

SYMPOSIUM

A Publication of Shimer College

SPECIAL ISSUE

NEWLY INAUGURATED SHIMER PRESIDENT CALLS ON AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO TAKE A PAGE FROM SHIMER'S BOOK



On January 24th, 2009, Thomas K. Lindsay was inaugurated as the 13th president of Shimer College. President Lindsay was introduced by Christopher Nelson, Chair of the Shimer College Board of Trustees, and was welcomed by members of the community, including Don Moon, Shimer Faculty and President Emeritus; Ed Walbridge ('54), President of the Alumni Association; and Rubina Isaac ('09), a current Shimer student.

The oath of office was administered by Christopher Nelson, followed by a speech by President Lindsay in which he called on all colleges and universities to take a page from Shimer's mission through instituting required civic education for all students, regardless of major.

Before coming to Shimer, President Lindsay served as the Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Director of the NEH's *We the People* initiative, which supports the study of U.S. history and culture.

Lindsay grew up in Chicago and received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He served as Graduate Dean and later as Provost at the University of Dallas. President Lindsay's research has focused largely on the relation of democracy and education, and he has been published in the nation's premier academic journals.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT THOMAS K. LINDSAY

As I begin my presidency of Shimer, my first and recurring thought is one of gratitude—to all in the Shimer community who have entrusted me with this opportunity to serve—to our alums, to our current students, to our devoted faculty and staff, and to our board members, all of whom demonstrate the elevating effect of a Shimer education.

I want to take this time to give special thanks to our anonymous donor, who has been so generous these past three-plus years, and has most recently given Shimer an additional half-million dollars to launch my presidency. As Shimer students read and know, Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, calls generosity of such a magnitude, *megaloprepeia*, which is Greek for "magnificence." Such rare individuals as our anonymous donor, Aristotle writes, are "artists of expenditure," for they understand and act on the principle that wealth finds its highest purpose in the service of nobility. I believe that Aristotle is correct, and that our anonymous donor perfectly fits Aristotle's famous description of nobility in action.

Like all of you, I am grateful for the fact that Shimer is one of the precious few institutions that still lives its conviction that a truly liberal education is an education *in, through, and for* liberty. In my Fall Convocation address, I spoke of the highest form of human liberty: intellectual liberty, or the freedom that comes from questioning previously unexamined assumptions. Intellectual liberty makes it possible for us to recognize the nature and status of all our other liberties—political, moral, and economic.

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I will use this occasion to speak further on the subject of political liberty. In the course of so doing, I want to issue here and now a call to all colleges and universities to take a page from Shimer's book. Here I refer to the study of the intellectual foundations of our democracy. On this critical subject, allow me to begin with a quotation from a man from Illinois who would go on to become president, Abraham Lincoln:

We have besides these men descended by blood from our ancestors-among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, . . . if they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, . . . but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and then they feel that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. - Speech in Chicago, 1858

I consider Lincoln's statement to be the best answer offered in response to the question, "What does it mean to be an American citizen?" However one decides the question, we can agree that, with all the heat generated of late over immigration, we would all have hoped that some light also would have been cast on the question of the meaning of Americanism. Given the need to elevate our national dialogue over this issue, it is disheartening that this has yet to happen. In fact, surveys suggest that the *idea* that is American citizenship is all but lost on America's citizens themselves. Here our universities can be of invaluable assistance, if they will take a page from Shimer's book. More importantly, our need for such assistance goes well beyond the immediate issue of immigration.

"The United States is more than a mere address, more than its history, and more than its demographics. It is, in its essence, an idea."

As Lincoln demonstrates, any attempt to illuminate the meaning of American citizenship ought to begin at the beginning, with the very justification for our existence as a country, the Declaration of Independence. Its claims are meant to be universal, addressed not only to King George III, but to a "candid world." The Declaration argues that, in the new American order, blood, creed, and national origin—the constituents of citizenship throughout history—have been dethroned. Instead, U.S. citizenship entails adherence to moral and political principles the truth of which, says the Declaration, is self-evident to those who reason rightly. These principles, which form what has been

called the "American theory of justice," argue for human equality; for the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; for government established by popular consent; and for the right of the people to rebel should government cease to fulfill the purposes for which it was instituted. On this basis, the United States is more than a mere address, more than its history, and more than its demographics. It is, in its essence, an idea.

