

**SHIMER COLLEGE**  
**ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ADDRESS**  
**David Shiner, Dean of the College**

November 14, 2010

The Constitution of the Shimer College Assembly mandates that the Dean of the College is to deliver a State of Academic Affairs Address to the Assembly at this time each year. This address offers an opportunity for the Dean to reflect on, and for members of the Shimer community to learn about, aspects of the academic life of the College that don't impact most of us on a day-to-day basis, and about which some of us might not even be aware. In preparing this address, one of the challenges is to try to speak about matters in a way that's equally informative for those who have been at Shimer for three months and those who have been here for thirty years. I hope to strike that balance in my remarks this afternoon.

I'd like to begin by discussing course offerings. Last month the Academic Planning Committee of the Assembly, or APC, asked all Shimer students to indicate their interest in a wide range of proposed elective courses by means of an online survey. That survey provided the basis for the committee's decisions about which electives to offer. The 7 non-core courses we will be hosting in the Weekday Program next term are the most in any semester since our move to Chicago in 2006. That's especially impressive given that this is an "Oxford year," meaning that a number of students who need electives are taking them in Oxford, England, under the auspices of the Shimer-in-Oxford Program. Granted, 7 courses is not very many, but it's the direct consequence of two regrettable but undeniable facts – one, we don't have all that many students; and two, we don't have all that many faculty members. The fact that the number of electives has been increasing is the result of the recent increase in the size of the student body. I'll have more to say about both that increase and the elective situation later on in this address.

First, though, I'd like to focus on an important event that will take place fairly soon. Visitors representing Shimer's accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges, will be visiting us a year from now – in fact, a year to this very day. That might well be the single most important event that will take place at Shimer in 2011, so it's well worth taking some time to reflect on it this afternoon.

Before discussing what accreditation entails, I'd like to briefly explain what it is. Accreditation is a process by which an external organization evaluates the services and operations of an institution to determine if applicable standards in various areas of concern are being met. In most countries the accreditation process for academic institutions is overseen by a government agency; here in the US it's handled by private membership organizations such as the aforementioned North Central Association. A key step in the accreditation process takes place when the accrediting agency sends visitors – in our case, mostly faculty and staff members from other small colleges – to inspect the school's academic program, its enrollment, its finances, its mission, and its processes of internal assessment. Before they do all this, we must do it ourselves. That is, we are required to undertake a self-study that critically examines Shimer. This self-study results in the composition of a detailed narrative that we present to our accrediting guests. They in turn decide, in part, whether that narrative tells the truth about Shimer, and to what extent it meets the standards to which the accrediting agency is expected to hold us.

As everyone here knows, many of the most important aspects of the Shimer story are unequivocally positive. The PhD rate of Shimer graduates is among the top 1% in the entire country, as it has been for many years. That achievement is particularly noteworthy given that all the other top schools have stricter admission criteria than we do. In addition, an increasing number of our graduates are attending, and excelling in, law school, a statistic that is not reflected in the PhD rate. The Graduate Record Examination, or GRE, scores of Shimerians are well above national averages in most categories. In short, Shimer graduates achieve the sorts of results in testing, and in graduate and law schools, that indicate academic success by conventional

standards. Furthermore, it takes very little investigation to discover why this is the case. One need only attend our classes to realize that the level of intellectual activity at Shimer is clearly and significantly higher than in the vast majority of classes in most other colleges and universities. Past accreditation visitors have visited those classes, and have been unanimous in their praise of both our academic program and the achievements of our graduates.

If that were the whole story concerning our preparation for the accreditation visit, I'd stop talking about it right now. But merely having a great academic program, laudable though that is, does not ensure soundness of operations or solid prospects for sustainability. On those fronts, much remains to be done over the next year, and that work will be a college-wide endeavor. Since this address is intended to emphasize matters concerning the academic life here at Shimer, I would like here to focus on the portions of that endeavor that directly involve the faculty.

