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For Openers: The Perils of Coring

William M. Shea

Kenneth L. Parker

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FOR OPENERS

The Perils of Coring

Curriculum development is a precarious project. Even with the wise guidance of a Fr. Loughran as president, vice president, or college dean, one will find a core curriculum to be a minefield and revising it a civil war. The only problem as bothersome as red ink is curriculum change, and the latter is the more intractable. A year or so before we arrived at Saint Louis University an intense, three-year core-curriculum review ended in 1991 with a shift of three credits and nothing more. Another review, begun two years ago, has been plagued by administration missteps and faculty suspicions. This latest round was kicked off by a workshop in which a renowned expert in curriculum revision likened the politics of curriculum reform to herding cats. He asked, at the end of his informative presentation on the variety of problems to be faced, how many of the assembled administrators, chairs, and program heads in arts and sciences still thought a revision desirable. Six raised their hands out of approximately sixty. We were two of the six. While we have had our political realism sharpened in the intervening period, we remain planted in the minority. What follows is our sketch of four perils that worry us and Fr. Loughran tells us how to sidestep.

First, the problem of brokering the differences in bureaucratic interests and educational ideologies is formidable. The requisite political skill of administrators and faculty leaders, and mutual trust between them, are of the order of preternatural virtue displayed by Fr. Loughran himself. To pull it off the administration must understand much more than financing and running academic institutions; it must have a coherent academic vision. The rhetorical skills of a manager, even a dedicated one, do not impress faculty members. Yet the faculty should not throw stones. A faculty lacking energy, creativity, and a sense of its own weighty educational responsibilities can do little more than block administrative initiatives. In the end, generation and realization of an institution's vision require plain speaking and vital communication among people who trust and respect one another.

Second, when changes are initiated by administrators, how can they not be experienced as imposition (or its appearance)? How can the faculty and its leadership avoid resentment of that imposition (or its appearance)? On the other hand, if proposals are thrown to the faculty for adjudication, and "faculty ownership" and "democratic" process are stressed, how does a weakened faculty community avoid power politics, debilitating compromise, and a strong tendency to credit quantification? A Pharaonic administration and a passive, resistant, resentful faculty are perfectly matched supports for the status quo.

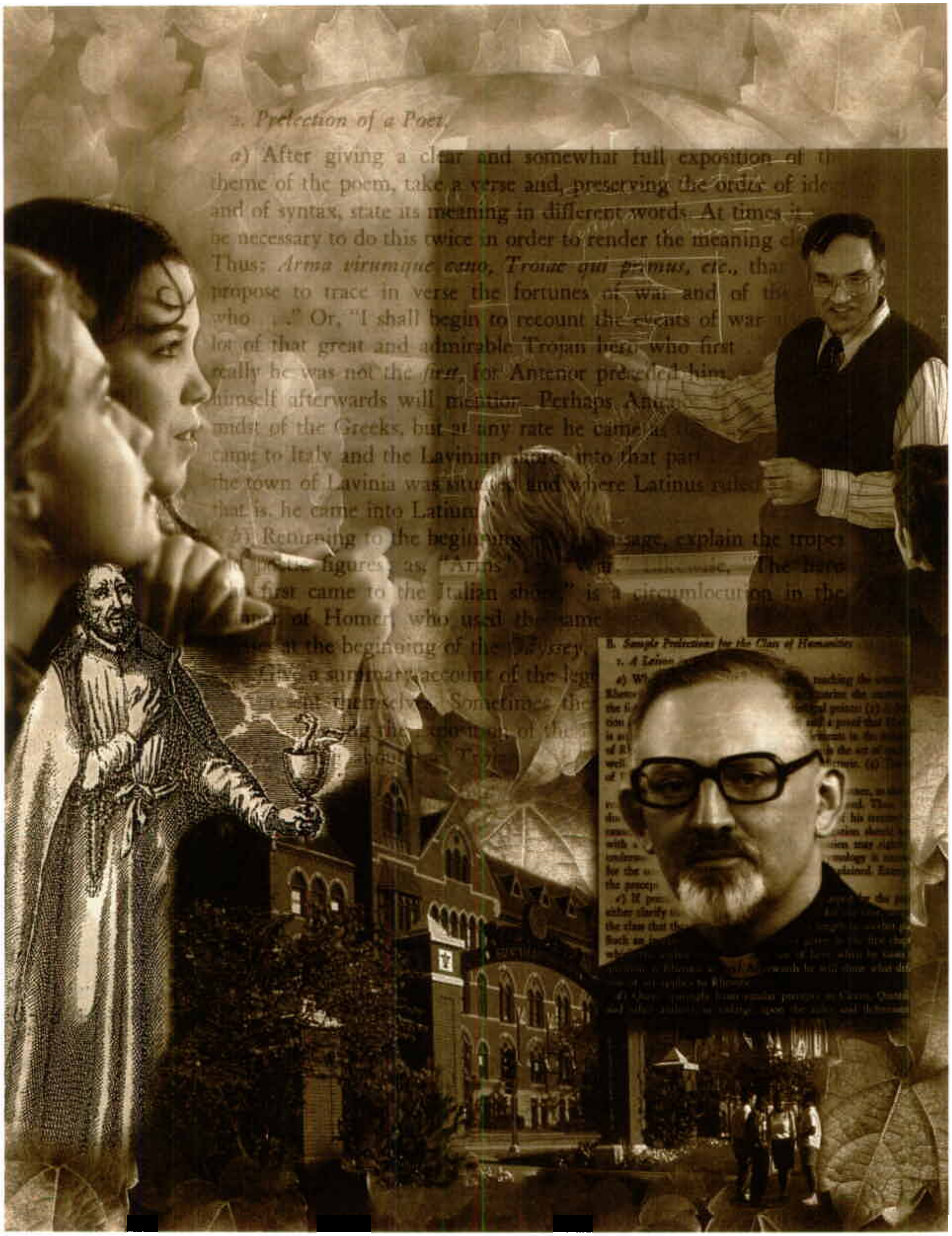
Third, no academic encounter reveals more about divergences in educational theory and practice than debates over curriculum. What are we doing when we set out to change an institution's core requirements?