We welcome you, Tom Lindsay, as President, into this community of friends we call Shimer College – friends who hold in common a love of wisdom – philosophy – seekers after beauty and truth."
- Don Moon, Professor and President Emeritus

Yet how many of us today, native-born no less than newly arrived immigrants, can recount the Declaration's four self-evident truths? More crucial, how many of us have even a rudimentary grasp of the moral and intellectual foundations of the American theory of justice? For years, surveys have told us that the answer to both questions is, "precious few." This cannot help but alarm those of us who believe, with the Declaration's author, Thomas Jefferson, that no nation can expect to be "both ignorant and free." But neither should we be surprised at the surveys' results, says Derek Bok. The former president of Harvard University argues in his recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, that American higher education is not providing the democratic or civic education on which he and Jefferson deem democratic health to depend.

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A SHIMER STUDENT'S CIVIC EDUCATION

Readings from Social Sciences II

Plato, *Republic*

Aristotle, *Politics*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law*

Douglas, *The Narrative of Fredrick Douglas*

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*

The United States Declaration of Independence

The United States Constitution

The Federalist

Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

Sojourner Truth, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

Bok's title conveys an unhappy thesis: our colleges and universities are underperforming on a number of fronts, one of which is preparing students for citizenship. Bok laments the fact that most colleges today do not require even an introductory course in American government, the result of which, according to Department of Education statistics, is that only one-third of undergraduates ever complete such a course. He is yet more concerned about *why* this might be the case, citing Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, who reports that "after five years of active discussions on dozens of campuses . . . I have been persuaded that there is not just a neglect of but a resistance to college-level study of United States democratic principles." Shimer's required study of our founding documents is a happy exception.

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While university-bashing has become something of a cottage industry of late, this is not my intention. I know too well that today's colleges and universities face a multitude of challenges that are little understood by those outside academe. My intent is, rather, to persuade our universities that they will be the first to benefit from requiring that all their students undertake the serious study of the character and foundations of American democracy, and to do so in Shimer-fashion. Why?

"It is good for a college to have a president grounded, as Tom is, in the books that are read across the curriculum. He is at home with these books, and he has a voice that comes naturally from within the college. I find that I learn from him when he speaks, which inspires me to do more to help get Shimer's message out to others."
- Christopher Nelson, Chair of the Shimer Board of Trustees and President of St. John's College

Having spent the bulk of the last quarter-century teaching in universities, I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of professors choose the profession for the very best of reasons—out of the conviction they share with Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Not the desire for wealth or fame, but the desire for knowledge, unites the professoriate at its best.

Socrates also argues that our quest for knowledge of the whole cannot take place in a vacuum. It requires that we simultaneously examine our act of examining. That is to say, it requires that we study the context in which we pursue the life of rational inquiry. This is why Socrates turned away from the study of what today is called the "natural sciences" solely and toward the "human things," politics chief among them. Simply put, the particular study of the intellectual and moral foundations of the American republic is not merely an exercise in antiquarianism or filial piety, but rather an essential element in our pursuit of knowledge of the whole of existence. As such, it is no less essential that, like Socrates, we share the fruits of our inquiry with our students.

This is not to deny, but to place in perspective, Bok's lesser yet legitimate point that, because our universities benefit from tax exemptions and federal financial aid, they have a duty to provide civic education as part of their claim of providing a public good. On this point, a 2007 *New York Times* essay, "Revisiting the Canon Wars," reminds us how Bok's thesis echoes in some respects the late Allan Bloom's commentary on Alexis de Tocqueville, which takes the form of a sub-chapter in Bloom's 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bok's title, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, is reminiscent of *The Closing's* subtitle:

How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students. Of course, no one would equate Bok with Bloom. For this very reason, we need to give both a hearing. When educators who are otherwise so different agree on so critical a point, it suggests that we owe it to ourselves to examine their arguments earnestly.

Bloom elaborates on Tocqueville's insights into modern democracy and the importance of the university within it. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville, the son of French aristocracy, offers a compelling case for the rectitude of democratic equality. In an effort to maintain democratic justice, Tocqueville also presents an analysis of the dangers to which modern democracy is subject, chief among which is the subjugation of the individual to majority opinion. This seems paradoxical at first: American democracy invites its citizens to use their powers of reason, because the authors of the Declaration and Constitution were confident in reason's power to discover architectonic moral and political truths. Accordingly, the Declaration announces humanity's independence from the unquestioned authority of kings, clergy, and tradition. Each democratic citizen is free to use his or her rational faculties to pursue happiness in a manner consistent with the like freedom of others. At the same time, Tocqueville discerns that, for most of us, such liberation may also carry new chains, because most of us require some sort of authority outside of our unassisted reason for guidance on life's most important questions. But with the older sources of licensed authority having been jettisoned in the name of equality, where can the modern democrat turn?

