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## **Teaching toward Virtue: Curriculum as Formation at Calvin College**

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### **Abstract:**

Calvin College has recently adopted a new core curriculum that includes a list of “representative” virtues among its intended educational outcomes. Several lines of argument were useful in bringing faculty into the conversation about these virtues. As a part of the core course approval process, faculty were asked to generate statements about how virtue is addressed in the content and pedagogy of their core curriculum classes. Several major themes can be seen in these statements. Virtue as an educational outcome also provided the context for useful collaboration between the Student Life and Academic Divisions, and for future faculty research and assessment efforts.

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Calvin College takes the formative power of its curriculum seriously. In its new core curriculum, written and adopted by the faculty and implemented in the 2001-2002 school year, the “purposes of the core” include a long list of knowledge objectives, skills, and, finally, virtues. In the words of the our core curriculum document: “Intellectual character, and its moral analogs, cannot be developed on the sidelines of the academic life” (Calvin College, 1999).

Choosing a list of virtues as a desired outcome of our core curriculum was not without controversy. Faculty feared that virtues might be addressed with simplistic lesson plans or moral fables, or that we might begin to assess virtue development through simplified measures of complex concepts such as courage or wisdom. Faculty have been reluctant to examine too closely just how this shaping occurs. Much of this reluctance springs from a deep respect for the autonomy and responsibility of the student in the classroom, and additional resistance stems from a fear that a process as deep as personal transformation will wilt if it is examined too intensely or attempted too deliberately. Three lines of argument were useful in countering these fears and nurturing conversations about virtue at Calvin:

1. Formation of mind and character have been essential goals in the history of liberal arts education. The adopted purposes of the core curriculum were initially presented to the Calvin faculty in the context of an historical reflection on the tradition of liberal arts education. Lee Hardy, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin and guiding author of the core curriculum statement, explained, in extensive written materials, that the new core at Calvin

connects to a very old tradition. Until very recently liberal arts education was never assumed to be value free. Rather, the shaping of character was often described as central to the mission of advanced learning. Liberal arts education had its beginning in ancient Athens and was designed for those destined to participate in the political life of their communities. The classical liberal arts education was to make people virtuous, effective, and intelligent. From its inception in the Greco-Roman period, liberal arts education has sought not only to equip students with knowledge and skill, but also to shape their character on the basis of some shared conception of the good for human life. Until the modern era, knowledge was presumed to have moral implications, and education was assumed to form mind and heart. In the postmodern context, we acknowledge that even in the secular research university, there are explicit or implicit assumptions about virtue. In the words of the core document:

“it is clearly time to retrieve this major component of the liberal arts ideal, attempt to articulate it for ourselves, and agree as a faculty upon its main contours. At a liberal arts college, we should be up front and intentional about the unavoidable formative effects of the educational process, and at a Christian college we are in an excellent position to do so (Calvin College, 1999).

2. Virtues are necessary, inevitable components of a thriving academic community. Mark Schwehn, in *Exiles from Eden* (1993), argues that virtues are necessary to the creation and conduct of any academic community. Many of these virtues have their root, Schwehn argues, in the religious roots of the academic life. The faculty at Calvin acknowledge that their mission is communal rather than individual and we can most effectively pursue our scholarship and educate students when we deliberately seek to become a virtuous community together. This acknowledgment prompts questions: what kind of virtuous community do we strive to be? How are students being shaped by participating in this kind of community?

3. The religious mission of the college provides a context and reason for a concern about virtue. Faculty assume, and indeed hope, that students are being shaped by the content of their academic courses. For many faculty, this hope is why they entered college teaching. Calvin College is a faith-based school, identifying itself within the Reformed strand of historic Christianity. Central to the Reformed tradition is the conviction that all knowledge is God’s knowledge, and our task, in academic community, is to expand and apply this knowledge in our work in the world. Our religious identity shapes all that we do, including education, scholarship, and community life. Our mission in scholarship is to take increasingly informed delight in the world, and to use knowledge and skill to renew the creation. Our mission in education is to prepare students to be servants of God and the world, and to have the passion and skills to make a transforming difference in the world. Conversations on campus about the kinds of graduates who are able to make this kind of difference in the world lead faculty to discussions of virtues and values, and to genuine curiosity about the most effective ways to shape student character in the classroom.

## **Academic Virtues**

The Core Curriculum Committee proposed, and the faculty adopted a list of 14 “representative” virtues. These virtues are described in our documents as distinctly academic virtues, central both to the conduct of academic community and to an active, informed life in the world. The virtues and portions of their descriptors are listed below. While the whole descriptor is not given for each virtue, note that each descriptor includes a desired goal for Calvin students and, typically, a statement beginning with “likewise”

that applies the virtue to our life together as a community. Samples of both of these kinds of goals are included here (Calvin College, 1999).

