

# Institutional Reform at a Small College

## *Reinventing a Core Curriculum*

Few college or university presidents ever enter into the fray of curricular reform. Indeed, the list of potential pitfalls associated with such efforts is substantial. But for some small institutions, a distinctive curriculum—or any curricular innovation—can bring about positive changes. At Scripps College, curricular reform led the way to a revolution in the college's image, ambitions, and achievements, and it began the process of institutionalizing strategic planning within the faculty. While Scripps has made substantial progress recently based on standard metrics—for example, endowment, applicants, yield, SAT scores, and faculty salaries—it is the nonquantifiable curriculum, and in particular the core program introduced in 1996, that has led the reinvention of the college. Nancy Bekavac, president of Scripps College, reflects on how and why curricular reform occurred at Scripps and on the implications of that process for other institutions.

### **The Scripps College Humanities Tradition**

Scripps College was founded in 1926 as an experiment in liberal arts education for women in the West. The original, distinctive program of studies at Scripps featured a three-year sequence of interdisciplinary courses called “The Humanities,” which constituted approximately one-half of students’ total courses during those years. Generations of Scripps alumnae, and some faculty, saw this substantial, integrated three-year program as the heart of the traditional educational mission of the college. It was highly valued by those who had experienced it.

The Humanities program was modeled on 19th-century precepts about the humanities and the proper forms and ends of cultural education. It was grounded

in a philosophy of history that saw the specific forms of European civilization as universal models that regulated what it was to be human. The program’s original content was drawn largely from the classics of Western civilization in a more or less chronological pattern. Pressure from students for more relevance and greater freedom to design their own academic programs began in earnest in the late 1960s and eventually led to the shrinking of the Humanities program first to two years, then to one year.

By the 1970s, the faculty had become a major factor in the demise of the Humanities program. They had begun to question the intellectual basis for a one-year course, and they had little interest in teaching outside their own disciplines, something required in

order to offer a comprehensive program. These criticisms led in the 1980s to a “combination” form of a core program: “two courses from column A and one from column B.” As the interests of students migrated from the faculty’s strength (by tradition and number) in the arts and humanities to social science (and began heading toward science and math), the possibility of a humanities core, or any common course, looked dim.

### **The Beginnings of Change**

By 1990, when I assumed the presidency, Scripps’ humanistic academic specialties of foreign languages, art, dance, and music were viewed by many applicants and parents as “soft” and of relatively little value. Applications were flat, and the college accepted over 75 percent of applicants. Enrollment was approximately 600 (and it fell during the severe recession of 1991–93 to 560). Scripps had a lovely, expensive, and inefficient plant, part of which was on the National Register of Historic Places. Deferred maintenance totaled about \$20 million. On the positive side, the college had just completed a \$40 million capital campaign, its first, and had a dedicated, generous, and involved board of trustees.

In terms of the curriculum, by the early 1990s much tinkering had led to a burdensome and complex mix of “breadth of study” regulations (requiring courses from across disciplines), humanities requirements, and requirements for a major. The list of required courses left very few electives open to students.

In 1992, representatives of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) visited campus. The WASC report’s message was unequivocal: Scripps needed a strategic plan, one that addressed finances, and it needed one now. We embarked upon strategic planning with a vengeance, forming six task forces and an overarching steering committee to tie things together. The work of the task force on academic climate, however, stalled as its discussions devolved into concerns about a core curriculum, which were overwhelming. After several months of effort the group had made no progress on any type of serious curricular discussion, much less reform. By late 1993, the task force virtually ceased meeting, and so the issue fell to the faculty as a whole.

Faculty meetings on curricular planning were marked

by long disquisitions on “student interest” and “curricular balance” that sharply divided the faculty along disciplinary lines. Political skirmishes broke out over proposals for gender-informed and intercultural requirements. The situation was particularly worrisome given that faculty clashes at small institutions can be especially harmful and have long-term effects.

The turning point came at a 1994 board of trustees retreat. The tenor of the retreat was difficult, as we had bad financial and enrollment news, and little progress to report on planning. In the keynote speech, I laid out the facts as I saw them: if Scripps did not get better quickly and continue to improve, it would not survive the 1990s as a college of repute, and it might not survive at all. I outlined two challenges the college faced: (1) reaching financial equilibrium, and (2) developing “an absolutely first-rate academic plan that appeals to students and can be sustained within our resources for the long term.” I cautioned that the plan would not necessarily please everyone and that it would require “reinventing the college.”

The reaction to the speech (which shocked most of those in attendance) was crucial to the college’s future. In a lengthy executive session the next day, the trustees moved from the current crisis to their role in promoting the planning process. They formulated a statement from the board to the college community outlining what was expected in any strategic plan, including a student-faculty ratio of 11:1, financial equilibrium, enrollment growth to 750, and a “compelling curriculum.” The board encouraged the faculty to consider a core program in interdisciplinary humanities. On the last issue, the not-so-subtle point was that there would be financial support for such a core. The importance of board leadership at this critical point cannot be overstated. The board stepped in, exerted its proper authority over curricular matters, and then stepped aside to allow the faculty to do its work.

