Kentucky Wesleyan College
Providing a different point of view on pertinent topics

Wesleyan Way PERSPECTIVES

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This is the last Wesleyan Way Perspectives of 2021. We appreciate your positive feedback about this new publication and look forward to sharing more perspectives with you in the new year.

As we all make preparations to celebrate Christmas and prepare for 2022, we extend best wishes to our alumni and friends for a joyous, safe and healthy Christmas and many blessings in the new year.

This months issue features a pair of perspectives as Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost, Dr. James Cousins is joined by Professor Chelsea Dowell, who shares a whimsical look at Christmas and economics. Enjoy!

America's *Cursus Honorum*

Americans have always appreciated ancient

Rome. Some of that comes from our reliance on Roman models that are, ironically, so pervasive they escape notice. But we see those models everywhere, in our language, our systems of law and education, in our appreciation of art and styles of architecture, in our sport culture and our engineering. Romans also passed down symbols of power along with the methods to secure that power and keep it secure.

One of those methods, the Cursus Honorum, helped Rome organize during its Republic (509 B.C. to 29 B.C.,) that period of citizen governance sandwiched between the death of the last Roman king and the rise of the first Roman emperor. Rome stabilized self-governance by channeling ambition, forcing status-seeking would-be statesmen, into a rigorous ladder of career advancement. Through the Cursus Honorum or "path of honor," status (i.e., influence) was earned through rank, and rank was earned slowly. However, over time the rungs of that ladder compressed and the path to success became the instrument of the Republic's own demise. The American Cursus Honorum is less narrowly focused but just as dangerous in its potential.

Sometime after dethroning the last Roman king, "Tarquin the Proud," Romans vested authority in elected officials. Of these, the position of "censor" was the most powerful. Censors kept the official roster of Roman citizens (the census), controlled taxation, certified every major decision and enforced moral order. Those who ran afoul of proper conduct risked punishment by the censor (censorship). Censors had absolute authority and wielded unquestioned power. For over 400 years, the office of censor was the highest and best honor to which any Roman could aspire and many did aspire to it.

Achieving the rank of censor required a steady march up the Cursus Honorum, a rigorous and rigid, but largely unspoken, hierarchy of offices. To qualify for election to censor, Romans first had to serve a term as consul (chief magistrate). The prerequisite to that office was a stint as propraetor (military general). Propraetors were drawn exclusively from among praetors (judges) who were, in turn, qualified for that role by their service as aedile (something like a town trustee). But it didn't stop there. Aediles were chosen from among quaesters (treasury officials), quaesters were chosen from tribunes (military officers) and tribuneships were hard to get. A Roman citizen had to serve at least 10 years in the army and distinguish themselves in combat before even being considered for the title.

The road to censor required a military background, some political maneuvering, and a lot of patience. Most Romans qualified for the office only after their 60th birthdays. As the decades passed, Romans grew tired of the slow march to glory and Roman aristocrats did whatever they could to shortcut their way through the ranks. The wealthiest Romans secured choice military commands for themselves or their inexperienced sons who entered the Cursus Honorum at astonishingly young ages and gained rank well before they should have, if ever. And so, by the second century B.C., we see Roman armies launched headlong into battles, not out of strategic need or defensive purpose, but to satisfy ambitions of young generals. In the end, the death of Rome's Republic was inevitable.

Rome's Cursus Honorum was a response to heightened competition among aggressive status seekers, but no amount of career laddering could stop the overweening ambitions of

those least qualified to rule. Each step along the path of honor was meant to give direct experience with critical, on-ground issues. A few decades spent digging out encampments with the army, followed by a decade or more working with civilians on local affairs, then more time leading massive armies, and maybe a decade-or-two negotiating with foreign rulers, gave a Roman consul empathy, sound judgment, and unmatched perspective. The system worked so long as the outcome (e.g. advancement to higher office) was subordinate to experience. In other words, when Romans stopped caring about experience and cared more about their next posting, things fell apart.

American's Cursus Honorum follows those same lines. Like the Romans, we've channeled our ambitions into career ladders that make credentialing and rank prerequisite to increased responsibility. We do this in the hopes that experience will accumulate and result in better, more effective leadership. But also like the Romans, we've looked for ways over, around and past these experiences. We celebrate the efficient pursuit of celebrity and honor fast fortunes gained with low effort and minimal energy. Education bears some responsibility for the rapid rise of rapid risers; college credit-bearing opportunities extended to high school students have exploded in recent years, as has the willingness of colleges to accept these credits.

