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Providence College: An Era of Change

Recollections

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Foreword

Providence College was established to serve an immigrant, Catholic population in Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts at a time when immigrants and Catholics faced discriminatory hurdles for entry into higher education and the professions. That mission continued through the 1950s, but it began to change in the decade of the 60s. The College moved in the direction of a more regional and even national base of students, and developments of both staff and curriculum adjusted the mission to the new realities of life in America society and in the academy.

It was during the administration of Father William Paul Haas, O.P. that important and dramatic changes took place that reshaped the College for its new role. I was privileged to participate in the work of that transformation. I joined the History Department of Providence College in September 1960, formally retired in 2009, but continued to teach one course until 2022. I served as the first president of the College chapter of the American Association of University Professors, a member of the Faculty Senate for thirty years and its president during the key years of change, 1969-1971. So I had a front-row seat during an exciting time in the College's history which has not gotten as much attention as it deserves. There is likely some prejudice in this account, but I offer these recollections as honest and sound memories of a story that was important to the College, to its faculty and to generations of students. This is a history largely unknown to much of the current faculty. It is hoped that this account may be informative, useful, and perhaps even entertaining in spots for them and others who may join the College.

At graduation ceremonies in May 2022, the College honored me by conferring the degree of Doctor of Humanities, in large part, I suspect, simply for endurance. I was most grateful for the honor even if a bit stunned, but I informed Father Kenneth Sicard, O.P., the College President, that I accepted the honor in the name of all of those faculty who joined in the work described here and of the years that followed. This applies in a special way to Rene Fortin, Rodney Delasanta, Richard Grace, Francis "Pat" MacKay, and Mark Rerick. They were joined by many others, too many to list here, dedicated to working toward excellence and standing for Providence College.

An Era of Change

By 1960 the student population of Providence College was increasing and would continue to do so. Typical graduating class size in the 1950s ran to about 350 to 450 students. Tuition ran in the neighborhood of \$250 to \$300 dollars per semester and most students were commuters. The one dormitory was Aquinas Hall for some rich kids from Boston or Fall River. Jackets and ties were required for admission to classes, facial hair was banned, and entry to class after the start required a “late slip” from the office of the Dean of Discipline. It was a different time. Older catalogs described the College as staffed by Dominican friars “ably assisted by carefully selected laymen.” By the end of the 1960s class sizes hovered around 1000. This required an increase in the number of faculty and that meant the hiring of more lay faculty. Digs for lay faculty were a bit primitive. One classroom in Harkins Hall was converted into a faculty office for the entire humanities lay faculty with a telephone assigned for each department. Dominican faculty lived in Harkins Hall, and the colloquial reference to the Dominicans on campus was “the Fourth Floor.” By the end of the decade the balance shifted toward lay faculty who then outnumbered Dominican faculty, and this included women faculty by 1970.

A key turning point in the history of the College came in 1965 upon the retirement of the venerable and highly respected Father Vincent Dore. The Province of St. Joseph had recently elected a new provincial, Rev. Louis Every O.P. Every was not an academic; he had recently returned from mission work in Pakistan. But he was very much interested in the College, and in line with what was happening in Rome at the time of the Second Vatican Council, he sought a kind of *aggiornamento* or modernizing for the College. Every, as was the custom then, appointed a successor to Dore. He chose a thirty-six-year-old Dominican who had taught Philosophy at the College a few years earlier but was then doing post-doctoral study at Notre Dame and teaching at Purdue University. He was William Paul Haas, O.P., who brought a new administration and new life to Providence College.

Among his first appointments, Father Haas named a layman, Paul Van K. Thomson, to fill a new office, Vice President for Academic Administration. To do this he had to persuade Thomson to forgo an appointment he had been offered as Dean of St. Leo's College in Florida. It was not the first time Thomson was persuaded to reject a post elsewhere and remain at the College. In 1956 Thomson had decided to accept a position at the Newton College of the Sacred Heart, near Boston. The president then, Robert J. Slavin O.P., asked Thomson to name his price for remaining at PC. His price was permission to establish a humanities honors program. Thomson stayed and the first honors class was recruited from among the entering freshmen in the fall of 1957.

