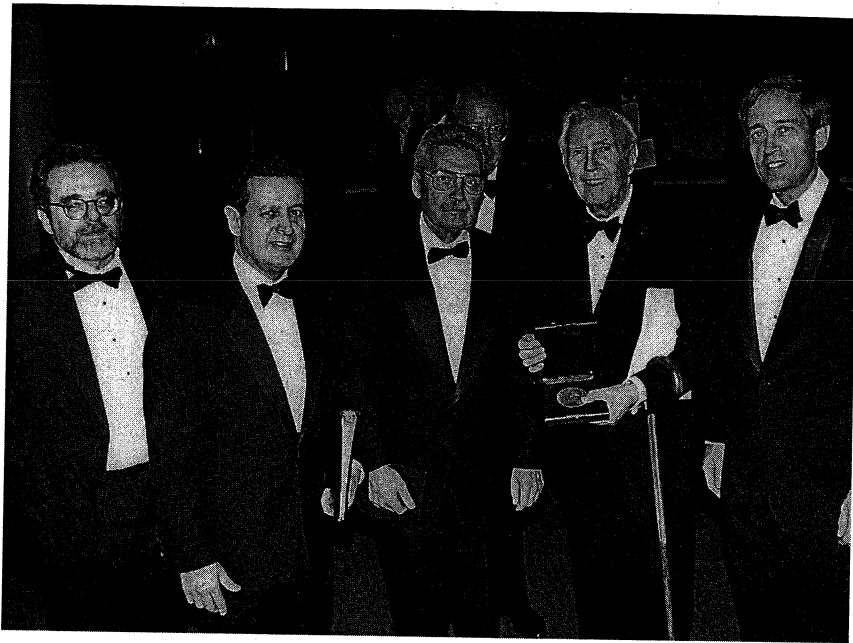


SCENE ON CAMPUS



At the Hamilton Dinner, from left: David R. Denby '65C, special guest speaker; Martin S. Kaplan '61C, President of the Alumni Association; Dean Stephen Marcus; University Professor Emeritus Jacques Barzun; President George Rupp; and, partially hidden, Professor Peter Pouncey.

and analysis.

Begun in the aftermath of World War I, the core remains true to its stated goal of helping students to "understand the civilization of their own day and to participate effectively in it." From the initial course, Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, the core has expanded to include Literature Humanities, Art Humanities, Music Humanities, Asian Humanities, and Major Cultures, a requirement that complements the primarily Western focus of the original core courses. Among the works studied are those by Plato, Homer, Machiavelli, Kant, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Nietzsche, Woolf, and Malcolm X.

The following are Professor Barzun's remarks on accepting the 1994 Hamilton Medal on behalf of his colleagues.

"Mr. Chairman, President Rupp, Dean Marcus, Colleagues, Friends of Columbia College:

I am much moved by this collective award to those who have taught in the Columbia Core Curriculum during the past 75 years. And of course I am touched that I was asked to represent them. In one respect, no one could be less representative; for I am old and they were young. But no doubt I too was young in my time.

I make a point of youth, because the innovation now called Core Curriculum has been taught at Columbia College mostly by the young, and because young teachers were essential to its success. Youthful enthusiasm and devotion were needed to overcome the difficulties of the program, the permanent difficulties, intellectual and administrative. They can be summed up in a phrase: the endless

1994 Hamilton Medal Honors Core Faculty

Award commemorates 75 years of the core curriculum

To mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of Columbia's renowned core curriculum, Columbia College presented its highest award, the Hamilton Medal, to senior faculty members who have taught in the core. Jacques Barzun, University Professor *Emeritus*, who graduated from Columbia College in 1927 and went on to become University provost as well as a teacher in the core, accepted the Medal on behalf of the 75 tenured faculty who maintain the vitality of Columbia's great experiment in education.

The Hamilton Dinner, held at the American Museum of Natural History in November, launched a year-long observance of this important milestone for the core, known as "Columbia's signature, its intellectual coat of arms." The core has evolved and endured through periods of great change in higher education, and it has been emulated by many schools that recognize its ability to engage young minds in the great questions confronting humankind. Other events will include an exhibition of books that have been taught as part of the core from

Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, to open in March, and, in April, a day-long symposium on the evolution and future of the core.

"The world has surely changed over the years, as has Columbia and even the core curriculum," said President George Rupp. "But the tradition of the core has remained constant. It connects alumni and students, from generation to generation, in a community of inquiry. This year's Hamilton Medal honors the teachers who teach, the mentors who have changed the lives of their students through great books, great ideas, and the stimulation and excitement of interaction in the classroom."

