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A Small College on the Precipice

- Posted by [Joseph Bast](#) on May 28, 2010 at 3:00pm
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At a meeting of its Board of Trustees yesterday, Shimer College took a step back from the edge of an abyss on which it has stood since April 19. How it got to that edge and what steps might lie ahead offer some insight into what's happening in higher education today.

Saving Shimer

Shimer College is “the Great Books school of Chicago.” It is tiny – only around 100 students – and it barely avoided closing for financial reasons on at least two occasions. Originally based in Mount Carroll, Illinois, it moved to Waukegan (north of Chicago) in 1979 and then to the campus of Illinois Institute of Technology (south of Chicago) in 2006.

I got involved with Shimer shortly before the move to IIT as part of a rescue operation to improve the school's finances and academic programs. By the time I came on the board in 2008 it had recruited a new president, Thomas Lindsay, who was given a mandate to raise money and professionalize what was largely an amateur operation.

Lindsay made considerable progress in his first 18 months, including getting the school's first "clean" audit in decades, recruiting trustees willing to financially support the school (incredibly, most of the "old" trustees gave little or nothing to their alma mater), replacing an incompetent admissions director, creating a professional development team, and revising the mission statement. (The old mission statement didn't even mention the Great Books.)

Opposition to Change

At every step of the way, Lindsay was opposed by faculty and staff. At first this opposition appeared to me to be based on Lindsay's personality and impatience with the slow and consensus-based "Shimerian way." But as opposition grew into hostility and then outright defiance of Lindsay's leadership, its real basis became clear: Faculty and students were deeply afraid of external review of their work or achievement. They were hiding something.

Thirty years in Waukegan had generated an unhealthy culture where drug and sexual abuse were apparently tolerated, "facilitators" (Shimer has no professors) socialized with and evaluated students and each other, students evaluated facilitators, and college presidents raised only enough money to keep the doors of a deteriorating campus open. The faculty was, and still is, undistinguished by conventional measures (publications, academic memberships, or recognitions). Enrollment is essentially open admission, and there has been no external review of faculty, curriculum, or student achievement in decades.

From the perspective of faculty and some students, Lindsay posed a threat to this status quo, and so had to be removed.

A Huge Step Backwards

Student and faculty protests eventually persuaded the executive committee of Shimer's board of trustees to call for a special meeting on April 19 to vote on Lindsay's removal.

The resolution passed by a single-vote margin, but only because Lindsay had to recuse himself while nearly a half-dozen other trustees with conflicts of interest did not. Three were faculty members who feared Lindsay was planning to not renew their employment contracts (yes, faculty members and even students serve on Shimer's board!), one was the brother of the dean who Lindsay had discovered had obtained his advanced degree from a notorious diploma mill, and one was an officer of a competing Great Books college that stood to benefit if Shimer were handicapped.

Lindsay was terminated immediately, rather than being allowed to serve until the end of the school

year. Classes were suspended the next day so students and faculty could celebrate. The trustees who supported Lindsay were not invited to a commencement ceremony on May 8, at which 12 students were granted degrees.

College representatives indicated their intent to not honor Lindsay's employment contract, raising the likelihood of expensive litigation. The new interim president – an emeritus trustee from the Waukegan days – dutifully renewed all faculty contracts. Three trustees and one staff member who had supported Lindsay resigned in protest of these actions.

If the story ended here, it would go down as another failed attempt to reform higher education. But yesterday, the other shoe dropped.

Yesterday's Board Meeting

As the meeting started, a trustee accompanied by two attorneys served legal notices on all the trustees present. He was suing the college and individual trustees for failing to recuse themselves from the vote to remove Lindsay. Pandemonium ensued for the next 30 minutes.

An obviously stunned chairman restored order and, after brief opening remarks, called for the traditional approval by acclamation of the degrees granted on May 8. I objected and asked for a roll-call vote, explaining that I intended to vote against approval of the degrees and urged others to vote this way as well. More pandemonium.

The campaign against Tom Lindsay, I argued, could only be explained as an attempt by students and faculty to hide deficiencies in the quality of education being delivered by Shimer. I could not, in good conscience, vouch for the quality of education these students had received. Absent external evaluation, other trustees should vote against the motion too.

Seven trustees voted to not approve the degrees. Given that I had not lobbied other trustees prior to the meeting, and given the very negative consequences to the graduating students and the college's reputation if the resolution had passed, it is remarkable that so many trustees voted with me. Only 16 external trustees (not students or faculty) voted to approve the degrees. Had three trustees not previously resigned from the board, and if a few trustees who were supporters of Lindsay but not in attendance voted, I estimate the vote would have been 16 in favor and 12 opposed. Had only two more trustees voted their conscience, instead of blind loyalty to faculty and students, the resolution would have failed, leaving an indelible stain on the college degrees of the graduating students.