Paul Thomson was an undergraduate at Columbia University in the 1930s. He was a classmate of Thomas Merton and studied under the legendary Mark Van Doren. He was also deeply involved in radical student politics and, like many of his young contemporaries flirted with Communism and with young women with equal enthusiasm. At least one of these activities was seriously frowned on by university officials, but Thomson did succeed in graduating. After graduation Thomson tempered his youthful impulses and was seriously drawn to religion. He became an Episcopal priest of high church inclinations, and during WW II served as a U. S. Marine chaplain in the Pacific theater. After the war he took a position as rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church adjacent to the Brown University campus on the east side of Providence. In 1948 Thomson became a Catholic and joined the PC faculty. Years later when Rome provided the opportunity for Episcopalian priests who converted to Catholicism to be ordained, Thomson qualified and became Father Thomson.

The six years of the Haas/Thomson administration transformed the life of the College in important ways, infusing an energy and direction which endured for decades. When Father Haas retired in 1971, Thomson remained as vice president under the new president, Thomas Reginald Peterson, O.P. and continued to lead and inspire academic progress for the college.

A digression here to comment on the great talent of William Haas as a leader. He was an excellent and persuasive speaker. His command of language, timing, and nuance inevitably captivated his audiences from the lectern as well as the pulpit. When a last-minute cancellation left the College without a commencement speaker, Father Haas filled in and delivered what many faculty agreed was the best commencement address they had ever heard. He was also a gifted painter and sculptor. His sculpted plaque depicting the life of Saint Paul now hangs in the Ruane Humanities building. He was also possessed of sensitive political skills. In some ways Haas was Lincolnesque in dealing with difficult situations. Lincoln often deflected protesting politicians whose demands he could not prudently satisfy. So with Haas. One example will serve.

This was an era of frequent student protests at American universities including Providence College. Rapid changes in American life distressed the older generation, and some became the causes of protest, some serious and others less so. One rather comic episode concerned hair length not to reach below the jacket collar, and disrupted classes for a day or so.

One springtime in the late sixties our students decided to march on the president's office with a set of non-negotiable demands for changes at the College. ["Non-negotiable" inevitably accompanied student demands in the sixties.] As they jammed into the presidential office complex, Father Haas pointed out there were too many of them for all to hear. Why not go down to the lower-level auditorium so that all could join in. The students agreed, and the president won the first round. Father Haas then climbed to the stage, looked thoughtfully at the written demands and said, "Is this all?" He told them that he could think of a lot more that was wrong and needed reform. He proceeded to detail his hopes for progress at Providence College. When he finished the non-negotiators actually gave him a standing ovation and quietly left the hall. It was some time before they realized they'd been had, and it was too embarrassing to renew the protest at that point. Besides, exams were approaching, and the summer break was near.

Among the first tasks of the new administration was to organize a centralized faculty structure. In the preceding era with few lay faculty, department chairs hired new faculty and there was no central personnel file for faculty. Thomson called on all faculty to submit credentials to his office and in the process discovered that in a couple of cases degree claims were questionable. Thomson moved to create more standard faculty organization. What followed was the establishment of a Committee on Rank and Tenure, a formal process for granting tenure and promotions, and standards for new hires as the lay faculty continued to grow. An important action that proved a great benefit to faculty was the administration's establishment of a pension fund for faculty through TIAA-CREF. For many years the College contributed a generous fourteen percent of salary to the fund, [a figure rare among universities and not reduced until the 1990s] eventually resulting in comfortable retirements for many faculty.

The faculty played an important role in this process of reorganization. The faculty was generally welcoming to and cooperative with the Hass/Thomson administration, but it also showed a measure of independence. For example, in 1965 a college chapter of the American Association of University Professors was formed though the administration had counselled delay. On the evening of November 9, 1965, the lights went out. It was the great blackout of the northeastern United States. With classes abruptly ended, a small group of faculty retreated to the cafeteria, which had emergency lighting. With coffee and a yen to influence the direction of the new administration, a plan was hatched to form a chapter of the American Association of University Professors. At that time the AAUP had a great influence on the standards governing faculty in American colleges and universities. Gerard Vanderhaar O.P., who had been an AAUP leader at St. John's University, encouraged us in the effort. Despite the president's reservations, the plan went forward, and the chapter was established.

Among the first actions of the AAUP chapter was a call for the creation of a Faculty Senate, to which the president responded positively. Father John F. Cunningham, O. P., later to become College president, was elected the first president of the Senate. The Senate was instrumental in reshaping college regulations, including winning the acceptance of AAUP rank and tenure standards, providing for the election of department chairs by faculty, gaining faculty

representation of the College budget committee, and endorsing the establishment a department of Psychology, and programs in Theater, Art, and Music.

