

# CATHOLIC TRADITIONS AND LIBERAL LEARNING: ONE POSSIBLE FUTURE FOR CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Albert DeCiccio, Ph.D.\*  
Academic Dean, Rivier College



I was able to hear Stanley Fish speak at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in January 2004. Fish is a literary critic, famous for his ideas about understanding and how reader-response theory can help us to understand understanding. Less than a decade ago, Fish became Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois (Chicago), a position he has recently left. In going to UIC, Fish brought with him many notables, including his wife—also a literary critic—Jane Tompkins. Fish has been well published in many venues during this time, extolling the ideals of the academy. He has written a column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which some of what he said in January 2004 was originally published. Repeated, incidentally, in *The New York Times* in May 2004, Fish's bottom line was that academics should do their job (and only their job) well; that academics should not attempt to do the jobs of others for which they are not qualified; that academics should not let others do their jobs.

For your edification, here's a provocative citation from his talk:

You can reasonably set out to put your students in possession of a set of materials and equip them with a set of skills (interpretive, computational, laboratory, archival), and even perhaps (although this one is really iffy) install in them the same love of the subject that inspires your pedagogical efforts. You won't always succeed in accomplishing these things—even with the best of intentions and lesson plans there will always be inattentive or distracted students, frequently absent students, unprepared students, and on-another-planet students—but at least you will have a fighting chance given the fact that you've got them locked in a room with you for a few hours every week for four months.

You have little chance, however (and that's entirely a matter of serendipity), of determining what they will make of what you have offered them once the room is unlocked for the last time and they escape first into the space of someone else's obsession and then into the space of the wide world.

And you have no chance at all (short of discipleship that is itself suspect and dangerous) of determining what their behavior and values will be in those aspects of their lives that are not, in the strict sense of the word, academic. You might just make them into good researchers. *You can't make them into good people, and you shouldn't try.* (AAC & U, January, 2004, **my emphasis**)

Starting with Fish may seem odd, given that I will be talking about a future direction for Catholic Higher Education, particularly at the small Catholic college where I work as Academic Dean. Rivier College was founded in 1933 by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary (Sr. Madeleine of Jesus, to be precise) and takes its name from the 1796 founder of that order, Blessed Anne Marie Rivier. Dedicated to the education of undergraduate and graduate students in both the liberal arts and professional courses of study and committed to the faith heritage, intellectual tradition, and social teachings of the Catholic Church, Rivier College educates the whole person in the context of an academic community that cultivates critical thought, sound judgment, and respect for all people through the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason.

In the field of Catholic Studies about which I will be talking and in my own local venue, Rivier College, there is a very conscious, deliberate tradition aimed at character formation—something that Fish believes academics ought not to be in the business of attempting. Nonetheless, I believe Catholic colleges, like mine, help to form good men and women who can, above all else, reason, read, write, and speak about all those matters that will ensure humanity’s survival. To drive home this point, I will cite Thomas M. Landy, founder and director of Collegium at Fairfield University and a member of the faculty at the College of the Holy Cross. Landy himself borrowed from Father Walter Ong’s exegesis of Mathew 13:33—the parable about kneading dough into bread—when he talked about the value of a Catholic education. Landy writes, “the function of Catholic intellectual life [is] to be leaven in the world, both to help transform creation and to be transformed by it” (xv).

Fish may have a point in asking academics to do best what academics do: teach, research, create, produce, and disseminate. When academics allow their political ideologies and social programs to take precedence in the classroom, they risk losing their hold on teaching the content for which they are compensated and, thus, risk dismissing the educational needs of their students. Fish may also be following a tradition in offering his own perspective to the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion to which nineteenth century thinkers such as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche contributed. In such a culture, the idea of character formation cannot thrive and will not be accepted. Nevertheless, I take my cue from Augustine. Augustine argued, of course, that the ultimate revealer of all things hidden is love, not suspicion. I submit, therefore, that the academy has to have a common object, and that we may find it in the love of learning fostered by the liberal arts and sciences. Moreover, to avoid what may be the most significant problem on campuses today—reductionism—the kind of curriculum espoused by Catholic colleges and universities provides us, if not a classical, certainly a postmodern trivium. As a result, reasoning, rhetoric, and religion (or theology) may be taught in a collaborative setting to help ensure the center will hold and offer hope to the suspicious.

