Rethinking the core curriculum

As the faculty ponders anew the mission of the liberal arts college, many older issues have resurfaced.

by James C. Katz '72

In September 1919, Columbia College inaugurated a course called Contemporary Civilization, taught by members of the philosophy, economics, history and government departments. It was required of all freshmen and was conducted five days a week at nine, ten, and eleven o'clock in the morning in small classrooms on the fifth floor of Hamilton Hall.

Known almost from the start as C.C., the new course became the cornerstone of the College's general education curriculum, one of the most widely admired and influential contributions to American education in this century.

Since the mid-1980's, college curricula nationwide have become a kind of political battleground, with most of the ammunition spent on such questions as the representation of women and minorities on required reading lists. However, Columbia's core curriculum is less a canon of texts than a method for introducing students to important books and ideas before they choose an academic or professional specialty.

The practical workings of the College's core—which now includes two terms of C.C., two terms of Literature Humanities and a term each of Music and Art Humanities—have always relied on consensus and compromise. Staffing for the hundreds of required course sections is arranged in often torturous negotiations between (and within) departments and deans' offices. The required texts are vetted and voted upon each year. In short, the core curriculum has been under continuous review from the start—a process which, every ten years or so, breaks out into a full-scale study or committee.

The latest such body was appointed early last year by the Dean of the College, Robert E. Pollack '61, and was chaired by Wm. Theodore de Bary '41, the noted East Asian scholar and former University Provost.* As the Commission on the Core Curriculum began its work, it was expected that many hours would be spent debating those issues of race, gender and Western emphasis which, at Stanford and else-

* A second faculty panel, chaired by Professor of Chemistry George Flynn, is preparing a report on the undergraduate science curriculum.
The existing core

These courses constitute Columbia College's required general education curriculum, as described in the report of the Commission on the Core Curriculum. Also required for the bachelor of arts degree, in addition to the departmental major or concentration, are four terms of a foreign language, two of physical education, two in a hard science, and two courses in major cultures not adequately covered in the core curriculum (Asian, South American, African or African-American). Required courses total 57 points of the 124 required for the bachelor's degree.

Contemporary Civilization CI001-1002. Although the basic Contemporary Civilization course has undergone some evolution since its inception in 1919 as a War and Peace issues course, Contemporary Civilization CI001-1002 today rests on a close analysis of selected classics of social, political, and philosophical thought studied in their historical and institutional contexts. Among the authors read in the autumn term are Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke; the readings in the spring term include Rousseau, Adam Smith, J. S. Mill, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Contemporary Civilization thus ranges over more than two millennia, from ancient Athens to our own day. The intellectual attitude it seeks to foster is one of critical engagement. Together students and instructors interrogate some of the best minds of the past, then move forward to study with increased understanding and sensitivity the dilemmas of the modern world. In the movement from past experience to present needs, from the ideas and institutions of particular times and places to the overarching problems of Western civilization, there develops a lively, probing dialogue between students and their cultural inheritance.

Humanities CI001-1002 (Masterpieces of European literature and thought), established in 1937, evolved from an earlier honors course based on the reading and discussing of the great books of the Western tradition. While the course has been a relatively stable one throughout its history, the reading list is reevaluated every year and frequently revised by a staff always ready to consider proposed new candidates. The list in recent years has included not only the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, but also selected works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Herodotus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, and Apuleius, and, in the spring, selections from the Old and New Testaments as well as the writings of St. Augustine, Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Jane Austen, and Dostoevsky, among others.

Fine Arts Humanities (Humanities CI121) was organized in 1947 and has been a degree requirement for College students since that date. Structured along the lines of Humanities CI001-1002, it is not a historical survey but an analytic study of a limited number of major monuments and images in Western art, including original works available in the metropolitan area. Its chief purpose is to acquaint students with the character of the experience of the visual arts and to introduce them to modes of analysis and interpretation. Since most college students have had less training in secondary schools in the critical examination of visual works of art rather than literary works, the course seeks to provide students with a foundation in visual literacy. A series of topics from the development of Western art has been selected to afford a sense of the range of expressive possibilities in painting, sculpture, and architecture. These include the Parthenon, the Gothic cathedral of Amiens, and works by Raphael, Michelangelo, Brueghel, Rembrandt, Bernini, Monet, Picasso, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Music Humanities (Humanities CI123), like its sister course in the fine arts, aims to instill in students a basic comprehension of the nonliterary forms of the Western artistic imagination. Its specific goals are to awaken and encourage in students an appreciation of Western music, and to help them learn to respond intelligently to a variety of musical idioms and to engage them in the issues of various debates about the character and purposes of music that have occupied composers and musical thinkers since ancient times. The course attempts to involve students actively in the process of cognitive critical listening, both in the classroom (for which the small-section format is essential) and in concerts which the students attend and write about. The extraordinary richness of musical life in New York is thus an integral part of the course. Although not a history of Western music, the course is taught in a chronological format, and includes masterpieces by Josquin des Prez, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Verdi, Wagner, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, among others.