- Diligence: It is the willingness to dig in for the long haul, to forego lesser goods in the present for the sake of greater goods in the future. In the academic life, it means not giving up on a difficult text when that text can't be understood the first time through; persevering with a problem until a solution is found; repeating the conjugation of a verb in a strange tongue until the proper endings become second nature.
- Patience: ..In our teaching we should not be given to quick and easy solutions where there are none, but be willing to do in the classroom the kind of patient work we expect of our students in their studies, ready to absorb a great deal of trouble for the sake of solid achievement.
- Honesty: Intellectual honesty can be fostered in our students by holding them accountable in their work for a careful consideration of viewpoints in opposition to their own, by not letting them get thorough the college without struggling with data, evidence, arguments, and views that might challenge the notions with which they entered its gates.
- Courage: ...Intellectual courage signifies the willingness to take risks, to take on the hard questions and follow the answers wherever they lead. ...The college, moreover, can support this virtue by belying and advising its more adventurous faculty members as they search out new and difficult routes on the previously unexplored faces of their disciplines.
- Charity: ...Students should be encouraged to practice charity in their academic work, granting those with whom they disagree a sympathetic hearing, giving a charitable interpretation to positions they may find strange or offensive, and treating others with respect, ever on the lookout for what is good within.
- Creativity: Fresh expression in the arts, advances in the sciences, and new approaches to seemingly intractable problems of practical life all depend on the ability of the human mind to move from the actual to the possible and the willingness to take risks in realizing the latter.
- Empathy: A deep and creative grasp of a subject requires empathy, an imaginative transposition of the whole self into the matters to be understood, a readiness to experience the world as others have experienced it.
- Humility: Humility before a text is grounded in the expectation that we will have something to learn from it; humility before experience, in the realization that experience is vast and ever instructive; humility before other persons, in the recognition that they are complex, varied, and inventive, and therefore may have something unexpected to say that will change our minds.
- Stewardship: Students at Calvin should become aware of the irreplaceable value of the gifts God has given them and the responsibilities attached to those gifts, and thus come to see themselves as stewards, not mere users, of the creation.
- Compassion: Likewise, faculty members should reflect on whether their lives manifest compassion or whether the demands of success in their academic careers have narrowed their moral vision and blinded them in some respects to the needs of those around them.
- Justice: Likewise, a commitment to justice should be evident in the teaching we do at Calvin. It should govern the way we treat our students; it should have some bearing, where relevant, on the content of our courses; and it should list high among the concerns of the institution as evidenced by the speakers Calvin invites to its campus, the admissions and recruitment policies it pursues, the hospitality it extends, the service projects it sponsors, and the volunteer services it makes available.

- Faith: Faith, as a virtue, is the auspicious combination of loyalty and trust. In the core curriculum, students should find themselves reminded of the faith of those who have gone before them.
- Hope: They should, moreover, learn to have a proper confidence in the gifts and abilities that God has given them, recognizing that it is possible for them, with God's help, to make a genuine difference in this world.
- Wisdom: Wisdom is developed over time in a tradition and carried in a community. Students should find themselves being instructed in its ways in the classroom, the chapel, the dorm, on the athletic fields, throughout the halls, and in our offices.

### **Virtue as a Course Objective**

After the larger purposes of the core were approved by the Calvin College faculty, academic departments were invited to submit courses designed to meet the core objectives. In the written proposal submitted to the Core Curriculum Committee, faculty addressed the ways in which the courses met the specified knowledge and skill objectives of particular core categories. The proposals also included a section on virtue. Faculty members were asked to describe how the specific course pedagogy or content addressed or promoted any or all of the virtues. What follows are three samples of the statements submitted to the Core Committee. The statement from the English Department illustrates the kind of statement that was written for an entry-level core course. The Art Department statement on charity is a part of a general departmental statement on virtue. The Economics statement accompanies their Senior Seminar.

#### ENGL 101: Written Rhetoric

English 101 directly encourages the core virtues in three ways: by promoting creativity, by demanding excellence, and by fostering a sense of service. First, promoting creativity, English 101 instructors guide students as they craft written texts that please as well as persuade and as they invent novel logical connections such as analogies and metaphors. Second, building on the message of Malachi 1, English 101 instructors encourage students to bring their best written efforts before the Lord. The conjunction of this encouragement, a process-based pedagogy, and the inherent difficulty of writing well promotes the virtues of diligence, patience, and humility. As students work and rework essays to clarify their thesis, to better integrate their research, or to enhance the loveliness of a passage, they learn to persevere. Furthermore, in researching and in representing the words and ideas of others, students learn to write in a way that honors the virtue of honesty. Third, English 101 prepares students to use their skills in written rhetoric to restore our fallen creation. Working through the challenges of writing redemptively, students practice the virtues of empathy and charity. Students must recognize that the challenges of writing redemptively will draw them into potentially uncomfortable situations, situations that require stewardly use of their writing skills. And we must encourage them that the virtues of courage and hope will enable them to meet these challenges.