To be sure, Fish’s critique pales when one recognizes that his reader-response theories are predicated upon a notion—social constructionism—which has as its ideological locus the transformation of society and espouses collaborative learning as its pedagogical practice. In some ways, Fish wants it both ways. Fish calls to mind for me Valparaiso’s Mark Schwehn, an advocate of Clifford Geertz and the scholar who coined the phrase “exile from Eden,”—himself an exile from the University of Chicago. Fish asks academics to nurture the intellectual life, in a community of knowledgeable peers, ultimately, teasing tender minds into thought—what he attempted to do at UIC after his tenure on the faculty at Duke. As Schwehn elegantly writes in *Exiles from Eden*, colleges like Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Boston College, Fairfield, and Rivier, to name just a few, being church-related, strive “to keep certain questions alive, such as questions about the relationship between religious faith and the pursuit of truth . . .” (vii). Indeed, as Schwehn intimates, passionate engagement is the hallmark of the Catholic college or university. It is this passionate engagement which leads thinkers (Fish’s and Geertz’s knowledgeable

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peers, as well as those who wish to become knowledgeable peers—their students) toward communion and the quest for truth and, ultimately, against reductionism. “The patience of the Catholic tradition,” write Jacobsen and Jacobsen in their new book *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, “is connected to the assumption that the thoroughly human quest for truth, goodness, and beauty will ultimately lead to faith if it is pursued with appropriate vigor and breadth of vision” (82).

Two-thousand years ago, Quintilian recognized the importance of three literacies—grammar, rhetoric, logic—as he tried to assemble good men to carry on the ideals of Roman culture in his *Institutes of Oratory*. Today, at Catholic colleges and universities, we may return to that trivium (adding the spiritual to grammar), even as we acknowledge new literacies brought about by technological advances, new genre studies that prepare young men and women for the public discourses that await them, debates about the environment, stem cell research, human reproductive health, and so forth. General education, core curriculums, at colleges and universities attempt to prepare students for living in and contributing to a world in which individuality—human dignity, individual rights, personal choice—is more and more interconnected with global systems of commerce and telecommunications. At Catholic colleges and universities, such as my own, curriculums can initiate this process by using reading, oral and written communication, critical reasoning, and theological reflection to explore the interaction among individuals and the various communities within which personal identity is cultivated.

Let me spend a few minutes sketching out a curriculum in which this return to the trivium may help to meet the goals Quintilian strived to meet. Contrary to Fish, I believe we must surely meet these goals in the dangerous world we currently inhabit.

The phenomenon of First Year Seminars is a good place to begin. In fact, the First Year Seminars should be the centerpiece of the student’s first year. They should be based on dialogues involving the arts of rhetoric, reasoning, and religion. They can be designed to do the following:

1. To introduce the student to the ways in which three liberal arts disciplines—each fundamentally part of a Catholic liberal arts education—contribute to the study of the nature of the human individual and the relation between the individual and community, and to do so in ways that overlap, support, and challenge each other;
2. To deepen and broaden the student’s ability to read, write, speak, and reason;
3. To create a community of learners who apply these skills to engage subject matters and each other actively.

The First Year Seminar rhetoric course should teach the student to read and write about ways in which non-fiction expository and literary texts contribute to the study of the nature of the human individual and the relation between the individual and community. The First Year Seminar logic course should teach the student to identify, analyze, and evaluate instances of reasoning and to practice applying these critical reasoning skills to support their own beliefs, with special emphasis on the centrality of good reasoning to the nature of the human person, to individuality, and to human communities. The First Year Seminar religion or theology course should examine the theme of individual and community from the perspective of religious beliefs and practices, teaching the student how to reflect on the meaning, beauty, and transcendent value of religious faith.

In the context of a community of knowledgeable peers, the student will take these initial competencies through her or his undergraduate career, learning how to make the connections between and among the other courses of study in the liberal arts and sciences and the professions. Then, I would argue that a Junior Year Seminar should serve as a culmination of the student’s education in the liberal

arts and sciences. If we regard the First Year Seminar as a first “bookend,” the Junior Year Seminar can be considered the other bookend. The Junior Year Seminar will require higher-level exercise of the foundational competencies begun in the First Year Seminars: reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. The Junior Year Seminar will expand the thematic focus of the First Year Seminars (individual and community) out to the globe; it will integrate the outcomes of a liberal arts and sciences education with those of career and professional training; and, ultimately, it will enhance the student’s connection with the Catholic vision of the college or university through the focus on ethics in the workplace, social justice, service to the larger community, and global responsibility. Ideally, to engage the entire faculty, each individual Junior Year Seminar will reflect the discipline of the instructor in both content and perspective, but will be “clustered” thematically with other Junior Year Seminars, allowing students to engage in cross-disciplinary conversation.