where, had proved most troublesome. Before long, however, it became clear that another question, more specific perhaps to Columbia, was coming to the fore: How will the University foster in a new generation of teachers the intensity of commitment to general education that had accounted for so much of its power and effectiveness in the past?

"in his award-winning 1966 study of the Columbia curriculum, The Reforming of General Education, Daniel Bell noted that in 1964 half the tenured professors in the English department were College alumni. Today, only three of the department's 29 senior members are alumni of the College—and of its approach to the core. "It is everlastingly to the credit of Ted de Bary," commented Dean Pollack, "that he understood that the purpose of his commission was not simply to look backward and mourn a golden age, and not to look forward and make ideologically rigid commitments to what we will do, but to acknowledge that the core curriculum is a living thing tied to living people, many of whom are retiring, and it has
build on the six-point "major cultures" requirement, which replaced the College's remoteness requirement this year. The report cited Columbia's nationally renowned Oriental Studies program as a model for the Extended Core.

The creation of new core courses, as well as the monitoring of current ones, will be the province of a new Standing Committee on the Core Curriculum, proposed by the de Bary Commission and approved unanimously by the College Faculty on December 19. Forming a new committee may sound like a way of postponing thorny decisions; however, at Columbia College, the principal responsibilities of the faculty as a body - setting degree requirements and admissions standards, for example - are largely discharged by such committees, which are few in number. The decision therefore elevates core curriculum planning and revision to a higher plane of visibility and accountability. The standing committee will consider ways to encourage broader faculty commitment to the program and will in itself constitute a kind of "Core Corps" - a cadre of teachers and administrators who will perform the details and dimensions of the heart of the College curriculum.

Finally, the Commission called on the administration to enact stronger measures to support general education. Among the recommendations: create a system of incentives - additional graduate fellowships, stipends, leaves, and awards - for departments and individuals contributing to core teaching; increase the proportion of tenured and full-time instructors by establishing new staffing goals; expand the new Senior Scholars Program to allow retired faculty - a possible reservoir of experience and commitment - to serve as core teachers and mentors.

The example and influence of great teachers has traditionally played a large role in the core ethos.

"I remember attending meetings of the Humanities staff," said Nathan Gross '60, a former tenured member of the French department who now writes for the musical theater. "There was Moses Hadas, Donald Frame, Quentin Anderson, Bert Lee, Gregory Rabassa - my teachers - and everyone taught it then. Having Hadas there was like having Homer present."

He relished the anxiety of delivering a paper to this group, on the Iliad - "a good paper basically, but I was totally wrong in my emphasis, now that I think about it," he said. "But that was okay. These teachers shared a knowledge of the poem and the conviction that it was important to keep reading this poem with young people. Not just to keep Greek literature alive, but because there are extreme cases of human behavior in the poem."

Mr. Gross has returned to the College this
year as a Humanities lecturer, and says he is enjoying the course.

"My class just discussed the question, 'Is Odysseus a monster?' How do you discuss such a question? What are your criteria? How do you support your arguments using the text?"

Presenting the Commission's report to Dean Pollack, Professor de Bary, never given to overstatement, termed their work "as thorough and fair a review of the core curriculum, both in its basic premises and current practices, as it has received in several decades." All but the first of the group's 20 meetings were open; students, alumni, and administrators took part in the deliberations, as did the staffs of the C.C., Humanities, and Oriental Studies programs.