The Senate also took the first halting step toward co-education. A resolution to study the possibility of admitting women students was presented in 1968 but failed to pass. Many previously all-male Catholic colleges had already begun to admit women students in the face of declining enrollments. The administration was reluctant, insisting that the College should continue as it was, preserving, it was announced, a “healthy all-male atmosphere.” However, the next year saw a continuing drop in our enrollment and a resulting steep budget deficit. [If memory serves it was a three-quarters of a million-dollar deficit in a ten-million-dollar budget.] Prudence dictated reconsideration, and in the 1969-70 session the Senate adopted a resolution to admit women, and the administration approved. Women were enrolled in the freshman class in 1971 and quickly displayed their intellectual excellence. In the years that followed, women dominated in winning honors awards.

Brick and mortar progress during these years came with the building of a library building in 1967, which won an architectural award, and a student union adjacent to the gymnasium and cafeteria. The library had been located on the third floor of Harkins Hall, and the full collection had to be moved to the new building. A group of students won a contract to move the books. A somewhat startled college community witnessed an efficient and successful relocation of the library’s holdings.

In 1968 the faculty responded to the assassination of Martin Luther King by establishing a memorial fund. The project was led by Professors Rene Fortin and Pat MacKay and invited faculty to contribute a percentage of salary deducted monthly for MLK Fund. Many responded.

Among the greatest achievements of the Haas administration was the revision of the College curriculum. A special committee was appointed to study the curriculum and recommend changes. The curriculum then demanded so many requirements there was little opportunity for elective choices, and in most majors six-courses per semester were needed to meet all requirements. These included eighteen credits Theology, eighteen in Philosophy, and more required courses in History, English, and a foreign language. In the days before ubiquitous computers, when Father Dore had served as Dean of Studies in the 1950s, he had in his office the “big board.” The structure contained a card slot for every course offered. There were so many requirements and so many multiple sections that Dore solved any problems with a quick reference to the board. Sometimes the solution would be accompanied by the phrase, “For your elective you will take....”

The study committee, which included students and faculty, was led by Thomson and English professor Rene Fortin. Rene was an award-winning teacher and respected scholar who also served as director of the College Honors Program. Also serving the committee was Rodney Delasanta, an equally gifted teacher and prolific scholar, and Father Thomas R. Peterson, then

Dean of Studies. They interviewed members of every department, tested ideas, and solicited suggestions. The result was a proposal for a completely new core curriculum, with a sharp reduction in requirements and much innovation.

The centerpiece of the proposal was a four semester, twenty credit course titled The Development of Western Civilization. This was an adaptation of a kind of “great books” course in the College Honors Program. A key difference was that the books were to be studied in historical and cultural context. The course combined studies in History, Literature, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Music. Classes were to meet five hours per week and be team-taught by members of the relevant departments. The committee took two years to complete its work on the proposal, which became the focus of intense debate.

The Education and Business departments, with heavy requirements for majors, feared the new core would cut into their credits. Many of the Dominicans, especially but not exclusively in Philosophy and Theology, were firmly opposed to the DWC proposal because its adoption would also reduce the number of credits in those fields to a total of twelve and would stray from the firmly Thomist character of the courses in those departments. The History department was evenly divided, pro and con; and the English department strongly favored the new program. Members of the science departments were generally supportive.

Other parts of the proposal for a new core curriculum established a six-credit integrated social science requirement, team-taught by professors from Political Science, Economics, and Sociology. After adoption of the new core, this requirement died and was replaced by requiring six credits from any of the social sciences. It seemed that successful integrated teaching among these departments was neither welcome nor feasible. One economist argued that his field had more in common with Physics than with Sociology.

The new core also proposed a six-credit integrated natural science requirement taught by members of each of the “hard” sciences. When adopted this requirement fared better than the social science experiment, but also encountered similar resistance among some science faculty. After several years of modest success, the resisters prevailed, and the science requirement could also be met simply with six credits from among science courses.

After much debate and despite opposition from various constituencies, the 1969-70 session of the Faculty Senate passed the new core curriculum package by an overwhelming vote. The legislation was signed and strongly applauded by Father Haas. The architects of the new curriculum were inspired by the ideas of Cardinal John Henry Newman in his *Idea of a University*. They understood that, beyond specialized knowledge, an understanding of the interplay of history and culture was essential to the development of the mind and to the serious pursuit of excellence in one’s education.