Many of you are aware that the faculty is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the entire core curriculum. That's vitally important, since the core is the foundation of our academic program. Our review involves extensive research and many meetings during which the faculty prepares for decisions concerning what to keep and what to change, based on its expertise and experience at Shimer. It's a lot of work, but it's work that must be done, both for the affirmation and renewal of the curriculum itself and for the message it sends to accreditors concerning our ongoing attention to, and concern on behalf of, the academic program.

In addition, other types of assessment are increasingly becoming regarded as vital components of any school's case for accreditation. The Higher Learning Commission doesn't only want to know that Shimer has an outstanding academic program; they also want to be assured that our processes are such that that program can be expected to continue to achieve excellent results for the foreseeable future. This means that the faculty needs to qualify and quantify its assessment procedures now as never before. That involves additional work of various sorts. For example, multiple faculty members have been assessing every writing diagnostic taken by every entering Weekday Program student for the past four years according to eight separate categories, after which those evaluations are compared with the similarly detailed assessments of student writing later in those same students' tenure at Shimer. The faculty will be reviewing all that data in an attempt to reach valid conclusions concerning the overall quality of student writing, the improvement of students at various stages of the academic program, the level of similarity or dissimilarity of assessment of student writing by each individual faculty member, and a number of other factors. That task is daunting, but it must be completed in the next eight months or so, before our self-study is due to be sent to the accreditors.

All of this is undertaken in what might euphemistically be called the faculty's "copious spare time." The Shimer faculty is far from underworked. In fact, the faculty teaches more each year on a credit basis than our counterparts at any other college or university I know. That teaching does not include tutorials, which make the overall teaching load even greater. And that leads us back to the issue of electives.

It's no secret that many Shimer students cherish tutorials. And well they should. Tutorials – that is, elective courses of three or fewer students that normally meet once a week – are a wonderful learning opportunity for students. Nevertheless, as I have already announced, we will be offering few if any tutorials next semester. The reasons for that are regrettable but undeniable. Even when we are not undertaking a self-study, a core curriculum review, and additional assessment of student writing, we are in no position to offer more than a handful of tutorials in any given semester. We strive to strike a balance between student aspirations and desires and faculty expertise and availability, all within the context of the overall state of the College at any given time. This semester every fulltime faculty member without exception is hosting a tutorial. That's unprecedented; it has never before occurred in the entire 25 years since tutorials were introduced at Shimer. Given all that the faculty has to accomplish over the next few months for the benefit of future Shimerians, particularly with respect to preparing for the accreditation visit, we simply do not have the luxury to do that, or anything remotely like it, next term.

None of this should be taken to imply that I'm unappreciative of tutorials, which can be a great opportunity for faculty members as well as for students. I've been happily reminded of that this semester, in the weekly sessions in which Erik Boneff, Kieran Kelley, and I pore over and attempt to puzzle out the complex writings of Gregory Bateson. All of my faculty colleagues have similar tales to tell. But the general well-being of the College entails our offering tutorials more judiciously, particularly next semester. I therefore encourage students who need electives to consider enrolling in the excellent ones that we will be offering, and also to consider courses at IIT and, for those interested in music and art, VanderCook College of Music and Harold Washington College respectively.

Of course, the hiring of additional faculty members will make more elective and tutorial opportunities possible in the future. Concerning that point, I'm pleased to announce that the APC has undertaken a search for new faculty members for next year. This is most welcome. We need new blood on the faculty, and we especially need young new blood on the faculty. We are, of course, looking for skilled seminar leaders – “facilitators,” as some Shimerians like to call them – who are well grounded in the Great Books. Finding them will be one of the keys in helping to secure Shimer's academic future.

The APC would like to be able to hire at least two new faculty members for next year. Whether we will be in a position to do that is largely dependent on two factors: the departure of current faculty members, and an increase in student enrollment. The former is sadly but inevitably occurring, as our longtime faculty stalwarts begin to retire. As far as higher student enrollment is concerned, I'm optimistic. Shimer's enrollment has already been rising at an impressive rate, an increase averaging 18% over the past three years, and the report that Amy Pritts sent the Assembly a couple of days ago indicates that that upward trend is likely to continue in the coming year.