A report from the advancement (fundraising) committee of the board followed. The chairman of the committee, who apparently voted against Lindsay at the April meeting, confessed to knowing nothing about the status of pending proposals. When she said she was hopeful that several grants Lindsay had been working to secure would still come in, several trustees laughed out loud.

Next up was renewal of the terms for three board members – one had supported Lindsay and two had voted for his removal. All three trustees were generous alums, and the chairman and his allies on the

board were confident all three would be reelected. But they were wrong. A roll-call vote for the three-candidate slate led the ayes to come up four votes short of the two-thirds majority of sitting trustees required for reelection. Voting for Lindsay's dismissal cost two opponents of reform their positions on the board, a decision the pro-reform faction was willing to make even though it cost them one of their own.

The final item of business was the election of officers. In past years this had been a matter of routine approval by acclamation. This time, a long and highly emotional debate took place over whether the chairman had lied to and misled one or more trustees in the days leading up to the April 19 special meeting. The chairman won a majority of the votes, but all the trustees who supported Lindsay either abstained or voted against him. The rest of the slate was approved by a voice vote.

Looking Ahead

What lies ahead for Shimer? I haven't seen the lawsuit yet so I don't know what remedies it demands. To avoid litigation, the board may vote to reinstate Lindsay, and he might be allowed to continue the reforms that the college so desperately needs to attract donors, improve its faculty and curriculum, and attract higher-caliber students. But that assumes that more trustees than in the immediate past will put the future of the college ahead of their own interests.

Without Lindsay as president, I suspect the organization can't survive financially past the end of the year. Major donors have stopped funding. More key staff are planning to resign. The interim president is already trying to renegotiate the school's lease with IIT.

There is a third possibility: that the college can con its alums and a few wealthy donors into keeping the college going without major reforms. I hope some of those potential donors will read this and not be fooled. If Lindsay isn't returned as president, every gift raised in the past month and in the coming months will almost surely have to go to pay his severance and legal fees. Shimer unreformed doesn't merit their support, and unrestricted aid now will only set back the reform effort.

Will Shimer head into the abyss, or is it about to be rescued from itself a second time? Tune in later this year!

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Comment by [Erik Badger](#) on May 29, 2010 at 2:21am

I don't have time to address all that's factually wrong in Mr. Bast's tendentious account here. I'll just make a few important notes so, hopefully, other readers here have some facts to inform them, in addition to what Mr. Bast alleges.

Despite a very liberal admissions policy, Shimer currently ranks third in the nation for colleges whose graduates go on to earn their PhDs (http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/rankings/liberal_arts_rank.php). Shimer has always gotten exceptional academic marks from their external accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission. The notion that Shimer needed Tom Lindsay or Joe Bast to improve our academic program is comical. If you don't believe the statistics or the HLC, have a listen to a speech from one of the graduates that Mr. Bast judged unfit to receive his B.A., Heath Iverson. I think Shimer's extraordinary education speaks for itself here as, apparently, does Heath: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Le0jA2V4SfQ>

The only "Saving" Shimer needed was from Lindsay himself. He blatantly disregarded not only the traditions at the College, but its written policies. Him and his hand-picked development office raised no more money than Shimer's previous "amateur operation" had the previous year, but cost more than twice as much. He imposed his narrow, ideological vision on the College through subterfuge in the case of the mission statement and through threats with respect to the faculty, staff, and, incredibly, his bosses, members of the Board as well. You should know this well, Mr. Bast, you were deeply involved in it and, apparently, still are.

In the end, the faculty and the Assembly (the widest governing body at the College) both voted unanimously "no-confidence" in Lindsay's leadership; the Alumni Association Board voted unanimously to call for his resignation; and, an online petition calling for the same garnered the signatures of over 10% of living alumni. If this wasn't a hostile takeover attempt, I don't know what is.

Mr. Bast: I can't help but note the irony of your claim that you do what you do to "Save" Shimer. Do you not realize that you, Lindsay, Parker, and your other Board cronies are the real threat to Shimer? Shimer survived for 153 years before you showed up, and we'll be around long after you're gone. Why won't you just leave us alone? Your takeover failed. Now, suck it up and leave. Efforts like these only make you seem petty and mean. Trying to revoke hard-earned diplomas from students after they've graduated. How dare you? Where did you graduate from? Who do you think you are?