#### Art Department: General Statement

Charity. Even though it may be true, as the philosopher Donald Davidson has suggested, that charity is not an option but a prerequisite in the act of interpretation, charity is, nonetheless, more than giving someone else the benefit of the doubt. It involves a kind of empathy that makes one's own a non-indifference for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, to those who cry for help in the midst of adversity. Charity includes hospitality to

others and compassion for them, the willingness to suffer with them. Charity is a key way to imitate Christ by loving others as ourselves. In art and art history courses, students and instructors will be encouraged to consider education as a process of giving to one another, rather than a process of taking what one can get. All participants will be welcomed to make contributions to one another and to others beyond the confines of the classroom in hopes of becoming captivated by the gifts of God.

#### ECON 395: Economics Seminar

Probably the principal virtue addressed in Economics 395 is honesty, for students are asked to seriously take stock of what they actually believe about the world and then to reflect carefully on the significance of those beliefs for the way they think about and do economics. Students are encouraged to gain increasing familiarity with the faith-based story that gives them their own identity and purpose, and then to play their role in that story with full integrity. To that end, students read materials by John Stott, Leslie Newbigin, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, and are given the opportunity to express their own views, relating them to economics and to other aspects of their lives. One hopes that students will thus grow, both in their understanding of faithfulness and in their ability to live it out in their own respective callings.

Recognizing that living a faithful life in the world of economics is not a simple and straightforward task, students are introduced to the conversation other Christian economists have enjoined as they try to discern God's will. In the process, students are encouraged to listen patiently and respectfully to people with viewpoints they themselves do not share, and to engage these colleagues in a constructive dialogue. During the class we try to model a style of dialogue in which each participant can courageously put forth his/her own viewpoints and ideas, but then also listen to others in the humility of knowing that each of us can often learn from others.

In trying to connect students with their own all-embracing story, they are encouraged to adopt and then creatively employ the economically significant virtues of justice, stewardship, compassion, and charity. Students are continually challenged to own these virtues, to identify their place in contemporary economic thinking, and to use them as criteria as they analyze and evaluate a current economics topic in their course paper. The ultimate goal, of course, is that students will gradually internalize these virtues in all aspects of their lives.

Finally, the paper itself is an exercise in diligence, courage, and perseverance. Papers are written in three stages, and usually end up being about 20-30 pages long. At each stage, papers are submitted to peer evaluations, which help build reliance on others in community, even as it creates an accountability structure. In the process of being critiqued and in critiquing others, students learn the importance of empathy, humility, charity, as well as honest, but constructive and motivating comments. These virtues are explicitly discussed in this part of the course.

#### **General Statements on Virtue and the Curriculum**

Statements much like the sample statements included above were obtained from almost every academic department in reference to every course that is included within Calvin's core curriculum. A collection of these "virtue statements" includes paragraphs describing courses in language, mathematics, natural and social sciences, the arts, communication, i.e. throughout the entire curriculum.

An analysis of all of these statements reveals some interesting patterns in the ways that faculty currently think about and approach virtue development within the curriculum. Five general trends were evident:

1. Faculty assume that students are shaped through the content of the course work. The virtues of empathy, humility, compassion, and wisdom were most often cited as the result of studying texts, engaging with other cultures and situations, and engaging the diverse opinions of other class members. Faculty are not sure of just how this formation happens and are reluctant to pinpoint specific texts, experiences, or classroom dynamics. They acknowledge that a variety of teaching strategies are needed to engage the variety of students. Nonetheless, faculty describe choosing texts and assignments that make an emotional and intellectual impact on students, not just to increase their knowledge but to nurture the moral life.

2. Faculty expect that virtues which are enacted within the classroom and community are strengthened through practice and will carry over into life beyond the classroom. The virtues of diligence, honesty, courage, patience, and creativity are repeatedly described as necessary for successful course performance. Writing several drafts of a paper, staying with a research project after initial frustrations, participating through service-learning in a community project, and conjugating countless verbs are examples of activities that are the training grounds for these virtues.

3. Many proposals contain an implicit assumption that enhanced cognitive complexity will lead to greater empathy and intellectual humility. Faculty want students to see the world from multiple perspectives and develop an openness to new, complex experiences and points of view. This implicit developmental theory described in many of the course proposals mirrors much of the writing on college student intellectual development. Our faculty assume links between this intellectual development and virtue development as well, links that are in need of further exploration.

