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Integrating the Humanities and Sciences: The Human Journey: Sacred Heart University's Common Core

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Integrating the Humanities and Sciences: The Human Journey: Sacred Heart University's Common Core

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Abstract: One way to respond to the crisis in the humanities is to integrate learning for our students. In fact one of higher education's greatest challenges today is for faculty to develop ways to integrate knowledge and learning across the disciplines. This essay describes a common core curriculum, THE HUMAN JOURNEY, which engages students in an integrated, common, and coherent understanding of the humanities, arts, and sciences, and the Catholic intellectual tradition framed by four enduring questions of human meaning and value. THE HUMAN JOURNEY is a five course sequence including literature, history, the social and natural sciences, and religious studies and philosophy. The courses are framed and yoked by the four questions of human meaning and value, by common readings, by faculty collaboration to make connections across the disciplines, and by co-curricular colloquia and events which include art and music. This common core engages students in a multidisciplinary understanding of the humanities, arts, and sciences as the fundamental mode of inquiry of the human person and of the entire human community, and it provides students with an ethical and moral lens with which to understand the world in which they live.

Keywords: Humanities, Sciences, Arts, Core Curriculum, Integrated, Common, Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Introduction

THE CRISIS IN the humanities reflects the more general crisis in higher education today. Many of the same factors -- increasing specialization within a discipline, materialism and careerism, and not understanding the value of a liberal education -- have led to this crisis. Responding to the crisis will require the vast and best collaborative efforts of institutions of higher education including both academic administrators and faculty across the disciplines. While there is no single solution to the problem, a joint statement by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching offers academia one way to respond to this crisis. The statement asks those of us in higher education to consider the importance of providing our students with integrated learning:

“Fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning – across courses, over time, and between campus and community life – is one of the important goals and challenges of higher education. The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, cocurricular activities, and ‘the real world’ beyond the campus....

Students need programs of study that will help them understand the nature and advantages of integrative learning and assist them in pursuing college

experience in more intentionally connected ways. They also need courses designed by creative faculty that model and build integrative skills, and curricula that define pathways that encourage integrative learning within and across fields....

Developing students’ capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today’s global society. Students face a rapidly changing and ever-more-connected world in which integrative learning becomes not just a benefit...but a necessity.”

In this essay, we are proposing that developing a core program that integrates our students’ understanding of the humanities and sciences may work not only to restore the humanities to the curriculum, but also to reinstate the value of a liberal arts education to higher education. Sacred Heart University, a liberal arts, comprehensive institution of higher learning, has developed a common core -- *The Human Journey*, which engages students in a multidisciplinary understanding of the humanities and sciences as the fundamental mode of inquiry of the human person and of the entire human community. We will provide a full description of this program but first it is important to understand the factors that are working against integrated learning.



The Fragmented Landscape of Undergraduate Higher Education

Despite the importance of integrating knowledge and learning across the disciplines, there are many factors which work against this integration. The culture of the modern university, especially in the United States, is in many ways disinclined to the notion of integration. Academics are encouraged toward more and more specialization, and the result is an environment in which each scholar is focused on a fragment of a discipline rather than on the wholeness and connectedness of knowing and learning within that discipline. Further, the various disciplines and sub-disciplines have developed their own vocabularies and methods of investigation, which are understandable only to specialists within a particular field.

Students, too, are trained in specific fields or majors by faculty who have specialized knowledge only in that area. Also, students are often offered general education requirements that are distributive and unconnected and are important only in so far as they offer 'supporting courses for the major.' Major fields are also increasing the number of credits required for a major thereby leaving students little room for electives that might be taken in the liberal arts. And here too students are encouraged to select electives that continue their specialization in the major. In all, students enter and leave the university with little understanding of the value and meaning of an education in the arts and sciences as a humanizing and liberalizing education preparing them with broad knowledge and skills for a global and connected world.

Faculty scholarship and research also reflect this same fragmentation and specialization. Thus, faculty are often unprepared and therefore unwilling to take part in campus-wide or even department-wide initiatives to create common and integrated curriculum and courses. It is often uncomfortable for faculty to collaborate with other disciplines for fear of exposing their own lack of knowledge in different areas.

