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A HISTORICAL NOTE

Once Upon a Time, there was a Jesuit College without a core...

By Helen M. Whall

When I arrived at Holy Cross in 1976, new Ph.D. in hand, I was five years out from Emmanuel College, a Catholic college whose core requirements had been minimal, centered mostly on philosophy and theology. By the time I was a teaching assistant at Yale, that Ivy institution had followed Brown University in abandoning all core or “general” requirements. In other words, I came of age both as student and teacher during the heady days of curricular freedom.

Academia was then reflecting, even influencing, demands that the U. S. extend civil rights at home and stop war abroad. Students who marched for those causes and took over campus buildings in turn demanded the right to study what interested them most and to do so with faculty who preferred interested students. Freedom is contagious, and it did not take long for the most prestigious colleges and universities in

the North East to follow Brown. But for Holy Cross to make that same radical adjustment in 1970 was quite astounding.

Holy Cross, I soon learned, had entered Academia’s most rapid waters with breathtaking courage and speed. The College demanded Ph.D.s of all new professors, cut its semester course requirements from 5 to 4, admitted women, and dropped core requirements all within the course of a brief few years. By 1975, when I interviewed for my job with Dean Joseph Fahey, S.J., the College president, John Brooks, S.J., had accelerated the work begun by his Jesuit predecessor, Raymond Swords. The “pursuit of excellence” which Fahey and Brooks both emphasized to job candidates was alluring. I accepted the job offer eager to teach and to write. The challenges I immediately faced as an untrained academic advisor, however, were quite another matter.

Eighteen may now be the new sixteen, but even in 1976, eighteen

year olds knew little about what might constitute a liberal arts education. The new freedom cried out for an informed and committed advising system. Holy Cross worked assiduously to invent one; a dedicated faculty tried hard to advise balanced programs of study. But the ratio of advisors to students somehow never seemed to be the same as the more feasible ratio of faculty to students. When student majors were used to identify advisors, some faculty were swamped. When students were randomly assigned advisors, highly specialized faculty were frustrated. Inevitably, advising became a matter of making sure students had enough credits to graduate (32 semester courses), had completed 10 upper level courses in most majors, had not taken more than 14 courses in any one major, and

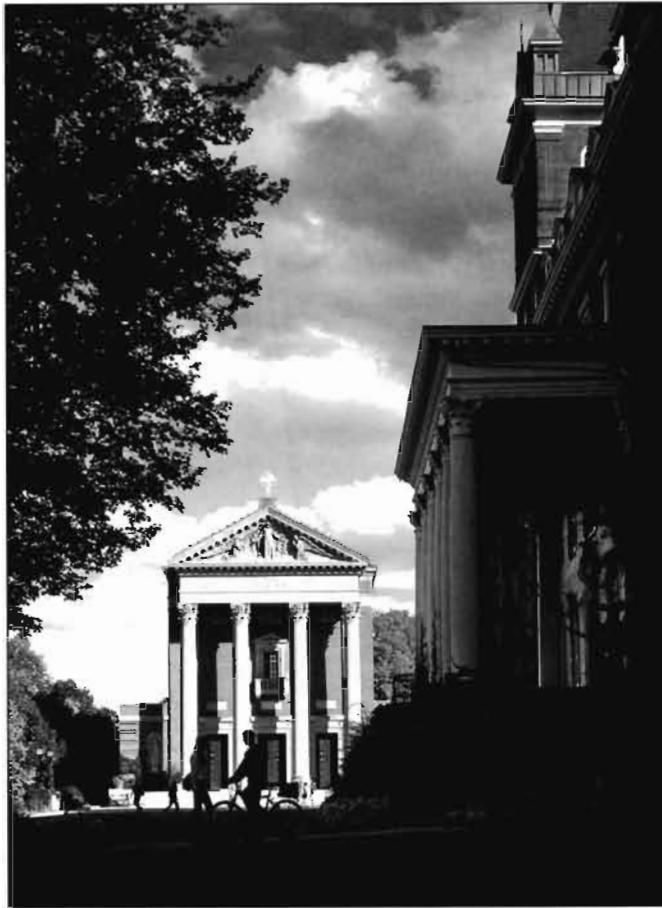
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had completed at least 18 courses outside the major. Meaningful conversations about life, learning, and the future ahead became rare in an advising context.

But the real threat to a coreless curriculum probably came, as had the cry for a coreless curriculum, in response to the culture at large. By the early 1980's, students everywhere had begun to feel a generational tilt toward pre-professionalism. The natural tension between liberal arts and pre-professional education established new alliances at Holy Cross. Faculty who had never wanted to abandon a core curriculum found a meeting space, if not common ground, with young faculty increasingly anxious over guiding student choices responsibly. We entered into

invigorating conversations about how a systemic rather than an individualized solution might better serve our students. Those debates yielded up, with only a few adjustments, the system of distribution requirements still in place at Holy Cross. Our catalogue describes these "Common Requirements" as: one course each in arts, literature, studies in religion, philosophical studies, historical studies, and cross cultural studies; and two courses each in language studies, social science, and natural and mathematical sciences. Students continue to complete the requirements of their chosen majors but must not take more than 14 courses in that major

The Holy Cross common requirements are far less proscriptive than they are directive. Rather



College of the Holy Cross.

than specify required courses or even required fields of study, they reflect what are, at Holy Cross, internal perceptions of academic specialties allied by shared methodologies or at least by shared philosophical assumptions. Encouraged by that implicit acknowledgement of faculty scholarship, many colleagues who did not routinely teach first year students began to rethink pedagogical strategies. In the early days of their enactment, these requirements also inspired rewarding curricular innovation in the newly emerging area of cross-cultural studies.

Though I came to cherish the resulting burst of creativity, I originally voted against distribution requirements. I was reluctant to take from students the freedom of choice I had myself enjoyed and

which I knew made it much easier for me to take a B.A. from Emmanuel College to an English Ph.D. at Yale. After about 10 years, though, I had accepted the "new" curriculum as one which better addressed the needs of new 18 year olds. These were the students, after all, who grew up as a millennium closed out and terrorism came home. They yearned for order. But 10 years later again, as the 21st century took hold and we inherited the "overscheduled" student, I worried as my advisees obsessively strove to complete all requirements during their first two years. Curricular programs in a post-modern academy seem of necessity to have a limited shelf life. That's exhausting, but not necessarily bad.

As I look toward retirement within the next decade, I anticipate with some interest a new "new" curriculum. Last year, Holy Cross introduced *Montserrat*, an ambitious, 2 semester seminar program for all first year students. Others on the faculty have discussed a requirement in "ethical studies." Still others recall with nostalgia the old core. The current requirement system is cracking under the burden. My only thought on the matter? When deliberating what the young need to prepare them for the future, none of us should look too wistfully at the program that served us well as undergraduates, whether 10, 20, or 30 years ago. The times, they aren't just changing. They have changed.