Columbia College students, at least publicly, have agitated less about the core syllabus than some of their counterparts at other campuses, where Eurocentric, male-dominated reading lists have come under protest. However, a student council committee advised the de Bary Commission, "The core needs to be more explicitly billed as an introduction to the dilemmas of humankind. . . . Too often, the core is misperceived as a rigidly defined canon and as a set of prescribed answers; this lack of understanding is at root of much misdirected criticism."

The student council members charged Columbia with misleading applicants: "Columbia bills itself as distinct from Harvard because general education courses are taught by professors rather than graduate students; reality diverges from advertised claims." They urged strong measures to insure that departments give greater weight to the needs of the core in faculty recruitment, teaching assignments and tenure decisions.

"In no case," they insisted, "must the revision of the core become an excuse to permit the withdrawal of junior and senior faculty into specialized subfields at the expense of undergraduate education."

Alumni, too, had their say. Eric Witkin '69, current president of the Columbia College Alumni Association, testified that the core curriculum is "more central to [the alumni] conception of the College than the Columbia Lion, the King's Crown, the football team and certainly the experience of dormitory life prior to the construction of the East Campus and the renovation of the older dormitories during the last ten years."

Mr. Witkin, a lawyer in Washington, D.C., vividly remembered a moment from his freshman Humanities course with Professor Hadas, when the class discussed the implications of the episode in the Iliad in which Achilles is "transformed from barbarian to civilized man by abandoning the animal-like behavior of abusing his dead opponent's body." Alumni recognize that such classroom experiences are

From left:
Paul Anderer,
Jacob W. Smit,
Wm. Theodore de Bary,
Steven Marcus,
Michael Rosenthal.

*The 33 faculty members of the commission were Robert L. Belknap and Ainslie T. Embree, the chairman of Humanities and C.C., respectively; former College Deans Carl F. Hovde '50 and Arnold Collery; Elaine Simson and David Rosand '58, who chair Music and Art Humanities, respectively; the philosophy Richard Kuhns, who chairs the Society of Fellows in the Humanities; historians Carol Gluck, Jacob W. Smit, Barbara Field, and Mark von Hagen; Paul Anderer, an expert on Japanese literature and film; Leeman Perkins and Myron Cohen, the chairmen of Music and Anthropology, respectively; Steven Marcus '48, Priscilla Wald, and Siobhan Kil-
a lifelong gift from Columbia, and this, Mr. Witkin suggested, is "one of the things that makes them so steadfast in their generous support of the College and the University."

Michael Rosenthal, a scholar of modern British literature and society, has been a kind of godfather to the core curriculum during his 17 years as Associate Dean of Columbia College.

"It really defines the College's academic mission, it distinguishes it from all other colleges, it is something the alumni cherish," said Dean Rosenthal, who will step down in June to rejoin the English department. "And—and this is a little-known fact—it is something that continues to work. The students may grumble about specific courses and instructors and texts, but I think, amazingly, with increasing power and frequency, the students think it is really terrific.

"It's not to say there aren't problems," he went on, "but I've never met students in any number who think it's a silly, outmoded enterprise. I think they realize when they compare themselves with their peers elsewhere that they simply know more. They've read serious, significant texts which don't necessarily provide the answers à la Allan Bloom, but which are absolutely critical to understanding how we evolved the way we did.

"It's not just alumni nostalgia. In fact, these kids are doing something extraordinary which is becoming increasingly rare and therefore is all the more valuable."

In some of these accolades from alumni and faculty, it is difficult not to detect a tone of pessimism. This cautionary spirit runs especially strongly in Professor de Bary himself.

"General education faces unparalleled challenges today," he warns in the preface to the Commission report, "and its value needs to be vigorously reaffirmed against the erosive efforts of several powerful trends in academic life today."

These are, in his view, "the ever more intense fragmentation and specialization of learning; the entrenchment of departmental structures in university administration; the stress on research and publication at the expense of teaching (as shown in the constant pressure to reduce teaching loads, especially in core courses), and the widespread assumption that 'selective excellence' is to be found in individual displays of highly visible scholarship rather than in shared programs of collegial instruction based on a coherent educational philosophy."

Much has been made lately of the resistance—even aversion—of some faculty members to the core curriculum. Joan Ferrante, a scholar of Dante and the current chairman of English and comparative literature, confirmed that in her department, "an increasingly large number of junior and senior faculty simply do not want to teach Humanities." Many have "canon problems," she said. "It's too colonialist for some, too patriarchal for others."

