Music Hum experiment sounds a sour note

One of the distinctive features of the College's core curriculum since its inception almost 75 years ago—indeed, one of the main ways that Columbia has long distinguished itself from other schools—is the small, seminar-type format of its classes. The College faculty has long maintained that to fully develop the skills of critical discourse, students must engage in active classroom discussion, something not easily accomplished in a large lecture.

It was not entirely surprising, then, that when the enrollment in two of the 25 sections of Music Humanities that were offered last semester was substantially increased, the reaction on campus bordered on a sense of betrayal, with many convinced that the University was poised to scrap the core format and renege on a sacred covenant.

Staffing the nearly 300 sections of the four core courses—Contemporary Civilization and Literature, Art and Music Humanities—requires enormous investment on the part of the University, an expenditure that has become only more pronounced as the College's rolls have swelled (approximately 3450 now, about 400 more than a decade ago). The University has not wavered in this commitment, but the financial pressure—and temptation—is always strong.

One possible strategy that had lately gained some credence was to deploy a smaller number of teachers in somewhat larger classes. Indeed, both a subcommittee of the University's Strategic Planning Commission's Task Force on Education (chaired by College Dean and Vice President for Arts and Sciences Steven Marcus '48), and a subcommittee of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' Executive Committee, had recently proposed such trial measures.

Music Humanities presented itself as a possible proving ground. Unlike C.C. or Lit Hum, which draw on many different departments for their instructors, Music Hum must be staffed by a single department, and a small one at that. Some of the more popular Music Hum time slots attract classes of up to 34 students, though enrollment is ostensibly limited to 26.

And so last fall, one section of the course was permitted to grow to 39 students while another weighed in at 56. Teaching the classes, respectively, were Associate Professor Elaine Sisman, who chairs Music Humanities, and Assistant Professor Thomas Payne (Mr. Payne's larger section split in half for the weekly listening hour conducted by teaching assistants).

Difficulties began almost immediately. "The size disturbed a significant percentage of the students," said Professor Sisman. "They expected to have the traditional Music Hum section, and they were shocked."

For much of the semester, in fact, the campus debated the wisdom of the undertaking. More than 800 students signed a petition circulated by Rebecca Stanton '94 stating that they were "shocked and dismayed" by the experi-
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The present experiment is more like shooting a horse in the head to see if it will run faster on fewer oats," wrote Professor of English John D. Rosenberg ’50 in Spectator. "Are we indeed so destitute that we are reduced to eating the Core?"

For their part, the affected students expressed their feelings colorfully in their course evaluations. While they applauded Ms. Sisman and Mr. Payne as teachers, they almost unanimously condemned the format. "Every student in one of these classes who was told to expect a Core at Columbia should ask for their tuition back," wrote one. Another declared, "Cease and desist with this intellectual chicanery: GIVE US OUR SMALL CORE CLASSES BACK!"

Of the 52 respondents in Professor Payne’s section, only four had a positive take on the oversized sections.

"What I gleaned from the experiment was that this wasn’t Music Humanities," said Professor Sisman, who noted that she had had her doubts from the start. "Too many people were able to hide [from the instructor]. The atmosphere was different." Thus, in a February report to the College’s Committee on Instruction, Ms. Sisman concluded, "Good responses to good teaching do not mean that the students are being challenged in the appropriate ways. ‘Core format’ does not work in large sections.

By that time, too, the idea had fallen into general disfavor. At the January 28 meeting of the board of directors of the College Alumni Association, Dean Marcus was questioned about the status of the experiment. He defused the concern with a dry and unequivocal appraisal: "The experiment in Music Humanities has come to an inglorious end. It was something of a misadventure to begin with."

"At the moment there are no plans to repeat the experiment, nor have the pressures that brought it into existence been fully addressed. But if anything has been achieved, it may be the realization that when the core is perceived to be in danger, its adherents—students, faculty, and alumni alike—will energetically defend it."

Last September, professors James Mirollo and J. W. Smit, the departing chairmen of Lit Hum and C.C., were honored with the first annual awards for Distinguished Service to the Core Curriculum. In his acceptance remarks, Professor Smit cited the controversial Music Hum sections and spoke pointedly against such swollen capacity, going so far as to equate it with the end of the core. "When the core is lost, we can say that the College has sold its soul," he said. "And only in medieval legends is a sold soul ever redeemed." —T.V.

Campus bulletins

- SENT UP: Katharine E. Chubbuck ’93 has been named one of this year’s 32 Rhodes Scholars, selected from 1200 applicants nationwide. The prestigious scholarship, which provides for a two-year term of study at Oxford University, is awarded on the basis of academic excellence, integrity, leadership ability, and athletic prowess. Currently a graduate student in Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, the New Orleans native plans to enroll at Oxford following her graduation in 1995.

Ms. Chubbuck is a cum laude graduate of the College who majored in English. As an undergraduate, she directed and designed sets and costumes for the Columbia Musical Theater Society’s production of The Threepenny Opera; off campus, she was a social service volunteer in Harlem. In 1991, she interned for U.S. Senator J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, and last summer she worked at the Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs, where her duties included promoting local trade and culture.

"In the past ten or fifteen years," wrote University Professor Edward W. Said in recommending Ms. Chubbuck for the Rhodes, "I haven’t encountered anyone so astonishingly gifted—superb insights, wonderful command of the language, an unending impressive skill in turning up new things in text after text."

- DOMESTIC PARTNERS: Citing "a real gap in coverage that should be available to all," University Provost Jonathan R. Cole ’64 announced that Columbia has decided for the first time to extend medical benefits to "same-sex domestic partners" of full-time faculty and administrative officers. The policy went into effect on January 1.

"Gay and lesbian domestic partners are important members of the Columbia community. Simple justice and fairness require us to extend these benefits to them," said Dr. Cole, who chairs

Class size at issue: Small core classes are expensive to provide, but many students and alumni see them as the heart of the College’s program.