All that is Human

Integrating teaching and learning in the humanities and sciences can become enlightening and liberating for both faculty and students. To facilitate this understanding, it is important to recognize that education in the humanities and sciences is an exploration and an inquiry into all matters human and into all matters of human culture including the social, philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific. Such an education proposes the fullest human development of an individual. It assumes that there is a profound humanizing value in acquiring the skills of critical analysis, interpretation, and communication; in acquainting oneself with an understanding of works which bespeak human

excellence; in engaging questions of human meaning, purpose, and value; in exploring scientific thought and discovery.

Further, it is important to emphasize to both students and faculty that everything that deals with human meaning and value requires an understanding of the integration of the humanities with the social, behavioral, and natural sciences. For, in order to realize one's fullest humanity demands an understanding of all that pertains to human experience; namely, the human organism and its physical and natural environment, the civilizations and social structures that result from human interaction and that shape human behaviour, the human search for meaning and value, and the aesthetic expression of this entire human enterprise and these human aspirations.

Responding to the Challenge

The challenge that faculty face today is how to integrate all these aspects of what it means to be human; that is, how to integrate the humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural sciences. While faculty can strengthen integrated learning within an individual course, these isolated efforts will not suffice to create and sustain the opportunities students need to develop as integrated thinkers throughout their undergraduate years. Faculty will need to collaborate across disciplines to design and develop curriculum, pedagogy, and programs that intentionally integrate teaching and learning and that integrate habits and ways of thinking and knowing across the disciplines.

For faculty teaching at a Catholic University working toward such integration should emerge from some of the assumptions about the nature and purpose of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Because these assumptions are at the basis of our development of *The Human Journey*, our common core, it will be useful to identify these ideas before describing our program.

First, according to Sacred Heart University President and Theologian Anthony Cernera: "The Catholic University is a place where the search for truth is cherished and nourished. Since the truth is whole, there is also a fundamental unity and interconnectedness of knowledge. This conviction of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the basis for this interdisciplinary approach to knowledge (81)." The Catholic intellectual tradition places tremendous emphasis on integration, whether discussing the relationship between faith and reason, the connection between the secular and the sacred, or the community of believers united across space and time. Interdisciplinary and integrated learning is essential at a Catholic university. *Ex Corde Ecclesia* stresses the importance of such interdisciplinary integration to assure that

“university scholars will be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the context of a vision of the human person and the world that is enlightened by the Gospel (16).” In other words, it is critical that there is an integration to a student’s entire educational experience at a Catholic university, and as such, the curriculum must be unified and whole rather than unrelated and fragmented.

Mark Roche, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame, offers some defining characteristics of the Catholic intellectual tradition which support and reinforce the idea and practice of integrative teaching and learning. He states that “a distinguishing feature of [Catholic intellectual thought] is its profound integration of Hellenic thought,... its emphasis on philosophical argument and historical tradition,... its elevation of tradition and reason,... and its assertion of the interconnection of faith and reason... (24-26).”

Roche goes on to explain that “the elevation of reason [in Catholic intellectual thought] suggests that the Catholic intellectual is eager to learn from other traditions and new perspectives (27).” Most important, Roche emphasizes that “The Catholic intellectual tradition, inspired by the concept of the unity of knowledge, seeks... to cultivate meaningful and integrative thought across the disciplines... (34).” In fact, it is the nature and character of Catholic intellectual thinking to seek to develop both interdisciplinary and integrative knowledge.

The Human Journey

Thus, these assumptions about the importance of integrated learning are at the heart of the development of Sacred Heart University’s common core, *The Human Journey*. This common core, comprised of five courses, engages students in an integrated and common understanding of the humanities and sciences and the Catholic intellectual tradition. Each of these courses is framed and unified by four fundamental and enduring questions of human meaning and value. The four fundamental questions that frame and unite the courses are: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose? What does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world? What does it mean to forge a more just society for the common good? These four questions will frame and yoke together every course offered in *The Human Journey*. Also, works, authors, ideas from both western and non-western cultures, as well as from the Catholic intellectual tradition are included in these courses to engage students in questioning and responding to these four fundamental questions.

