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Character and Liberal Learning Discussed at Freshman Foundation Lecture

Hillsdale College Academic Dean Addresses Character and the Liberal Arts at third Freshman Foundation Lecture Series Luncheon

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Hillsdale College hosted its third Freshman Foundation Lecture and luncheon of the school year at the Searle Center on Feb. 20. Dean of Humanities and Professor of English Stephen Smith offered a lecture on character to the freshman class.

Smith discussed how character, one of the four pillars of a Hillsdale College education, relates to liberal education through an analysis of Dante’s “Divine Comedy.”

“Character comes from the Latin meaning brand or impression,” Smith said. “It’s also connected to the verbs for etching or engraving, which I think is very interesting because the human soul is rational.” Likewise, “we say a person is of good character when their soul is molded, or etched, or fashioned in such a way that it consistently desires and makes good choices and actions. When we are living our lives, we experience this fundamental drama of choosing, deciding, and acting. In a way, we are always etching or forming our character one way or another.”

Smith presented Dante’s journey as a parallel to this etching and engraving of the soul. “Dante for his part has to suffer, endure, and learn about himself, about those images or models of life. He has to be willing to take the journey. It takes time, it takes patience, and it takes desire. It even takes a willingness to suffer. In the end, Dante’s experience of this character etching, this new formation of his character, is going to lead to a Scriptural vision, a vision of all of those seven great virtues dancing together.”

Hillsdale College launched the Freshman Foundation Lecture Series in [the fall of 2021](#). The series addresses the four purposes — or pillars — of Hillsdale College: learning, character, faith, and freedom. It complements the Senior Capstone Course, also established in 2019, in which students discuss the four pillars in the context of each student’s core and major course of study.

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 6.4 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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