

9-1-2010

Forum: Lessons Learned. From Plato to the School of the Americas: One-dimensional justice is not good enough

Robert M. Senkewicz

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Senkewicz, Robert M. (2010) "Forum: Lessons Learned. From Plato to the School of the Americas: One-dimensional justice is not good enough," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 38, Article 17.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol38/iss1/17>

e.g. the "great books" or should it focus upon the development of critical analytical skills and the mastery of methodologies?

2. Within those curricula which do emphasize content how much weight should be given to the achievements of Western civilization and how much to the riches of a more multicultural, pluralistic, and global perspective?
3. Should the core curriculum build upon the established disciplines, or should it focus upon interdisciplinary attempts to deal with themes and problems which transcend any single field?
4. Should the core offer a limited number of common courses taken by all students, or should it provide an elective menu of offerings which addresses a wide variety of topics within selected areas?

Given the legitimate alternatives, how does one decide? *The answer, I believe, is to think locally.* One should not attempt to create *the* core for some generalized or abstract "student body" at some "ideal" university. Rather the question should be "Given our students, their levels of academic preparation, and their socio, economic and demographic profiles, what curriculum is the most appropriate for them?"

I believe the answer would be different for an urban school whose students are economically and socially diverse, less well prepared academically, and likely to be among the first from their families to attend college than it would be for a residential school with a more homogeneous, advantaged, and established student body. For example, a meaningful Theology core for a school where 92 percent of its students are Catholic/Christian would most likely be different from one at a school where the corresponding number is 46 percent.

Just as our students differ from one another so too do our faculties. A university faculty that is expected to support a large number of Ph.D and advanced professional programs and at the same time is responsible for securing external research support differs from a faculty that is focused primarily on undergraduate education. Depending upon the nature of the programs they are expected to serve faculties at different institutions have differing sets of responsibilities, expectations, and working conditions. To develop a core curriculum without acknowledging the special character of the faculty, which is responsible for offering it, is to base a program upon an abstraction. Thus just as an institution must consider whom it is teaching so too must it consider who are its teachers. The "right core" depends to some extent upon the particular gifts, strengths, and character of the faculty who will deliver it.

James L. Wiser is the former provost of the University of San Francisco.

FROM PLATO TO THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS

One-dimensional justice is not good enough.

Robert M. Senkewicz

I had the privilege of serving as director of the core curriculum at Santa Clara University for eight years. During that period, our core consisted of thirteen required areas. Some of them, such as composition and rhetoric, western culture, ethics, and religious studies, were relatively traditional. Others, such as world cultures and societies, reflected the broadening of global perspective which has occurred in American universities over the past few decades. Still others, such as technology and society, owed their existence to our location in Silicon Valley.

As its designers realized from the beginning, this core was far from perfect. It was replaced at the beginning of this academic year by another set of core requirements, which attempt to offer students a more interdisciplinary perspective, and whose design, both for better and for worse, reflects the current emphasis upon student outcomes and assessment. But my experience with what we now call our "old" core suggests to me some thoughts which I think might have some validity for existing and new cores as well.

1. Trust the Faculty

One of the most impressive aspects I witnessed was the enthusiasm and creativity of our faculty in embracing the core and in experimenting how various core requirements might creatively intersect with their own disciplines. By the conclusion of my term as director, over 300 faculty were teaching almost 800 distinct courses which satisfied one or other of our core requirements. Faculty enthusiasm to develop new courses which might satisfy the core was uniformly high and the results were often unexpected and impressive. I occasionally wondered, for instance, what was contained in one of our courses, entitled "The Joy of Garbage," which satisfied a natural science requirement, but I consistently heard from students that it was a demanding and rigorous, as well as joyful, experience. Also, a good number of faculty in the profes-

sional schools, business and engineering, reworked their courses so that they could become consonant with the core expectations. Our faculty development office made all of this much easier by offering a series of course development grants to interested faculty.

Of course, not all of this was selfless and disinterested commitment to general education. Some faculty participated in the core so that they could increase their student enrollments, a task sometimes imposed upon unwilling faculty by departmental chairs. Yet my overall sense was of widespread faculty willingness to participate in the core enterprise. Most faculty subscribe to our teaching mission, and conceive of their own scholarship, which is often extensive, as something which complements and enhances their teaching.

Like most undergraduate institutions we have a handful of colleagues who are by turns baffled and resentful that Stanford or Berkeley has not tried to recruit them away from us. But most of our faculty enjoy being teachers and scholars, and they believe that imaginative teaching and scholarship in their own disciplines can contribute to the university's mission, as that mission is articulated in our core curriculum. Acknowledging and nourishing that desire on the part of the faculty as a whole needs to be a central priority for academic and core curriculum administrators.

2. Trust the students

In the current economy, students can hardly be blamed for having a greater career orientation, and faculty or administrators who bemoan that orientation are not making a positive contribution to student development. Students also realize that most of them are not going to have just one career. They are acutely aware that they are going to change careers, willingly or unwillingly, many times during their lives. They are also aware that careers cannot be simply changed like clothing, but that career choices are intimately related to the kinds of persons they are and will become.

This awareness can make them more open to the insights and perspectives embodied in the variety of disciplines which constitute our core curricula. I have found that business students, for example, are much more interested in second language acquisition and in the cultural traditions of other areas of the globe than were their predecessors two decades ago. Natural science students no longer believe that all scientific discoveries represent progress and advancement, and they are urgently interested in rooting their professional lives in a system of ethics and values.