Another major problem, suggested Professor Ferrante, is that many teachers simply feel out of their depth. "At a time when anti-intellectualism is rife, the idea of glorifying a course that, at best, we can teach incompetently, is offensive," she added. "The investment in the core comes at the expense of many other things. It could be done more economically and could be done more intellectually honorably."

Professor Robert Hanning '58, who has taught at Columbia since the early 60's, including "about a decade" of Literature Humanities, is sympathetic to colleagues who dissent from many aspects of the core, but said: "I like the course. I don't think that to teach it is to buy into elitism or Eurocentrism. One can teach the course so that the subversive nature of the texts comes out."

Now vice chairman of the department of English and comparative literature, Professor Hanning feels that the core is weakened by its failure "to deal with the American experience"—a question with special urgency, he said, because Columbia students are "the potential leaders of a pluralistic democracy." An authority on the Middle Ages, he also teaches a popular new English course—Race and Racism: Literary Representations of an
American Crisis—which fulfills the College’s “major cultures” requirement and may be suitable for the Extended Core too. “It’s an enormously stimulating and scary experience for me as a medievalist to be doing this."

Professor Hanning sees a growing gulf between Columbia’s rhetoric and the reality. “If the core is so important, why is it so difficult to get people to teach it?” he wondered, and then answered himself: “They feel their scholarly work is more important. But if the faculty has decided that its professional obligations are more important, they should be able to make an argument for that.”

The assumption that one should only teach one’s narrow academic specialty is “absolutely dead wrong,” in Dean Pollack’s view. “If one does that one should be at an institute for advanced studies, teaching graduate students, and one should not be paid from the tuitions of undergraduate students.”

“The tragedy would be if the core should ever become a charity, where people teach it only out of sympathy, or to get promoted,” he said. “In reality, it can be the one life-giving, anti-competitive, anti-professional aspect of a college faculty member’s life here. Everything else gets you ahead or behind in the eyes of your peers or the peer review process of your profession. This one’s just fun. It’s hard work, but it’s fun.”

Many of the issues raised during the Commission’s hearings—from instructional format to cultural representation—have been debated for many decades. The persistence and, many feel, the success of the Columbia curriculum owe a great deal to the the original corps of educational visionaries in 1919 and earlier.

The C.C. program arose from a set of concerns—political, philosophical and pedagogical—imposed by the First World War. In 1917, an interdepartmental course in “War Issues” had been organized by a committee led by the noted philosopher Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, who was a colleague of John Dewey and Dean of Columbia’s Graduate Faculties. Before the war ended, it occurred to several faculty members—notably Acting College Dean Herbert E. Hawkes, and Professors Harry J. Carman and John J. Coss—that a course in “Peace Issues” might also make sense. C.C. resulted from these collaborations.

At the same time, Professor John Erskine was pioneering “great books” seminar approaches to the teaching of literature that would lead to an upper college offering in comparative literature called General Honors (which survives today as the Colloquium), and culminate in the establishment in 1937 of the required freshman Humanities program, patterned in many respects on C.C.

Some regard the core curriculum’s ancestry as tainted by wartime fervor and propaganda—to make the world safe for democracy. This view tends to ignore the postwar context of 1919: As Columbia experimented with its new curriculum, surveying the European philosophers and examining the development of democratic institutions, American society was careening into isolationism, the Palmer raids, the Red Scare. Lauding the new C.C. course as “one of the notable educational advances of the year,” Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler noted that its virtues extended equally to “college students enamored of the cruder and more stupid forms of radicalism” and those “afflicted with the more stubborn forms of conservatism.”

By their own accounts, the College faculty members were interested in anything but indoctrination. John Erskine’s mentor was Professor George Edward Woodberry, once called “the apostle of comparative literature and the enemy of divided academic disciplines.” In Erskine’s description, Woodberry summoned his colleagues to the view “that poetry, religion and politics in any noble sense are all rooted—not in the genius of any one race or country—but in the general heart of man.”