In the marketplace of free and equal citizens, the opinion of the majority takes on a power previously unimaginable. Indeed, for Tocqueville, the sheer dominance of public opinion in modern democracy threatens us with a new form of despotism, "soft" despotism, which is not imposed by force but rather submitted to, almost without being noticed. In the absence of any authority outside the majority, it becomes nearly impossible for the solitary, democratic "individual" to conceive of the prospect that our majoritarian ways may at times suffer, like all things human, from certain defects. We recognize the accuracy of Tocqueville's diagnosis when we reflect on the immense power public opinion surveys hold over our lives. This hold hinders our capacity to imagine ways of life fundamentally different from the status quo; that is, it undermines the development of intellectual freedom, the sine qua non of the "examined life." If such freedom is not to be swallowed whole by democratic conformism, what is to be done?

In this, American higher education, and perhaps it alone, has both the obligation and the privilege to play the role of liberator, to liberate us from slavish devotion to the conventional and elevate us toward the highest—what some would call the truly human—questions, e.g., "What is a noble life and how might I achieve it?"

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In short, our democracy needs a place where it can transcend its endemic attention to narrowly practical concerns in order to ask the most important questions, the questions whose examination, says Socrates, makes life worth living. Our universities, armed with intellectual courage and shielded by academic freedom, can help us declare our independence from the tyranny of convention and the seductions of conformism.

But to establish such an education, the professoriate must dare to tread territory still scorched from the campus "culture wars" of recent decades and revisit the discussion of a required core curriculum. To do this, perhaps we can begin by agreeing that there are at least certain core *questions* that all students should examine. Here, I offer a sampling of these questions, along with some of their ancillaries.

- *What is the meaning of human equality as articulated in the Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal"? Equal in what respects? What view of human nature does this presuppose? Does the Declaration mean to include African-Americans, as Abraham Lincoln, along with Frederick Douglass and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., insisted?*
- *What does the Declaration mean by asserting that we possess rights that are not "alienable"? Who or what, precisely, cannot alienate our rights? Are all rights deemed inalienable, or only some? And why?*



- *Why does the Founding generation consider government just only when it is instituted by the consent of the governed? Is justice for the Founders merely consent-based? If not, what might trump consent?*
- *Why do the Founders assert the right of the people to rebel when government ceases to protect the ends (equality, inalienable rights, and consent) for and by which it was instituted? Are there other grounds that justify rebellion?*
- *What is the relation among the Declaration of 1776, the original Constitution, instituted in 1789, and the first ten amendments, ratified in 1791? Does the Constitution give flesh to the Declaration's promise? Or is the Constitution guilty of the charge of having retreated from the Declaration's democratic spirit?*
- *Why did the Founders opt for representative democracy over the "pure" version of democracy practiced in ancient Athens? What did **The Federalist** (penning by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) assert was the inadequacy of ancient democracy?*
- *What economic conditions make American democracy possible? Why does the Constitution protect property rights? Why do its critics, such as Marx, believe private property to be the root of injustice? How would Madison and Hamilton have responded to Marx's and his followers' critique?*
- *Why does the Constitution establish a separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches? When Madison writes in **The Federalist** that "ambition must be made to counter ambition," what view of human nature does he presuppose?*
- *Why does the First Amendment of the Constitution protect, among other things, speech, religion, and the press? Why did Hamilton argue in **The Federalist** that the first Amendment—along with the nine that followed in 1791, all of which only years later came to be called the "Bill of Rights"—was unnecessary?*

Implicit in these questions are a number of fundamental documents and major speeches that every student should study. The themes of human equality, inalienable rights, popular consent, and the right of revolution clearly require an examination of the Declaration, along with Frederick Douglass's "The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro" and Chief Justice Taney's infamous opinion for the majority in the *Dred Scott* case (where Taney denies that African-Americans have any rights that whites are bound to respect). Against Taney, Frederick Douglass's and Lincoln's scathing critiques of the *Dred Scott* opinion need to be taught.

The Declaration needs also to be scrutinized in its relation to the pro-woman's-suffrage, 1848 *Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*, as well as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on the National Mall in 1963. Why did Elizabeth Cady Stanton look to the form and substance of the Declaration of Independence in crafting the *Seneca Falls Declaration*? What did the Reverend King mean by asserting that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution constituted a "promissory note to which every American was to fall heir"?

"The Constitution, of course, must be taught to our students. As both critics and admirers of the Constitution agree, there is no more authoritative commentary on that document than *The Federalist*, the series of 85 newspaper essays defending and explaining the Constitution, written during the period when the states were debating its ratification."