It's not wrong to seek efficiencies, but there's no escaping value of inefficiency. For experience to mean something, it must be pursued in a somewhat desultory manner, with undivided attention and with little thought to how that experience will feed ambitious ends. Education works the same way. When pursued strictly for external validation, and the typical markers of validation, individual courses become meaningless exercises and the final shape of a degree is like an amorphous blob. When that degree is simply the means to an end, we lose the opportunity to discover what's most important about our pursuits and ourselves.

Lessons from Rome's fallen Republic allow us to scrutinize our own experiment with democracy. The Cursus Honorum failed to protect Rome from the Romans-can Americans do better? Certainly not if our answer is to pursue and promote the same modes of destructive self-interest. Higher education has a role to play in the preservation of the Republic, and Kentucky Wesleyan College understands this responsibility all too well. Here, the student experience is made whole by faculty and staff committed to the idea that the success of the individual is possible only in the aggregate; that is, when students work together in common cause and with shared responsibility. Our coursework reinforces collaboration, and our pedagogy holds mastery of material above all else. When process is held apart from product, the value of education becomes clear.

We can avoid the same fate as the Romans if we multiply these ideas and if we spread a similar commitment; if we can reward meaningful experiences and train up generations to seek after the same. Rome's Republic fell because Romans reduced experience down to its essentials, then distilled those essentials until all that remained were a jumble of meaningless titles. The American Republic can remain strong, so long as our judgment of title, of rank and experience, remains fixed on the things that matter most.

James P. Cousins, Ph.D.
Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost

Ebenezer-nomics

As the leaves begin to turn and the air gets colder, I am dreaming of a White Christmas. The most wonderful time of the year is upon us: Holiday Movie Season. It is a time of pink

bunny suits and hearts that grow three sizes in one day. The light and cheerful movie season is a welcome reprieve from the challenges of the Pandemic.

The Pandemic has been a season of hard choices. Should my family get vaccinated? Should I go back to work? Should I use all of my kitchen storage space for toilet paper? Should I adopt a Pandemic puppy? [See a photo of my Pandemic puppy below because who doesn't need more cute puppies in their lives?] Should I order my Hickory Honey Ham early? Should I replace the holiday bonuses with enrollments in the Jelly of the Month Club? In the midst of these hard choices, Economics is there to guide us.

Economics is the study of choices. [Some say Economics is the study of scarcity, but scarcity is simply what forces us to make choices. So, I repeat: Economics is the study of choices.] When economists study people's choices, we often assume the person is always rational. We call this person Homo Economicus – a perfectly rational being that is clearly different than our own Homo Sapiens.

Homo Sapiens have often been accused of making irrational decisions in their heyday. See the Turbo Man mania for reference. A recent cultural trend of FOMO – the Fear Of Missing Out – has been under attack for its irrationality. However, I disagree. I think my students' phobia of missing out on some meaningful experience is valid and even rational.

This fear stems from what economists call "opportunity cost." Opportunity cost is what you would have done if you didn't do what you did do. [Cue eyeroll from all of my previous students – yes, Opportunity Cost Theory strikes again!] When we make decisions, we weigh the costs and the benefits of that decision. One of those costs is what we give up when we make our final choice. If we stay late at work, then we miss making snow angels for two hours with our adult son who has an affinity for elf culture. If we sleep late, then we accidentally leave our son home alone at the mercy of the Wet Bandits.

So the next time you are faced with a difficult decision this holiday season, I encourage you to embrace your FOMO. Remember your friendly neighborhood economist and include your opportunity cost in your decision. I Triple Dog Dare You! What are you giving up to be here right now? Is it really worth it in the long run? Or instead… do you want to build a snowman? [It doesn't have to be a snowman.]

Yours Rationally,

Chelsea T. Dowell

Economist and Holiday Movie Enthusiast

Special thanks to Jake – the former high school sweetheart who runs the Christmas tree farm; drives an old, beat-up, red pick-up truck; and got the girl too busy with her career to fall

in love – for winning the gingerbread contest that saved the family business all by Christmas Eve.

[Warning: This article may cause rational FOMO. If any of the movie references are unrecognizable to you, then you are most certainly missing out. Fear not. A complete list of movies is available upon enrollment in your next Economics class. Contact Prof. Dowell for more information.]

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Professor Dowell's pandemic puppy!