If people want the real story, there is no shortage of online resources. You can start here: <http://shimeralumnialliance.blogspot.com/>

Erik Badger
Shimer Alum ('97) and former staff ('02-'09)



Comment by [Byron Keys](#) on May 29, 2010 at 12:01am

Joe Bast has, unfortunately, made a few factual errors in his blog post. In the interest of complete honesty and full disclosure, I just want to clear up some of these errors. I am an alum of the college who graduated in 2008. During my final year at Shimer I was a member of the board of trustees.

Mr. Bast talks about the "Shimerian Way" and our consensus based form of government. Shimer does not use a consensus based form of government. In a consensus system, the entire group or community has to agree on an issue for it to go forward. The internal government at Shimer is based on The Assembly. The Assembly is a democratic form of government in which every member of the internal community is a voting member. That means a first year student has the same voice in the Assembly as a long term staff or faculty member. The Assembly has committees that oversee academic planning, administration, financial aid policy and most other areas concerning the administration of the college.

The problem with the short tenure of Thomas Lindsay was that he was not willing to take the Assembly seriously. He did not attend committee meetings or take seriously the recommendations that the committees sent to him. As president of the college, Dr. Lindsay had both the authority to make decisions and the responsibility to listen to the recommendations of the Assembly. When he met with various constituencies of the college prior to being hired, he was advised of the role of Assembly. Dr. Lindsay specifically agreed to respect this role.

His egregious abuses of his power started with firing of the director of admission. He did not consult anyone in the internal community as he is required to do by the Assembly constitution. In choosing a new director of admission, he continued to put forward a candidate he had worked with at another school, even when she was continually rejected by the committee in charge of interviewing and hiring administrative personnel. Mr. Bast claims that the admissions director was incompetent, yet she brought in the largest class in thirty years in the 2008-09 school year and consistently recruited students of high academic caliber who could have easily gotten into larger, richer and higher profile schools; including the ivies. There was no open admission as Mr. Bast claims.

Mr. Bast claims that the so called "old" trustees (most of them alums who have been board members and financial supporters of the college for many years) "gave little or nothing to their alma mater". This is untrue, these old alums sustained the college in some of its darkest hours. His claim that the faculty is undistinguished by conventional means may be the closest to the truth he comes in his post. They do not need to jump through the hoops that tenured faculty at more conventional institutions need to in order to be considered distinguished. They are distinguished in their mastery and dedication to the pedagogical tradition that includes the great books of Western civilization. They are distinguished in that they sacrifice higher profile and higher paying positions because they believe in the motto of the college, "To Serve Rather Than Be Served".

Shimer is accredited by the North Central Association which requires a regular external review

of the faculty, curriculum and student achievement. When Mr. Bast states that there has been no external review of these areas for decades, he clearly must have forgotten about that. Furthermore, Shimer is consistently among the top schools in percentage of graduates who go on to earn terminal degrees. It may not be an elite college, by conventional standards, but it is certainly a very good and widely respected college.

What concerns me most is his decision to vote against his awarding degrees to the recent graduating class. He did so with full knowledge that this would have caused "very negative consequences to the graduating students and the college's reputation if the resolution had (not) passed". So as a trustee of the college, Mr. Bast voted against awarding the degrees, with full knowledge of the damage it would have caused. A trustee is entrusted in acting in the best interest of the college. He thinks the college is trying to "hide deficiencies in the quality of education being delivered by Shimer". I do not know if Mr. Bast has sat in on many Shimer classes, but most people who do are impressed by the experience. Shimer classes are small and discussion based and everyone approaches the text on a more equal footing than a typical college. There are no lectures, everyone in the class is expected to have an opinion, and to share it.

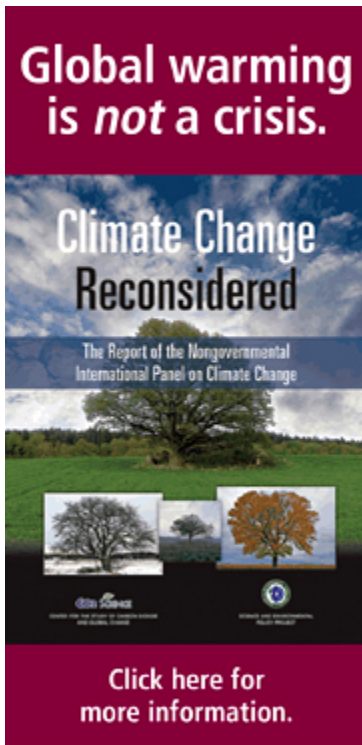
As far as the rest of his claims, that Shimer will either close it's doors or "con its alums and a few wealthy donors into keeping the college going", there is no reason to believe this will be the case. Like Brer Rabbit of legend, Shimer has been through the briar patch before. To quote the folktale "I was bred and born in the briar patch, born and bred in the briar patch."

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