The Constitution, of course, must be taught to our students. As both critics and admirers of the Constitution agree, there is no more authoritative commentary on that document than *The Federalist*, the series of 85 newspaper essays defending and explaining the Constitution, written during the period when the states were debating its ratification. Specifically, the questions regarding representation, minority rights, and the economics of democracy require examination of the Constitution and *The Federalist*, along with Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt's writings and speeches on economic democracy.

Finally, for reasons already articulated, all students need to be introduced both to Tocqueville's defense of democratic equality and to his concerns over the intellectual conformism to which American democracy lies exposed.

"The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

- Robert M. Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago and proponent of the Great Books curriculum

Needless to say, these questions are not exhaustive; others should be added. My chief point is that these questions and concomitant sources are necessary to any attempt to educate our students in the meaning of American citizenship. Moreover, these questions, which constitute the core of my proposal for college-level democratic education, spring not from mystical, filial piety but, rather, from the requirements of the Socratic life to which we academics have committed ourselves. Filial piety is contrary to the rational inquiry to which universities at their best are devoted. It also is contrary to what the Founders intended. The Declaration's appeal to a "candid world" makes no demands based on faith, tradition, or blood lines. Instead, it asks us to reason about—to debate—its assertions that equality and liberty are the grounds of justice.

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Through instructing our students in the questions that I have outlined, we can—and Shimer already does—continue the debate proposed by the Founders. As Shimer students learn, Socrates argues that human goodness, at its peak, may well consist primarily in investigating the question, “What is human goodness?” Socrates taught Plato, who in turn taught Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle honors both Plato and Socrates when he takes Plato to task: “Plato is dear to me,” writes Aristotle, “but dearer still is truth.” In a like manner, we pay tribute to the Founders when we subject their radical reinterpretation of citizenship to the most searching scrutiny. But such tribute is far from filial piety. It is, instead, the quest demanded by the desire to know ourselves.

For the sake of the integrity of both our universities and our politics—for our citizens both newly arrived and native-born—let us follow Shimer's example, and begin this quest, and let us do so in the civil, fair-minded, and magnanimous manner that defines university life at its noblest.

“The inauguration of Tom Lindsay is a testament to Shimer's renaissance. Listening to Tom speak at his inauguration, I felt that I was looking at the future of Shimer College. And it is a bright future, indeed.”
- Dan Shiner ('77), *Shimer Board of Trustees*

DID YOU KNOW?

- Shimer students do not read textbooks or listen to lectures. Instead, they read original sources and participate in discussion-based classes.
- Shimer students have the opportunity to cross-register for classes at the Illinois Institute of Technology and the VanderCook College of Music.
- Shimer students enrolled in the joint degree program with Chicago-Kent College of Law can earn both a bachelor's degree and law degree in only six years.
- Shimer students can spend a year or a semester in Oxford, England, where they take courses from Shimer faculty and tutorials from University of Oxford tutors.
- Shimer ranks in the top 1% of U.S. colleges and universities in the percentage of graduates who go on to earn doctorate degrees.
- Shimer alumni go on to professional careers in nearly every sector, including education, business, art, writing, philanthropy, law, and medicine.



SIT DOWN WITH PRESIDENT LINDSAY

Recently, President Thomas Lindsay sat down for a chat with senior Rubina Isaac ('09) to talk about his experience at Shimer thus far and his vision for Shimer's future.

What has your Shimer experience been like so far?

Very rewarding. I have been studying Shimer's history and culture and making use of these early months to get to know the many members of the Shimer community.

I know you grew up in Chicago. What neighborhood? Where did you go to school? What is it like to be back?

It's great to be back. I grew up in Humboldt Park and am a product of the Chicago Public Schools. I'm proud to be a part of Shimer because it offers what I believe is genuine liberal education.

How did you become interested in liberal education?

As an undergraduate, I intended to go to law school, and was in fact accepted. But during my senior year, I read Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*—and I was hooked. Instead of law school, I accepted a scholarship to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago, where I earned a Ph.D. in political philosophy.

Is there a particular educational experience that has been especially influential in your life?

One of the most influential courses I ever took was at the University of Chicago. It was a two-quarters-long course on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The professor extended our meeting times to four hours a week instead of three. It was the most intense and rewarding educational experience of my life.

What excites you about being here at Shimer?

I'm excited to have the opportunity to present Shimer as a model of higher education. As we've moved from the Industrial to the Information Age, the boom in information technology is enabling more of us to see once again the value in Great Books education.

Why is that?

