GUEST EDITOR’S COMMENTS

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I have read with interest and care the essays included in this volume, and the messages transmitted via the general education bulletin board and I have two confessions to make. First, I have to confess that what remains significant to me from my undergraduate days has little to do with the carefully crafted curriculum presented by the faculty at my school. I wonder, then, if we debate the wrong things? Second, I confess that my concern with core curriculum issues is, fundamentally, a selfish one.

My own education—at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota—contained a core curriculum, a freshman humanities sequence, complete with those "great books" to which some of you inevitably make reference when you write and speak. In truth, I remember little about those books, beyond the fact that I found them to be enormously boring and, from my naive perspective as a seventeen-year-old college freshman, ridiculously remote. While I do not in fact remember much about the texts so carefully selected by my freshmen teachers, I do remember the teachers themselves, the personal models which they provided, and the sub-textual message which I think they were trying to communicate about the importance of reading and thinking and the significance of being responsible members of a community.

I remember David Hopper, Professor of Religion, who became enraged with a number of my classmates in freshman humanities on the day he abandoned us to take his turn at a televised lecture for the whole first year class. He discovered, somehow, that several of these classmates had taken advantage of his absence to flee the scene and play bridge in the "Grille". I didn't play bridge, and it was a combination of this and my basic freshman timidity that caused me to stay in place while Professor Hopper lectured to us from the television screen. I am eternally grateful that I did.

I take from that class something less than the ability to quote from Homer or Virgil, or, perhaps, something more. I retain instead a vivid picture in my mind of Professor Hopper, angry and disappointed, eyes bulging, face red, as he chastised the class for failing to appreciate the opportunity to read and to learn, and the obligation he believed we had to contribute to the community of the classroom as responsible adults. He cared passionately and deeply about his subject matter and about us. Why couldn't we care as much as he did? He, not the mandatory course texts, made a lasting impression on me.

My freshman English teacher was the poet, James Wright. I confess that I do remember something more of what we read in this class than I do in my required humanities seminars. Most vividly I recall Wright's own poetry, which he shared with us even as he was working on it. More importantly, as I think about it now, I remember
Wright himself—in front of the class, perched on the table, or leaning on the lectern, grasping a filterless cigarette which rarely touched his lips. He shaped words for us in English, Latin, Greek, and German, as we sat there enthralled, listening to him speak. I remember the ash, how it grew longer and longer as he spoke and forgot to smoke, and how, outside of class, we placed bets on its longevity. I remember his trembling, yellowed fingers, and his passion for language, learning and life.

I recall, too, the required "service-learning" that accompanied my introductory psychology class, and the mandatory weekly visit to a state psychiatric facility which was one of the course requirements. I recall the locked ward where each week I met my assigned patient, Mrs. Feshbach. She was a gentle woman, who swore that she had been committed to the institution by her husband, who was having an affair with another woman and who wanted her out of the way. As the weeks went on, I came to believe her.

I remember, too, the nameless woman patient who always met me at the door, her large frame, intense (murderous, I thought, then) eyes, her mannish voice and her single phrase, invoked again and again as a warning—or so I believed. "Responsibility," she intoned, "responsibility caused the fall." I heeded the call, and have always managed to include an element of irresponsibility in my own life, just in case. Here I encountered real people, and a glimpse into the world of madness. The curriculum was a vehicle for this understanding, but not its source.

Privileged as an undergraduate student at a private liberal arts school—a privilege which my working class background allowed me to recognize—the important point is that I remember less about my classes—the formal curriculum—and more about what surrounded them. And for me this helps to underscore what is important about our discussion of core curriculum and what really matters in undergraduate education.

Of course it was classes and texts, but it was also the into-the-night discussions about...whatever. The river parties on the banks of the Mississippi, which helped me appreciate the beauty of the land and the importance of group effort as we struggled to help one another to the top of the steep banks after an evening of too much drinking and in an effort to make curfew. This was my first real taste of cooperative effort and collaborative learning.