Columbia's core curriculum is the oldest uninterrupted program of general education in America. All College students are required to complete its four major courses and additional required programs in their freshman and sophomore years. Students meet in small classes and are encouraged to take an active role in learning. Through the core, students develop skills in critical thinking

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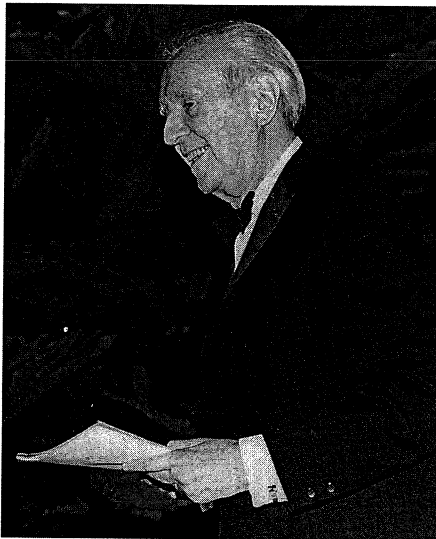
fight against Specialism.

To give details would be tedious. Let me rather describe the founders' grand purpose in 1919 – actually three purposes in one. The first was guidance – to show the freshman in a single course the nature of the subjects he would later have to choose among. This preview would prevent the mistake of majoring in a subject that turns out uncongenial or unsuited to career plans.

The course was at the same time a protection against the free elective system, born at Harvard and spreading fast; a system that led all too often to four years of freshman work – as it still does today at places I will not name. Free electives assume that those who come to college are consumers in a variety store, when in fact they are students at a seat of learning, where those in charge are wiser than they – at least for the time being.

The second purpose was to enlarge the vision, by unfolding a panorama against which to place whatever the student would learn in college and during the rest of his life. This may seem an excessive claim to make for the course labeled Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West, but I think you will admit the claim if you reflect on what a civilization is – a great body of precedents for all that we live by and live with – ideas and customs, religions, political and social institutions, arts and sciences. With even a rough outline of what was done and thought in the last 750 years, one can put some order and perspective in the chaotic present and cushion its repeated shocks.

You may think that in these days of global concerns “Civilization in the West” is too narrow. The truth is that learning about the West one learns an enormous amount about the rest of the world. Global interaction was a European fact long before 1492. It is on the contrary the present fad for courses about separate regions and peoples that is too narrow. No student can take more



than a few, and what he gets is not multiculturalism; but multiprovincialism.

The third purpose became full-blown when the original course that combined history, philosophy, and the social sciences was supplemented by three more, in literature, music, and the fine arts. The aim here was not so much to equip the mind as to cultivate it – sharpen its perceptions, refine its tastes, enable it to enjoy new creations, because able to judge them without philistinism or gullibility.

For the course in literature the College had the benefit of an earlier experiment dating back to the birth year of Contemporary Civilization. In 1919 John Erskine planned an honors course in the reading of great books. He believed that books worth reading should be read entire. Snippets coupled with notes full of ready-made opinions leave no trace. But two years spent in discussing some 50 books – one a week – under the lead of two instructors might indeed cultivate.

Such was the source not only of our Humanities A, but also of the Great Books program at Chicago under Mortimer Adler, who had been one of Ersk-

ine's young discussion leaders. From Chicago it branched out all over the country in the form of seminars for businessmen and lawyers who thought they were intellectually underfed. I remember in the 1950s meeting a railroad president and hoping, as a railroad buff, to hear about his work; he insisted on talking about Plato's Republic.

By that time, General Education, the Humanities, the Great Books, were terms in common use; most colleges had courses bearing those names. This left the natural sciences to be dealt with in the same introductory spirit. After several different trials at Columbia, it turned out that the best way to enlighten the most convincing evidence is that year after year the College alumni voted these courses the best they ever took, the best and most useful. Even if some graduates, under the pressures of modern life, could no longer summon up the details they once possessed, their minds retained what is next most valuable – recognition: they were not cultural illiterates – and they had learned to think. For the core courses cannot be passed by memorizing and regurgitation. Discussion in small classes trains the mind as well as fills it.

★ I should add that the substance of the Core was at no time regarded as fixed forever. I took Contemporary Civilization four years after its inception and I took part in its operation and watched its development for fifty years. I can testify that it varied in detail each year in response to suggestions from both teachers and students, and that every few years readings and syllabus were revised to meet changes in the temper of civilization itself.

But purpose and method remained the same, because they proved fruitful and were continually tested by results. I can only hope that in the present blasphemous turmoil of the academy, the idea of the Columbia program survives unimpaired and beneficent. ♣