We are putting on the table our most cherished ideals and suppositions. Yet while our ideals are the acceptable text, our feelings about them are the unmentionable yet controlling subtext. Three theology courses, or one? Three philosophy, or two? How can there not be enough room for recommended requirements in math, the natural and social sciences, or languages, literature, and history? Why should students have anything to say about it? These are practical questions answers to which are anchored in values, beliefs, and conceptions of education. More to the point, they reflect our academic community's esteem for our disciplines and ourselves. Why would anyone venture to stir this volatile cocktail? As one of our colleagues has repeatedly observed: "If it ain't broke, why fix it?"

Finally, we function in a fractured and bewildering cultural context. Jesuit institutions are caught in the crosscurrents of three world-views, each perceived to be in conflict with the others. As Catholic and Jesuit institutions we corporately profess an ancient belief in creation, redemption, and the sacrality of human history. As modern (Enlightenment) institutions of higher learning we value scientific and humanistic disciplines, prize rational investigation, appeal to empirical evidence, suspect traditions, and assume the universality of certain human aspirations. Yet we are also part of an intellectual ethos that challenges the universality of any truth claim and that suspects not only traditions but the possibility of reasonable and responsible inquiry itself. Our faculties function to some degree in all three. Each must play a role in curriculum development. The challenge might be put this way: how do we aid students to live in a diverse (modern and post-modern) society that gives priority to material culture while they simultaneously live by the ideals, beliefs, and self-understanding of an ancient religion? A core curriculum at a Jesuit institution must hear and answer to the three voices.

If the perils are to be skirted, then, they can be only under skilled leadership, a system of healthy communication, a strong sense of honor and the common good, and a recognition of the complexity of our cultural context. Fr. Loughran's tale counts on these.

William M. Shea
Kenneth L. Parker
Saint Louis University


2. Prelection of a Poet.
a) After giving a clear and somewhat full exposition of th
theme of the poem, take a verse and, preserving the order of ide
and of syntax, state its meaning in different words. At times i
be necessary to do this twice in order to render the meaning cl
Thus: Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus, etc., tha
propose to trace in verse the fortunes of war and of th
who . . ." Or, "I shall begin to recount the events of war
lot of that great and admirable Trojan hero who first
really he was not the first, for Antenor preceded him,
himself afterwards will mention. Perhaps Ane
midst of the Greeks, but at any rate he came at th
came to Italy and the Lavinian shore, into that part
the town of Lavinia was situated and where Latinus ruled
that is, he came into Latium
b) Returning to the beginning of the passage, explain the tropes
figures, as, "Arms" War. Likewise, "The hero
first came to the Italian shore" is a circumlocution in the
of Homer, who used the same
at the beginning of the Odyssey.
a summary account of the leg
Sometimes the
the exposition of the
B. Sample Prelections for the Class of Humanities
1. A Lesson