Now, I hope it is becoming apparent that these seminars follow a classical, indeed a rhetorical, tradition of conversation and collaboration. From Quintilian to Augustine to Aquinas to Newman and all the way up to Karen LeFevre and Maxine Hairston, rhetoricians have practiced a social pedagogy built upon conversation, collaboration, and critical consciousness. I believe that the First Year and Junior Year Seminars should be constructed in the same manner. Specifically (and Fish would applaud this move), the First Year and Junior Year Seminars might follow the classroom theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire—both envisioning classrooms in which there would be no teacher-of-the-students, nor students-of-the-teacher. They should advance an idea of a classroom in which everyone participates as a teacher-student and to which everyone contributes. Overall, the size of the seminars (not more than eighteen students, I should think) and the painstaking practice of interactive learning will help the institution to prepare students, from their very first years, for the curricular challenges that are ahead of them. In addition, the pedagogical philosophy espoused by the faculty and students should lead to additional curricular refinement, particularly with respect to rhetoric, or writing. In my opinion, every First Year and Junior Year Seminar should have a Writing Advisor attached to it. The Writing Advisor should be an upper-level student-tutor; eventually, the student-tutor will be chosen from among those who have successfully completed the First Year or Junior Year Seminar she or he is assigned. The Writing Advisor therefore has disciplinary knowledge of the seminar in which she or he will tutor, and can help the novice student cross Cheryl Geisler’s divide from disciplinary naiveté to disciplinary expertise. The Writing Advisor will learn about the teaching of writing through a program conducted by the college’s or university’s Writing Center Director. As a result, the Writing Advisor can serve as an intermediary between faculty member and student, employing tested strategies for bringing about effective academic discourse. The Writing Advisor program, a result of the First Year and Junior Year Seminar programs, even Fish would argue, is precisely the kind of academic response demanded in higher education. And, by the way, you will notice that the Writing Advisor plays a role similar to that of the rhetorician in Quintilian’s *Institutes*.

By the end of his or her Core experience, a student should be prepared to engage in the public debates about the important questions of the day, fortified with the knowledge, wisdom, and charisma of a Catholic education. As did Mario Cuomo, Michael Halloran, Pepperdine’s Jeanne Heffernan, and countless other leaders, such a student has moved through a Newman-like, inquiry-based curriculum in which she or he has been able to contemplate, study, and see revealed what the poet Hopkins called “God’s Grandeur.” Despite all that “is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil,” such a student has understood the message of these lines from Hopkins:

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nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (784)

Such a student has learned that meaning is charged with the supernatural. Such a student has learned the difference between the way of life and the way of death, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell, darkness and light. Such a student, in the end, is armed against reductionism. As Schwehn writes, “Spiritually grounded education in and for thoughtfulness seeks the cultivation of those virtues that make the communal quest for the truth of matters possible, an undertaking that is in every sense prior to . . . the explication of various systems of meaning. . . this conception of higher education insists both that religion needs Enlightenment and that Enlightenment needs religion” (135-6). This is the answer to Stanley Fish. What, then, should academics do in the twenty-first century and beyond? In the words of Saint Augustine, they “who [seek] to teach in speech what is good, spurning none of these three things, that is to teach, to delight, and to persuade, should pray and strive that [they] be heard intelligently, willingly, and obediently” (142).

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\* **Dr. ALBERT DeCICCIO**, Academic Dean, is in his sixth year at Rivier College. Before Rivier, he worked for twenty years at Merrimack College, until 1998, when he was asked to accept a position as Dean of the Graduate School at Wheelock College in Boston. In 1997-1998, DeCiccio completed a term as President of the International Writing Centers Association; in 2002-2003, DeCiccio ended a five-year term as co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal*. He regularly contributes articles and presentations about collaborative learning, writing, and writing center theory and practice. He has three times presented for the International Conference on the First-Year Experience.