Still, not all the enrollment news is favorable. In particular, I have expressed varying levels of concern about the Weekend Program in each of my State of Academic Affairs addresses over the past four years. I remain concerned about that program, in fact more concerned now than a year ago. For nearly two decades, the Weekend Program accounted for about one-third of Shimer's total student enrollment, a proportion reflected in the fact that several Assembly committees and the Board of Trustees include designated positions for two Weekday students and one Weekend student each. This semester, Weekend students represent significantly less than 20% of the student body. As things stand, only a dozen current Weekend students are candidates to still be enrolled at Shimer a year from now. We will certainly enroll new Weekend Program students by then, but we will also inevitably lose some of those who are enrolled now, aside from those who are expected to graduate this coming May. This is a serious issue. I say this not to denigrate the quality of the Weekend Program or to make light of my care for the students it serves, nor to imply that there is any danger that the program will be terminated in the immediate future. But it's important, although sobering, to realize that the Weekend Program is probably not sustainable indefinitely at current enrollment levels, and that our sincere attempts to increase Weekend enrollment in recent years have not borne sufficient fruit.

Let's now turn from the cautionary to the encouraging. Aside from overseeing the academic program, a Dean at Shimer tries to provide some measure of connection between past and present; and hopefully between past, present, and future. Last year I had the opportunity to meet with Professor John Hirschfield, a well-respected and much-loved faculty member of half a century ago, when the Great Books Program was in its infancy at Shimer. John taught here for only ten years, but he regards them as the most educationally fulfilling years of his long and successful teaching career. As we lunched together he told me that, in his view, Shimer's educational system was successful because classes were small, the faculty was gifted and committed, and students sat around tables discussing original texts and important ideas with genuine interest and intelligence. I assured him that that's still the case at Shimer today.

And there's lots of evidence to back that up. Early last month, for example, I sent an email to Weekday students asking for volunteers to participate in a seminar on Plato's *Crito* for the purpose of showing interested members of the Board of Trustees what Shimer discussion classes are like these days. That seminar

took place at the end of a long week, at a time when two other classes were meeting. Nevertheless, ten students signed up, attended, and participated. There was no particular incentive for them to do that – no academic credit, no free stuff from the Bookstore, nothing but the joy of learning together. The discussion went well, and the Board members who attended were suitably impressed. One of them, a distinguished professor at a noted East Coast university, subsequently sent me a highly complimentary note in which he stated that the seminar compared favorably with the classes in which he participated as a Shimer student back in the 1960s – some of them under the tutelage of John Hirschfield. In my response, I wrote simply, “That’s Shimer.”

And so it is. For most of the intellectual work we do here, there are tangible payoffs: grades, diplomas, and the like. And yet, it’s striking that we do what we do primarily for the love of learning. If that wasn’t true, each student here would have chosen to attend a college that’s less expensive, or more career oriented, or just plain easier. But you didn’t. That’s to your credit, and to Shimer’s.

The academic life here at Shimer is shared by all of us, but the Dean of the College has special responsibilities and reaps special rewards. I have now served in that position on three separate occasions, each of them lasting 4-5 years. My first stint as Dean ended in 1991. The second came to a close in 2001 – 10 years after the first. It therefore seems appropriate that this one will end in 2011 – that is, at the conclusion of the current academic year. That will involve a transition for Shimer, but it’s unlikely to be a major one. I’m well aware that most of you who are attending today’s Assembly meeting have never known Shimer when I wasn’t the Dean, and it might seem to you as though I have the position by divine right. If so, you can rest assured that that’s far from the case, and that Shimer functions perfectly well when someone else serves in that role.

The Deanship at Shimer is, and should be, shared among qualified and interested members of the senior faculty. A subcommittee of the APC has begun the process of discerning who will inherit that role next year, and their recommendations will be taken up by the faculty a few months from now. All Shimerians will be informed of the results of that process once it is known. You’ll also be invited to become involved in various aspects of the self-study process for accreditation, as well as in assessing prospective future members of the Shimer faculty who will be interviewing with us here next semester. That’s always an exciting process for all of us, as those who have participated in such interviews in the past will attest. For now, I close my final State of Academic Affairs Address by thanking you for your kind attention, and for affording me the privilege of serving you as Dean of Shimer College.