In many students these tendencies might be only faintly visible. But they are present, and they provide a significant invitation for the traditional disciplines of the core to help shape the vocational aspirations of those who will become our graduates.

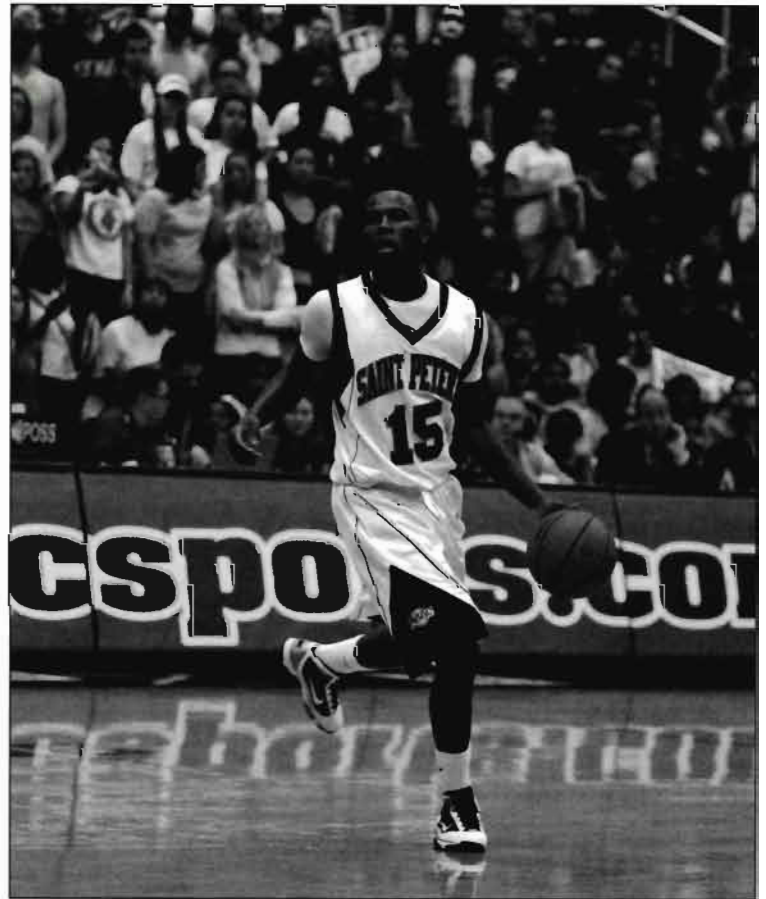
3. Biblical justice is a necessary but not sufficient principle of curricular integration

On our campus, and I suspect on other Jesuit and Catholic campuses, "justice" has become the de facto unifying principle of our undergraduate curriculum. Our own particular mantras tend to revolve around what we call the "three Cs"—conscience, competence, and compassion—which have basically become three synonyms for justice. The word justice itself has come to have a specific meaning. It

tends to be used in a biblical sense. It connotes social justice in the prophetic tradition, the denunciation of privilege which enriches some at the expense of others, and the care for the marginalized.

Since prophetic justice tends to emphasize immediacy and confrontation (the prophet denouncing the monarch or "speaking the truth to power"), it has naturally sparked a

I occasionally wondered, for instance, what was contained in one of our courses, entitled "The Joy of Garbage."



Saint Peter's College

host of experiential learning exercises, social justice activities, and immersion trips. These activities have become the normative high points of our students' educational experiences and the essential element of the

The notion of justice in the curriculum has become a bit one-dimensional

university's presentation of how we fulfill our mission. An unfortunate narrowness can sometimes appear, as overzealous faculty or

unimaginative administrators occasionally argue that only courses which explicitly aim to inculcate this particular fashion of conceptualizing justice ought to count for the core.

Many of our graduates can say that they are deeply committed to justice while at the same time they are unaware of the profound reflections on the meaning of that term found in Plato's *Republic*. Few will have grappled with Aquinas or Mill, tried to come to grips with the choices in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or engaged in the contemporary debates. The notion of justice on campus and in the curriculum has become a bit one-dimensional, and focused more on righting wrongs through protest rather than looking critically at the complicated preconditions for

a more just social order. Graduates of such an approach can turn out to be as earnest as they are uninformed.

This manner of foregrounding justice can then function as the default least-common-denominator in discussions about faith and belief: whatever God we believe in, or don't believe in, we can all agree that justice demands that the School of the Americas ought to be closed! But this short-circuits the original insight which the Jesuits developed when they started talking about justice decades ago. They spoke of "the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement." The notion was that a Jesuit could not understand faith without justice. But the converse was also present, that justice could not be understood without faith.

So faith needs to rejoin an expanded notion of justice in the curriculum. I mean faith in the broad sense of belief, and of reflection upon belief, as Anselm wrote, "I believe in order to understand." The potentially destructive implications of unreflective belief are tragically obvious in aspects of most of the world's religions today. Explicitly joining reflection upon belief to reflection upon justice in the undergraduate curriculum might well make that curriculum much more relevant to what seems to be facing us in the 21st century.

The core curriculum is the place where a college or university's deepest values are expressed. My own experience with one core

helped me understand that justice in the biblical and prophetic sense is one of those deep values. But if it is not to become simply a set of slogans, it needs to be nursed by other equally deep values. These include trust in the faculty and in their disciplines, trust in the experiences and journeys of the students, and the willingness among all members of the community openly to reflect upon our own deepest beliefs.

Robert M. Senkewicz is professor of history at Santa Clara University.



Xavier University.