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Third Freshman Foundation Lecture Discusses Character and Liberal Learning
English Professor David Whalen addressed character in relation to a liberal arts education at third Freshman Foundation Lecture Series luncheon

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Hillsdale College hosted its third Freshman Foundation Lecture and luncheon at the Searle Center on Feb. 8. David Whalen, associate vice president for curriculum and professor of English, offered a lecture to the freshman class on character. Whalen discussed how character, one of the four pillars of a Hillsdale College education, relates to liberal education through an analysis of Richard Lovelace’s poem “Lucasta, on Going to the Wars.”

The poet describes his love for Lucasta and his love for country. Both are self-sacrificial and built upon his personal integrity and duty. These are the loves that compel him to go to war. Through his analysis, Whalen illustrated that the source of human virtue is loving the right things well.

“In talking about character, which means virtue or moral excellence, we are talking about that ‘pillar’ whereon the College aids its students to make fully real their very humanity, to realize or make complete their natures,” said Whalen. “This is a far cry from just telling students to ‘be good’ or encouraging people to ‘behave.’”

Whalen encouraged students to view their education as not merely the acquisition of knowledge, but a means by which they fuel their love of the right things and fulfill their purpose as written into human nature. During his lecture, Whalen explained how moral virtue is difficult to attain and must be sought through deliberate repetition of right behavior. Justice, prudence, temperance, and courage — Whalen claimed — all are virtues that arise in this manner.

“The word character means ‘an engraved mark,’” said Whalen. “It suggests something about how the virtues are acquired — through repeated acts that, at first, may be difficult or against our inclination, but by repetition, the good sought in right action is etched in our souls.”

Whalen emphasized the centrality of the issue of moral virtue, which he called “the defining issue of our time,” describing the cultural war between subjective morality and objective morality. Whalen argued in favor of objective morality and the reality of a genuinely human nature. Helping students embark on this lifelong journey, he argues, is the purpose of Hillsdale College.

“Human nature is why the College is what it is and does what it does. Rather than just address the intelligence via knowledge, it addresses the passions, appetites, and will as well,” said Whalen. “It seeks to help students love what is genuinely loveable, to be drawn by the attractive power of perfection — otherwise known as the beautiful — to acquire those habits that fully humanize the soul and make it blossom. This is not quaint finishing-school stuff, or dreamy wishful thinking, or old-fashioned mumbo-jumbo. Character, or the lack of it, is as real as your appetites, as ever-active as your mind, as imperative as the difficulties you face.”

View a headshot of Whalen [here](#).

About the Freshman Foundation Lecture Series

Hillsdale College launched the Freshman Foundation Lecture Series in the fall of 2021. The series addresses the four purposes, or pillars, of learning, character, faith, and freedom of Hillsdale College in student life. The series includes four lectures by Hillsdale College faculty deans over the course of the academic year. All lectures take place in the College’s Searle Center and include a complimentary lunch for all freshman students.

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 6.2 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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