Education in the Industrial Age focused on training students in a set of skills. But today, the paradigms governing business are changing with laser-like speed. As a result, the skills acquired in a conventional education become obsolete nearly as quickly as the computer software that becomes obsolete the moment it hits the stores' shelves. To cope with the pace of change that defines the globalized marketplace, a new education is required. Happily, that "new" education is already with us—here at Shimer.



Today, anyone with a computer can amass a great deal of information. But information is different from wisdom. To cull wisdom from the glut of facts available through information technology, our students need depth, breadth, creativity, and, of course, the capacity to synthesize new information. They need to be thinkers. And that is what a Great Books core curriculum seeks to nurture: thinkers.

How do you think a liberal arts education prepares students for the world?

One way, as I discussed at my inauguration, is that it prepares students for democratic citizenship. Liberal education simultaneously depends on, yet transcends, political freedom. American democracy is grounded in a set of principles whose truth was deemed self-evident by our Founders. For this reason, effective citizenship must begin with an understanding of these fundamental principles—human equality, inalienable rights, and government by consent—as they were articulated at the Founding. All Shimer students study America's Founding documents.

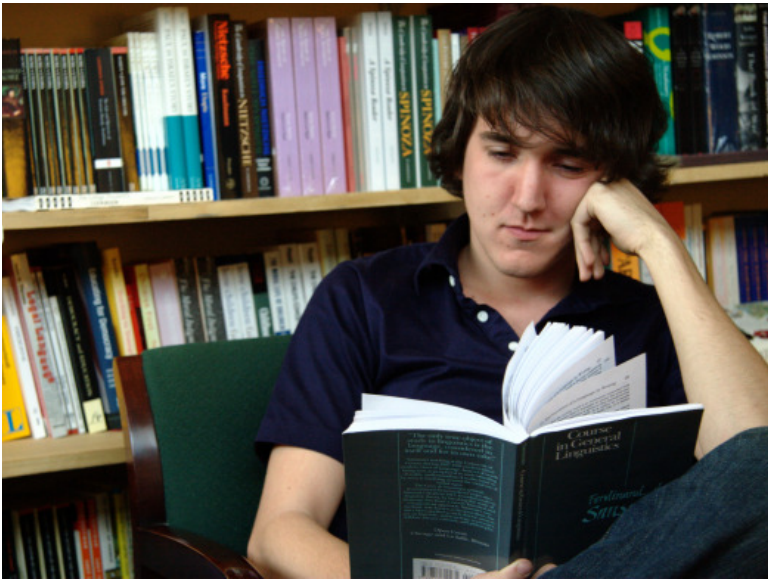
A more important way in which a Shimer education prepares students for the world is through giving them the means and opportunity to achieve a freedom higher than political freedom, and that is intellectual freedom. Socrates said "the unexamined life is not worth living." In the Socratic spirit, the purpose of a Shimer education is to free us from bondage to the unexamined assumptions that govern our, and every, culture.

What's your favorite book?

The book that has had the most influence on me is Plato's *Republic*, because it taught me the limits of politics and revealed the possibility of a way of life whose goodness transcends even that of the best political order; namely, the examined life.

What are you currently reading?

I just finished *The Brain That Changes Itself*, by Norman Doidge. The book is about neuroplasticity, which is a fascinating field. Until about ten years ago, it was assumed that the brain stops producing new neurons once we reach adulthood. However, now we know that, at any age, that very act of learning produces new brain cells—one more reason we should never stop learning!



SHIMER THROUGH THE YEARS

1853 - The Mount Carroll Seminary is founded by Frances Ann Wood and Cinderella Gregory. It is one of the nation's first preparatory academies for women.

1896 - An affiliation with the University of Chicago is formed. The school becomes the Frances Shimer Academy of the University of Chicago.

1906 - Fire destroys much of the campus, most of which is rebuilt over the next few years.

1950 - The name "Shimer College" is officially adopted. Shimer also adopts a curriculum based on then-University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins's belief that undergraduate education should furnish "a common stock of fundamental ideas." This Great Books curriculum continues to this day.

1951 - Shimer becomes an autonomous four-year college and begins accepting men.

1978-79 - The College moves from its original location in Mount Carroll to Waukegan, Illinois.

2006 - Shimer moves to Chicago, bringing Hutchins's Great Books curriculum back to its birthplace.

[http://alumni.shimer.edu/
BecomingAmerican](http://alumni.shimer.edu/BecomingAmerican)

Read President Lindsay's full essay on the subject of civic education, *Becoming American*, which was originally published in April 2008 in *Inside Higher Ed*.



Shimer

The Great Books
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