The core courses were explicitly designed not to spoonfeed any particular facts or ideas, but to develop students’ critical abilities. A common body of texts, it was argued, would provide a common ground of discourse for students of increasingly diverse backgrounds, and serve as a foundation for more specialized academic work. Above all, true to Woodberry’s vision, freshmen would be led to confront works of literature directly—not to gape in awe at classical monuments to the eternal verities, but to question and challenge. As Professor Justus Buchler later noted, this would require a new classroom approach: “The instructor, though necessarily a chairman and guide, was to be an inquirer, not a preacher. He was there not to deliver a message for the day but to
preserve the sense of order, balance, and continuity and to exhibit the critical attitude."

John Erskine's undergraduate seminars did engender some opposition among the faculty. In an essay published in the 1954 History of Columbia College on Morningside, Lionel Trilling '25 wrote:

To some scholars who had spent a lifetime in the study of certain authors or certain books it seemed sacrilegious that undergraduates should be presumed able to read them with understanding in a single week. Erskine replied that every book had to be read at some time for the first time, that there was a difference between a reading acquaintance with great authors and a scholarly investigation of them. In answer to the charge that to read a great work in translation is not to read it at all, he remarked that if this were so, very few of his colleagues had read the Bible. At the heart of the new general education program was a bold assertion of the centrality of undergraduate teaching. In preceding decades, the College had found itself increasingly subordinated to Columbia's graduate and professional schools. The liberal arts faculty now insisted that broadly conceived humanistic studies—general education, as opposed to professional or vocational training—was a worthy enterprise for the University's leading scholars.

Professor Trilling was one of many who saw the founding of C.C. as a decisive moment: "The problems of the College's corporate life were not done away with after 1919, but from that time on there has been no doubt that Columbia College was a college, that it defined its own existence, so far as any institution can, and followed the law of its own being."

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A Parnassus in the real world

In Humanities A, every student reads the essential texts, unfiltered through secondary sources, with the professorial guidance only possible in a small class. Can this time-honored method be maintained despite the constraints—budgetary, administrative and philosophical—that now threaten it?

by James V. Mirollo,
Professor of English and Comparative Literature

We all know by now that Humanities A (or Lit Hum) began in 1937 as an outgrowth of the Erskine General Honors Course and the Colloquium on Important Books. We also know that it began as an enterprise nourished by a group of professors and a few instructors who offered some 20-odd sections of a two-semester course with small class size and a long reading list. The staff met weekly to discuss the texts being taught and to choose the texts for the next semester or year. Translations were used, and emphasis in the classroom was on discussion rather than the conveying of expert knowledge by faculty to students. The staff was drawn from various departments, none of them expert on all the books covered but all of them, to quote Quentin Anderson, "gifted amateurs" eager to learn from each other and to have an experience that did not involve their specialized learning.

For this reason, too, background information, secondary scholarship and criticism were banished or at least soft-pedaled. The ideal was a conversation among faculty and students about the books assigned. Over the years, some 130-odd works appeared on successive annual reading lists chosen by the staff, so that except for a half-dozen texts that have never disappeared from the syllabus, there has not been a fixed canon of so-called great books read every year. The course was successful enough to be noticed and imitated elsewhere. By all accounts alumni regard it as perhaps the single most valuable experience they had here. And the current students express similar enthusiasm. Nevertheless this educational experiment cannot rest easily on its fifty-year laurels, for it now faces problems that raise serious doubts as to its future.

Although they are intertwined, I will separate for purposes of discussion the two principal issues of staffing and content.

The initial premise of distinguished professorial participation was difficult to maintain even in the early years. As the number of sections offered increased to the current number of 50 it became more and more difficult to staff those sections with professors, never mind distinguished veterans. Various pressures contributed to the shaping of the current situation, which sees the staff divided into four full professors, one associate professor, 26 assistant
“I would teach the phone book”

James Mirolo received the 1988 Great Teacher Award of the Society of Columbia Graduates last September. The award citation began: “As Dante walked with the shade of Vergil to hear the dead tell their stories, so do students under your guidance hear long-dead poets speak to them. But unlike Dante’s Vergil, you are known for your animation. Voluble, dynamic, witty, colloquial, as a teacher you make the classic texts contemporary.”

In his acceptance speech, an excerpt of which follows, Professor Mirolo reflected on what good teaching is.