### **The New Core Humanities Program**

Soon after the trustee retreat, a small, informal group of faculty members sat down to draw up some proposals. They outlined a variety of pedagogical issues and grand ambitions, including a single theme that would unite a

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whole class cohort, perhaps with a large lecture component; a sequence of linked courses offering different class sizes and teaching styles, culminating in small seminars; involvement by math, science, and social science faculty; and coordination with writing instruction. All of these early ideas are reflected in the academic program section of Scripps' 1995 Strategic Plan.

The 1995 Strategic Plan outlined the following goals for a new core curriculum:

- Creating a truly interdisciplinary introduction to college-level learning that introduces students to different ways of learning and expression across the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences
- Creating a unifying intellectual experience for each entering cohort of students that proceeds from all readings and lectures in common to more in-depth, individualized learning
- Creating a distinctive course that sets Scripps apart both from other colleges and universities and from its closest neighbors in Claremont
- Creating a course that emphasizes and values intercultural and cross-cultural understanding

The new core was the first of six strategies related to the curriculum that were adopted in the 1995 Strategic Plan, but it was unquestionably the key reform. It signaled a more inclusive approach to collegiate learning, one characterized by introduction to fields of knowledge through a comparison of readings and examples taken from all fields, not just the arts and humanities. While the content would vary from the "original" core, the structure of the first-semester course, Core I—a single large lecture class for the entire first-year class, followed by discussion sections—would reflect the experience of students who had attended the college during its first four decades.

Core I emphasizes breadth of knowledge, beginning in the 18th century with the Enlightenment and analyzing the principles (e.g., autonomy, liberty, democracy, reason, and human rights) that are basic to a modern understanding of knowledge, self, and society. Core II, on the other hand, emphasizes depth of knowledge. Building on Core I, Core II courses are more focused in their inquiry into special topics and themes raised in the previous semester. The approach, however, remains strongly interdis-

ciplinary. Core III courses are small seminars intended to foster innovation and collaboration among students. The Core III seminars culminate in a significant, self-designed project. Each core course is one semester long.

After running a pilot test course on the class of 1999, the faculty began teaching the full core sequence to the class of 2000 as it entered Scripps in the fall of 1996. As it turned out, the readings were burdensome and the students were overwhelmed. By the end of the first year, several students had decided to transfer; after all, they had not applied to a college with such a demanding and time-consuming core curriculum. Those who stayed to graduate, however, clearly bonded. The class of 2000 is one of the most unified classes we have ever graduated, as measured by notes to the alumnae bulletin, participation in class activities, class fund-raising, and class visibility in leadership positions. All this may not be attributable to the core, but it is surely more than coincidence.

The core has evolved every year since its inception. It is an absorbing and demanding program. Each May, the faculty who teach in Core I have a two-day on-campus retreat to discuss and refine readings, schedule lectures, and prepare the syllabus. Throughout the semester, the entire Core I faculty of 13 or 14 professors meets weekly to review the lectures, discussion groups, and readings.

## **Lessons Learned**

The following general propositions are based on my experience at one small college:

- Reform can only go forward with the support of a supermajority of the affected group. The supporting faction may be composed of those substantially dissatisfied with the current situation and/or those reasonably satisfied that the future will be substantially better.
- No administrator can lead curricular reform as a conductor leads a band. The leader can encourage, underwrite, advise, and participate (carefully), but she can-

not be too far ahead of the curve. Curricular reforms, like ground wars, are won by the infantry fighting under leaders who are colleagues—senior faculty, young faculty with new ideas, and previously embattled faculty who see a chance to achieve their goals in a new way.

- The best incentives for curricular reform are positive incentives. In the Scripps case, the willingness of the trustees to indicate a clear preference for a core—if that was what the faculty members wanted—was the single most effective factor in guiding the planning effort toward an integrated curriculum. The trustees were credible, informed, generous, and properly deferential to faculty prerogatives. Their third-party endorsement was key.

- Curricular reform must have a fundamental idea or ideology that inspires. This may stem from tradition (the Scripps Humanities program tradition was invaluable in “selling” the idea to trustees, alumnae, and faculty), from a particular set of studies or ideas (such as the theory of multiple intelligences and Howard Gardner’s other works), or from an inspired faculty member or group. If the faculty is not fired with enthusiasm, it cannot possibly ignite the students.

- Curricular reform may have largely unanticipated effects on student enrollments. Decisions about which fields should have new or continued hiring are still largely driven by student demand. At Scripps, for example, implementation of a humanities-based core curriculum has been accompanied by an unexpected near doubling of the percentage of science majors.

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## Conclusion

By all accounts, the new core curriculum is a success. In surveys conducted as part of Scripps’ 2000 self-study on the core curriculum, both students and faculty agreed by unheard-of margins (82 to 85 percent) that the core has met the ambitious goals outlined for it in the 1995 Strategic Plan. And it has met numerous other goals as well, all leading toward one curricular aim: that Scripps College provide the best liberal arts education in the United States.

From time to time, however, curricular reforms must be reformed. Scripps College adopted a bold educational plan with its original three-year Humanities program in 1927. By the 1970s, that program was in ruins. In 1995, the college adopted a very different, very contemporary program. I believe that the Scripps core curriculum will need a substantial internal reexamination in two or three years and an independent external review every four or five years. Such examinations are crucial to sustaining the tremendous progress made by having reinvented the Scripps core curriculum.

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