Five courses comprise *The Human Journey*. The first course, *The Human Journey: Historical Paths To Civilization* provides students with a fundamental understanding of the continuity of the human experience throughout different epochs. The second course, *Literary Expressions of the Human Journey*, leads to a fundamental understanding of the human reflective and creative capacity to give expression to the human condition. The third course, *The Human Community: The Individual and Society*, promotes an understanding of humans as social beings who are both architects of society and who are shaped by society. The fourth course, *The Human Community and Scientific Discovery* leads students to a fundamental understanding of the natural world in which humans, as organisms, function in and control their environment. The fifth course, *The Human Search for Truth, Justice, and The Common Good*, is a capstone course which synthesizes and integrates learning from the previous courses and provides students with an ethical and moral frame to reflect upon, evaluate, and act in the world in which they live.

The integration of the humanities and the sciences in these courses is further implemented by several other components of the courses. First among these is the Common Core Reader which will include seminal readings chosen by the faculty teaching the common core courses. The aim of the Reader is to provide common reading materials that students will examine in more than one course so that students can see and experience the connection and integration between the humanities and the sciences by, for example, reading a work in history or literature as well as the sciences. Classical western works as well as works representing non-western cultures, historical as well as contemporary works, and works representing cultural diversity all might be the kinds of texts included in the Common Reader.

Second, a series of colloquia and cross disciplinary course conversations will serve to intentionally integrate the humanities and the sciences. Colloquia may be offered by faculty or by outside speakers, but topics of the colloquia will integrate the humanities and the sciences. So for example, a recent speaker at the University spoke on Astronomy and Religion. Another colloquium will have two faculty, one from History and one from Literature, speaking on two different works that students will have read and the faculty will discuss the connections of the works as the works embrace the four fundamental common core questions. In addition, faculty from the different courses will convene their classes for common discussion of a topic that will integrate the humanities and the sciences. For example, a biologist, psychologist, philosopher may convene their classes for discussion of the fundamental question: What does it mean to be human? Here students will hear and dis-

cuss the perspectives of the different disciplines as they respond to this fundamental question.

Such intentional effort at integrating teaching and learning in the humanities and sciences has involved faculty development. Faculty have been working intensely reading materials in common, discussing how their individual courses might organize around the four fundamental questions and then discussing and comparing their syllabi with their colleagues' syllabi. They have been developing "boiler plate" syllabi in some courses and "common template" syllabi for groups of courses in the sciences. Faculty have been working together discussing pedagogy: how to teach in a way that integrates the humanities and sciences and that engages students in this integrated way of learning and knowing. Faculty development has taken place in the individual departments, and more broadly, has included a large cross-disciplinary group of faculty. Further, an immersive week long academic technology seminar is being offered to faculty to assist them in integrating their courses across the disciplines through the use of academic technology. In addition, the development of *The Human Journey* has included the development of assessment. Faculty have been working to develop learning outcomes for these courses and have been developing the methodology to assess the courses individually as well as a whole.

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Conclusion

One way to respond to the crisis in the humanities is to integrate learning for our students. In fact, one of higher education's greatest challenges today is for faculty to develop ways to integrate knowledge and learning across the disciplines. Sacred Heart University has taken up this challenge. Its common core, *The Human Journey*, engages students in an integrated understanding of the humanities and sciences and the Catholic intellectual tradition. Framed by four fundamental questions of human meaning and value *The Human Journey* provides students with an integrated understanding of the humanities and sciences as the fundamental mode of inquiry of the human person and of the entire human community. Such a curriculum has demanded intense faculty development, assessment, and the development of pedagogy. But such a curriculum can challenge and prepare students to take their place as knowledgeable and educated people in global and changing world; it can engender and expand intellectual conversation among faculty; it can restore the humanities to the curriculum and it will assert the value and importance of the liberal arts and sciences as the core of a university education.

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