During a heated Humanities staff meeting on the syllabus two years ago, I interrupted to make a statement that has since been often quoted, to my discomfort. What I said was that I would teach the telephone book if we as a staff decided that it belonged on the reading list. This was variously interpreted, and has been cited since, to mean, for example, that Mirolo is so desperately hooked on teaching that he will teach anything, as long as you let him go into the classroom for his daily fix! Come to think of it, this is actually not too far from the truth.

But my remark has also been interpreted to mean that I am so hopelessly a pedagogue that I have no real interest in the political, social, and cultural implications of the course’s content, which is certainly not the truth. My remark, in fact, was a rhetorical ploy, a way of saying to my colleagues that after all of the arguments about which books to include have subsided and a compromise list is reached, there is still waiting the matter of how to teach the chosen books to undergraduates, and to teach them well. It is one thing to discuss the issues involved in a course like Humanities A at staff meetings, or in graduate seminars, or in scholarly forums, or in the New York Times Sunday magazine, and quite another matter to determine whether undergraduates are likely to be well served by a year’s discussion of such issues, as opposed to a year’s experience of reading complex texts, and of learning how to read them critically. It is absurd to think that any current teacher of Humanities A presents a text like the Iliad entirely on its own positive terms, as hallowed or sacrosanct, excluding inquiries into its possible negative meanings or influence. That is not being apolitical; that is being a bad teacher.

teach it to earn the year off provided by a combination of the Chamberlain leave and the semester development leave offered by the University; still others do not believe in the course on ideological or political grounds such as feminism, Marxism, or post-structuralist literary theory. Still others deplore the absence from the syllabus of representative works of other cultures, and of the voices of the marginalized, while pointing to the dominance of the European cultural tradition and its prejudices of inclusion and exclusion.

So we have the anomaly of a staff whose preceptors love to teach it but may be too many in number, a senior professorial minority, because others are indifferent or unable or reluctant to teach it, and the largest group, many of whom are not content to be teaching it at all. To complicate matters further, there is a
significant minority of assistant professors who question the rationale of significant deviations from the traditional notion of the course as including acknowledged masterpieces of European literature and philosophy.

The indifference, ideological concerns, and disagreements I have recorded were clearly in evidence at the staff meeting held last April to discuss the syllabus for 1988-1990. There was a clear division between those who believe the course must be opened to additional new texts and those who feel that its original purpose, identity and coherence, especially in the spring semester, are being eroded.

The most hotly debated issue in the past five years, both in the staff meetings and outside, has been the inclusion of works by women, blacks and other minority or marginalized or excluded voices. The creation of programs in Women's Studies and African-American Studies has not lessened this concern, because Lit Hum is a required course and a famous one at that, a jewel of the core curriculum, and therefore an ideal place to make an urgent statement. For most critics of the course, including such texts would probably suffice; others, I suspect, find the very idea of the course so odious that they would prefer to see it banished and replaced by something more representative of a global cultural perspective, though it seems to me that in practice this global perspective narrows down to certain marginalized or non-European cultures and voices. I noticed, for example, that none of the course's critics on my own staff attended the seminar meetings on the Oriental Humanities held recently at the Heyman Center, perhaps because these meetings centered on the classics of Islamic, Indian, Chinese and Japanese culture, and the interests of the critics tend to focus on contemporary or modern works by women, Afro-Americans, Africans and Latin Americans. I noticed too when I appeared before the Hamilton Committee on campus race relations, I was pressured only by black and Hispanic students on the matter of inclusion of texts in our syllabus. I also learned from that valuable session that some Hispanic students do not consider Don Quixote as satisfactory as a novel by Marquez, and that some minority students feel the presence of just one of their representative texts on our syllabus is not offensive tokenism. As one student said, "We'll take it!"

The Lit Hum staff, not without considerable strain, has attempted to respond. The syllabus now being considered for the next two years continues to include works by Sappho, Jane Austen and Madame de la Fayette, and may include Christine de Pisan and Zora Neale Hurston (a black woman author) as well as Ellison, Achebe, Borges and Marquez. But at the same time we are considering restoring Cervantes, Lucretius and Apuleius.* Some of the staff have questioned the canonicity and appropriateness of authors such as Christine and Hurston, especially since their inclusion entails cutting such allegedly authentic masterworks as those of Boccaccio, Rabelais, Swift and Dostoevsky. The spring syllabus is especially vulnerable because it has never had the inviolable integrity afforded the fall term by its focus on the surviving Greco-Roman masterpieces. In the spring, with its sweeping movement from the Bible to the contemporary novel, it has always seemed possible to insert and withdraw texts of comparable value and resonance, there being more of them available and less cultural coherence to violate.