4. Although all of the virtues can be related to the religious mission of the college, one subset of virtues - hope, justice, faith, and peace - are described in explicitly religious terms. When faculty describe these virtues they are anchored to a religious worldview that grounds the material that is discussed or presented in class. Faculty believe that students will grow in a motivation to be virtuous as they grow in religious maturity and depth. Faculty do not expect all students to begin to sound alike in religious depth or commitment; there is a rich variety of perspective, maturity, and commitment within the Calvin student body. But faculty generally expect that students will look for and move toward consistency in mind, heart, and behavior.

5. Faculty demonstrate an awareness of the importance of modeling virtue in their interactions with students and colleagues, although this is rarely mentioned as a pedagogical strategy. Faculty generally express an eagerness to be a part of an academic community marked by the intellectual virtues that we desire for our students.

What these themes reveal is, again, a reluctance to look too closely or label too confidently the process of virtue formation within the classroom. Faculty believe that it happens, and that it happens through a rich, somewhat mysterious mix of engagement with text and experience, behavioral practice, modeling, intellectual growth, and religious maturity. Most faculty acknowledge that they have little understanding of how virtue is formed in the classroom, and they have primarily anecdotal evidence that, in fact, their attempts to address virtue formation have been successful. In statement after statement, faculty

acknowledge that the virtue is a worthy, essential goal, but its relationship to grading and assessment must be treated carefully.

### **Assessment**

What difference will it make that virtue has been deliberately addressed in our core curriculum and in our classroom strategies? Will faculty conversations about pedagogical strategies and student virtue make a real difference in student outcomes? These are questions for assessment. We are beginning to develop a qualitative interview protocol to assess the impact of our curricular and co-curricular efforts on graduating seniors. This assessment strategy will not attempt to measure student virtue, but will assess student language about virtue and the richness of their descriptions of the virtues and their perceptions of the qualities of our academic community. We expect that this interview process will produce a rich source of data that will help us further expand and refine our "best practices" in the classroom and community life.

### **Student Life and Collaborative Programming**

The desire to focus on the formative aspects of the overall curriculum grew out of joint conversations between the Academic and the Student Life Divisions of the college. The Student Life Division has adopted the same set of purposes, or goals, as their own, and their programming is also designed to meet these core objectives. The Student Life Division, in collaboration with many faculty members, developed a first year program to introduce all students to the purposes and methods of a Calvin College education. Explicit discussion of virtue, formation, and community life occur in this first year program. This program, known as "Prelude," introduces students to these ideas through the lenses of "The Reformed Perspective," "Responsible Freedom," "Cross Cultural Engagement," "Cultural Discernment," and "Vocation."

### **Faculty Development and Scholarship**

The focus on virtue formation has also encouraged several recent faculty development and research efforts that are consistent with this emphasis and will be useful in the classroom. Through the Lilly Vocation Project, funded by the Lilly Endowment, four faculty each year are designated as "Lilly Faculty Scholars" and will be doing research related to teaching, vocation, and student formation. A particular focus for several of these scholars in the next academic year is virtue formation through classroom experience.

A student-faculty team spent the summer of 2001 collating research material in order to provide faculty with the theoretical background and best practices for virtue development in higher education (Bratt, Bolt, and Beversluis, 2001). It was difficult to find literature that discusses how specific virtues play a role in the college classroom. The bulk of literature about college and its relationship to virtue is descriptive, not prescriptive. That is, from books to journal articles to mission statements, the literature describes what should be done to promote virtue in students, and how academic institutions ought to act in terms of fostering character, and the goals that have been set forth towards such ends. In terms of prescribing concrete methods and means for these ends, however, the literature is largely absent. The theoretical material is helpful but not specific enough for faculty eager to see concrete examples of best practices.

The team looked into the literature on K-12 character and virtue education in order to search for best practices that could have relevant extensions into the college classroom. Of

course, the greatest challenge in doing so was to find practices that would be effective at the college level without being juvenile. The straightforward, didactic methods of the elementary school classroom are not conducive to the college classroom, nor would they be well-received by students who see college as their first chance to be free of the sermonizing they may have encountered at home or school.

Three areas of research received the most attention in the literature review, and provided background material for faculty who wish to examine developmental theory and classroom practice. These three areas were the use of narrative, cognitive complexity and dissonance, and cooperative learning. Extensive resource materials were made available to faculty that reviewed what is known about the theory and practice of virtue formation through narrative, dissonance, and cooperative learning.

A specific area of promise and investigation is the rapidly expanding literature on "positive psychology." This new focus within psychology is providing increasingly nuanced understanding of the definitions, development and measurement of the kinds of positive personal qualities that overlap with the virtues that we desire as student outcomes. We expect that this area of research will also have significant application to classroom practice, and investigation of these applications to the college classroom is planned.

The decision to include virtue as a desired outcome of a Calvin College education has prompted extensive, lively dialogue between the Academic and Student Life Divisions, between faculty, and among students. We are eager to see where these discussions and the collaborative work described here will lead us and our students.

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