The Development of Western Civilization Program became the centerpiece of a Providence College education. There were adjustments to be made. At the start enthusiastic

faculty tended to overkill. One team required reading the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in one week. But realism eventually prevailed, and assignments became more humane. The student response was interesting. There was a good deal of grumbling about the workload during the freshman and sophomore years when they were enrolled in the program. When they became seniors there was much support for the course as students better appreciated its value and relevance to their other studies. A standard confession ran, "I wish I had paid closer attention." Among alumni as the years passed there was very strong applause and support. Faculty and administrators visiting alumni groups reported that the center of conversations with alumni was a discussion, in very positive terms, of their DWC experience.

While these responses remained consistent over the years, faculty resistance gradually developed into calls for reform. Early in the new century a combination of faculty activists and a cooperative administration substantially reduced the DWC hours and requirements, and, in the view of this writer, damaged the program. A cynic might point to the fact that teaching in DWC was demanding in time and energy, distracted from specialized research, and interfered with three or four-day teaching schedules. There are times when a cynical view might also be an accurate one. There was also a call to change the name of the program. One administration official with much experience visiting alumni did not object to the changes made but insisted absolutely that the name remain intact.

The 1969-1971 sessions of the Faculty Senate were the most active in the Senate's history in reshaping the College. These were tumultuous years for the College and the country. In addition to supplemental legislation dealing with coeducation and curriculum revision, the College was confronted with repeated episodes of protest against the Vietnam War. There was some feeling on campus that the government's military policy should not be questioned in time of war. Most dismissed that brand of patriotism, and the war was much debated. By a vote of Faculty Senate and with the approval of the president, the College joined in the nationwide Moratorium in October 1969, when classes were suspended for "teach-ins," and antiwar speeches were delivered on the lawn in front of Aquinas Hall.

The climax of anti-Vietnam protests at the College came in response to the shooting of student protesters on the Kent State University campus in May, 1970. During a special evening session, with the president in attendance signing bills as they were passed, the Senate voted to join the national academic strike protesting the war. There was only one dissenting vote. Several tense days followed, and given the disruption, the administration announced that final exams would be optional. Students were given the chance to raise their current grade in a course by taking the final exam. Few took the opportunity.

After six years of intense and transformative activity for the College, Father Haas resigned the presidency and was succeeded by Thomas Peterson, O.P. Haas remained at the College and joined a team to teach in the first year of the new DWC Program. He left the College during the 1972-73 academic year for a post-doctoral year of study at Boston University.

During that year he appealed to the Vatican for laicization, was approved, and subsequently married Pauline Burke, who had served as his secretary. Father Charles Duffy, O.P., his seminary classmate, officiated. Moving to Massachusetts, he eventually became president of North Adams State College. Years later he returned to Rhode Island to live in Newport, and for a time taught Philosophy at Bryant University in Smithfield and Salve Regina University in Newport.

Father Thomas Peterson was determined to build on the progress made in the Haas years, and asked Paul Thomson to stay on as Vice President for Academic Administration. Thomson held the post until 1983, overseeing implementation and adjustments to the new curriculum, to a larger student body now including women, and meeting that need by building a faculty of predominantly lay professors.

As noted, Paul Thomson had been an Anglican priest for some years. He became a Catholic in 1948 and began his career at Providence College. When the Vatican opened a path to ordination for Anglican priests who had converted to Catholicism in 1980, Thomson was deemed qualified, and, still the vice president, he was now Father Thomson, a Catholic priest with a wife and seven children. A moment of interesting drama occurred when Thomson was assisting at St. Mary's Church in Newport. One Sunday, Father Thomson presided at the Eucharist, Pauline was the Eucharistic minister, and she served communion to layman Bill Haas. Real life is often stranger than fiction.

Detailed history of the College has been covered elsewhere in an account by Donna McCaffrey and more recent years by my friend and colleague Richard J. Grace. But the Haas/Thomson era demanded special attention. The objective of those years was to build a reputation for excellence among American colleges that would draw honor and students to Providence College. The work was dedicated to fulfilling the traditional mission of the Order and The College. With a healthy working relationship between administration and faculty, the project succeeded. This was a time when many faculty volunteered much time and energy to the work of reform. Devoted to their teaching and scholarship, they also displayed a deep sense of commitment to college as an institution. That spirit was captured one day by Rene Fortin when he described the College as "this sacred place." That era transformed the College in many ways, and for decades, Providence College functioned on the steam generated during those years.