

A Renewed Focus on Teaching and the Classroom



Spurred by concerns that their concentration on teaching had been partially swept away by a recent wave of technological and administrative changes at the College, a group of Liberal Arts professors (including Mark Strunsky, above left, and Elaine Torda and Paul Basinski below) and instructors convened in an attempt to rekindle their focus on the classroom. Out of those discussions emerged several “Humanities Initiatives” that will benefit students (like MaryLee Shorr, above right) by creating connections across academic disciplines and maximizing an exemplary faculty talent pool.

By Richard Heppner

It had been a particularly rough semester. We had been bannerized, alpha numericed, recatalogued, trained and retrained. Somewhere in the back of our minds the words of **Jim Givant** kept creeping in, “When do we talk about teaching?”

After informally talking with a number of people, it became apparent that many within the College’s Liberal Arts Division were wondering the same thing. So it was, following further discussion at a Liberal Arts chair meeting, that I asked the chairs to seek out faculty interested in doing just what Givant had been suggesting. For lack of a better description, it would be a discussion on a new humanities initiative—one in which all ideas were welcome as long as they were about the classroom.

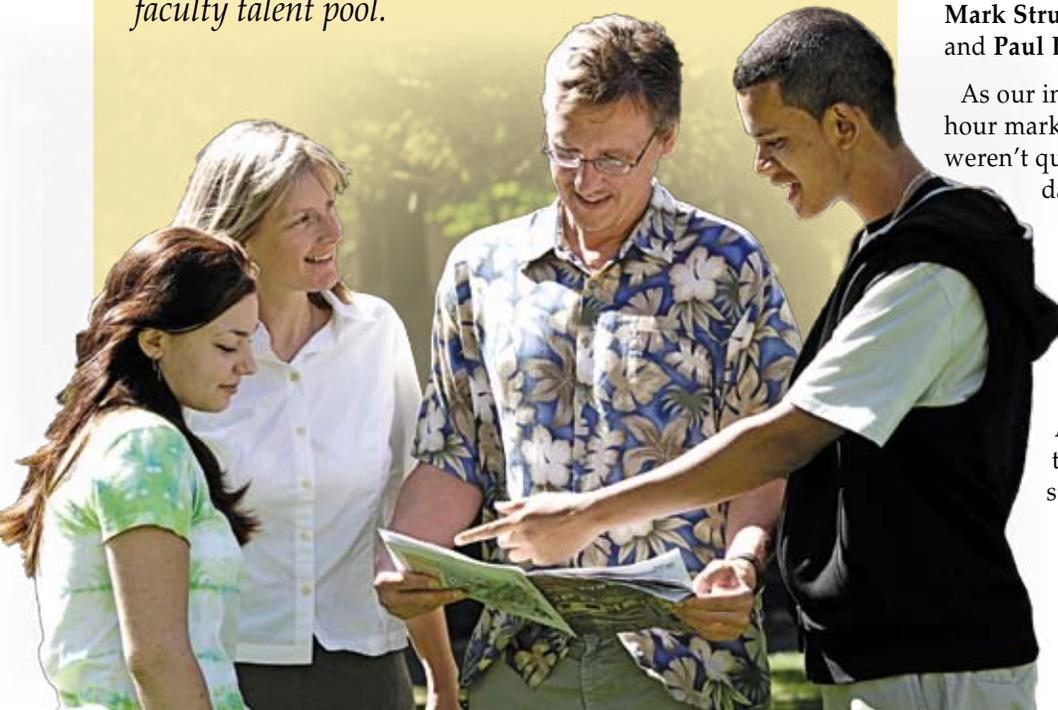
As is sometimes our nature in the liberal arts, our first meeting wandered every which way. Gathered over pizza, we touched upon a wide variety of topics, including 19th and 20th Century literature, the rise of modern art, corresponding social and political movements, poetry, popular culture, ethics, the great composers and anything else that seemed even remotely connected.

It was a gathering of both new faculty and “seasoned” veterans that included: Givant, **Elaine Torda**, and **Kristen Katzin-Nystrom** from English; **Michael McCoy** and **Heidi Weber** from Global Studies; **Susan Slater-Tanner** from Arts and Communication; **Robert Cacciatore** from Criminal Justice; and myself. In the weeks that followed **Mark Strunsky**, **Jennifer Lehtinen**, **Mary Warrenner**, and **Paul Basinski** would also join us.

As our initial conversation approached the two-hour mark, it was decided to meet again. We weren’t quite sure what we had accomplished that day but it was agreed that the discussion, in and of itself, was preferable to the content found at most of our recent meetings. Next time, we would try to make sense of it all and actually begin outlining some new initiatives.

Surprisingly, there was a next time. And, once again gathered, we began to focus on how to better engage our students in the very same discussion

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we had shared two weeks earlier. The underlying theme of our first meeting had been connections across disciplines and how to demonstrate to students that the subjects we teach do not exist in isolation. To that end, it seemed an obvious starting point would be to look at the feasibility of offering paired courses.

Though certainly not a new concept, the thought of making another attempt at linking courses together in an effort to integrate the academic experiences of our students seemed to have obvious merit. The practical problem with paired courses, however, is how to get students to enroll in both classes? Depending upon the courses selected, some students might want or need one course within the pair, but not the other.

As a result, the group thought it best to pair both a required course (English 101) with a general education course (U.S. History Since 1865). While both courses can be adjusted to accommodate each other, the fact that they are both applicable to a wide variety of degree programs would seem to offer some insurance against cancellation due to low enrollment.

Another major initiative to grow out of the group's initial discussions has been the creation of an Introduction to Humanities course. Currently in the curriculum development stage, such a class would not only offer students a course of study that intellectually



Professor Susan Slater-Tanner, who directs the Harriman Student Gallery, was among those liberal arts professors who crafted a series of "Humanities Initiatives" geared toward engaging students, uniting academic disciplines and shifting faculty focus back to the classroom.

develops ways of reflecting on the human experience, but would also permit us to make full use of the remarkable resources within our academic community.

As currently planned, two to three faculty members would have primary responsibility for the course, not only sharing lecture time but working with each other over the course of two semesters toward presenting a cohesive overview of the humanities. With each new academic year, faculty assignments would rotate in an effort to tap into the wide variety of expertise represented by our faculty.

Along similar lines, the group has also been examining the possibility of creating an on-campus speakers list where faculty, possessing a specific

area of expertise within a broader field, might serve as a guest lecturer for a particular class. Such a possibility was recently demonstrated by the Women in Art discussion organized by Weber. Why not, for example, invite Slater-Tanner to speak on—and present—the Depression-era photos taken by Dorothea Lange in a post-1865 American history class?

By making connections such as these in the student's mind, we reinforce the entirety of the academic community while demonstrating our own partnerships and connections as faculty.

As we all know, the academic area has seen its fair share of changes over the past few years. Though necessary, such changes at times seem to have obscured the very purpose behind our academic mission. While the above initiatives are neither revolutionary nor earth shattering, they are offered as but one opportunity to refocus our attention on the classroom. No doubt they won't please everyone.

Change should be viewed as an opportunity, not a threat, which is why, as demonstrated by the commitment of those engaged in this initiative, we need to continue to construct and support an environment in which those with new ideas are encouraged to come forward and forge their own trail of innovation. ■

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