These reflections have led me to view the faculty debate about curriculum, centered as it usually is in content, as a self-serving exercise, providing us with an opportunity to out-do one another, to flex our disciplinary muscle, and to show our wisdom and our wit. Perhaps we miss the point of the core curriculum discussion when we focus only or primarily on what our students should take, what they should read, or how they should read it. At least as important as content, we need to take into account the spaces around and between the formal curriculum, the spaces that are inhabited by our students and by ourselves, the spaces that give the undergraduate experience life and meaning.
How do we meet our students? What do we show them-model for them-about the life of the mind, life-long learning, and the scholarly enterprise? What do we look like to them-what models for democratic living and active citizenship do we, ourselves, present to them, individually and collectively? How have we personally resolved or confronted the moral and political dilemmas of our time? What do we read? How do we write? How do we conduct scholarly work? How do we see them-as they see themselves? as they "are"? or as we construct them, based on our image of what we would like them to be or what we believe we were when we were, like them, undergraduate students?

The real question, in relation to core curriculum issues, is, I think, whether we have the ability, the resources, and the will to create inclusive and morally responsible spaces which will provide our students and ourselves an enlightened entry into a world which is complex and conflicted.

And this brings me to my second confession. I confess that in this long discussion of the relevance of core curriculum for our university, not only do I care about the way in which we inhabit the curriculum, but I also care selfishly. Of course I want the undergraduate students to discover and construct values, (as Professor Portko has argued) to encounter the "discipline"(s) of the liberal arts (as several colleagues have argued,) to read a common and "great" set of texts (as the arts and humanities group has argued,) and to read inclusively, as I would argue. But I also care about the practice of teaching, about collegiality, about discussion, debate and conflict. I care about that practice which energizes my own life in the academy. I "confess" this unapologetically. I have no interest at all in teaching in a program-core or distribution, major or general education-that is not able, somehow, to provide for me an element of personal satisfaction and a sense of community.

Define the content of general education/core curriculum as you will. Count on me, predictably, to argue for the importance of recognizing the political dimension of any curriculum, for the need to teach the conflicts, and for the moral responsibility of the academy to include in its core the voices of those who have been, historically, excluded. Nothing new there. However, I have come to believe that our arguments are pointless unless we pay attention to the conditions necessary for and secure the resources needed to create structures for learning. Bill Baum suggests that we name fifteen faculty and select one hundred fifty students to participate in an "experiment". I think we will need to tinker with his numbers, a bit, but he is right. And, I would go further than he has in outlining conditions for such an experiment.

Name faculty who are good teachers. Recognize and include as criteria for membership in the community, diversity. Include faculty who represent differences in discipline; junior and senior level faculty; faculty who differ by race, gender, and ethnicity. Provide these faculty with a space-contiguous offices and a common place for conversation and debate. Build opportunities for such debate/discussion into the curriculum. Allow them freedom to create a meaningful program of general education.
Select a group of students and include as criteria for their selection diversity: include residential and commuter students, traditional and non-traditional ages, part-timers and full-timers. Include students of different color in the community; include men and women.

Uncouple the general education requirements from the requirements of the professional schools, as Chris Falvey has suggested. Invite the students to share the common physical space inhabited by the faculty. Install a coffee maker, preferably one able to produce cappucino.

Provide the resources needed for contemporary living in higher education-instructional classrooms with computer capability for all our students, not just those in mathematics and engineering, not just during the freshman composition requirement. Provide video taping, playing and editing equipment. Provide space and support in the community for faculty to mentor students and one another and to model teaching/learning strategies.

Then trust. Trust one another. Trust that the issues which surround the national discussion in relation to core curriculum will guide the construction of the content of curriculum: trust that it will be a curriculum centered in consideration of philosophy and ethics; politics and aesthetics; intercultural and global issues; diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusivity; universals and particulars. Trust that we really could create an exciting and inventive program, one in which students will want to learn and teachers will want to teach.