Will it be possible for Humanities A to satisfy the various demands and remain intact? Should we perhaps conclude that the course has had its day and now it is time to junk and replace it? If we decide to preserve it in anything like its current shape, who will teach it? How can we staff it in the future? If we replace it, what should take its place? Should it coexist in some form with its replacement? These are not easy questions, but the time has come for the faculty of Columbia College to answer them. And please note that I say the faculty of Columbia College, not the overwhelmingly transient faculty of the Humanities A staff, two-thirds of whom are teaching the course for the first time this year.

Instead of answering these questions, I prefer to propose a series of scenarios that might ensue from the crisis in staffing and syllabus. In this way I can suggest some alternatives without being so specific as to let the College faculty off the hook of responsibility.

As to staffing considered by itself, one might imagine departmental quotas by rank as well as by numbers, which would be preferable in my view. (According to a formula dating from the late Seventies, the participating departments had quotas to fill, principally from English (15), foreign language departments (10), classics (5), philosophy (5) and religion (2).)

Or we might accept the inevitable presence of a large number of preceptors, in which case they ought to be trained as part of an apprentice program set up with outside funding. This would mean a change in our advertising and a loss of uniqueness as an undergraduate enterprise, but it would mean also greater honesty, and better trained preceptors in the classroom.

If we did institute rank quotas, there would still be the anomaly of the largest ranking

*I do not agree with the Village Voice that Columbia College has been engaged since 1937 in the futile teaching of the same dead white boys.

*In the voting that followed this report, none of these proposals obtained a majority of votes of the staff; thus the syllabus for 1987-88 was automatically continued for 1988-89.
group uncomfortable with the course. Here we might allow junior faculty to earn the entire fourth year on leave in other ways, so that no individual would have to teach the course to earn the leave, and those who choose to teach it would be presumably more content. This might mean very few such contentees available, however.

Of course these staffing solutions cannot be disentangled from course content—the syllabus will determine who wants to teach it, and the wishes of those who teach it may influence its content. It should be the College faculty that decides, however, what the course should be and how to staff it, if it decides to have the course continue.

To talk about discontinuing a course that the alumni revere, our current students love, and some professors and preceptors love to teach, may seem perverse, even in the context of the current discontent. The only basis for discontinuing Humanities A would be if it no longer serves its purpose, and if it cannot be staffed in a way that assures that purpose is being honestly and continuously served.

As a scenario of discontinuance, one might imagine another course to take its place, organized thematically, entitled perhaps “Voices and Cultures,” including both European and non-European texts, global in scope. In such a case, our current Lit Hum course, restored to its traditional content, might join the Oriental Humanities course as an elective and a follow-up to the basic “Voices and Cultures” course. Those who would teach the few sections needed would want to do so, as would those who choose to take it. I predict it would be quite successful and carry on its tradition and its values intact.

Another possibility would be to revive the now moribund junior and senior Colloquium from which Humanities A evolved, thus solving two problems at once by pouring Lit Hum back into Colloquium, which we could offer as a one-year elective in multiple sections instead of the current two-year sequence. This too would be an appealing solution.

Or we might continue Lit Hum and also require “Voices and Cultures,” using the credits made available by the recent change in the remoteness requirement. This is in many ways an ideal solution, which guarantees something more coherent than is likely to emerge from the current smorgasbord of courses available. But doubtless it would be next to impossible to staff both a required “Voices and Cultures” and a required Lit Hum course. In that case we might consider an existing elective course, Humanities V3003-3004, “Readings in European and American Literature and Philosophy of the 19th and 20th Centuries,” which is advertised as a continuation of Lit Hum and must have been created on the assumption that the readings in the latter course would stop around the end of the 18th century—a stopping point which some colleagues believe would be a good idea in any case. Although it would be an elective, it could offer a “Voices and Cultures” syllabus, and since it carries six credits it might be the ideal way to fulfill the new remoteness requirement. Or it could be required if staffing existed for both it and Lit Hum. Either way, it could not be characterized as an excuse to siphon off troublesome texts from the Lit Hum syllabus. Indeed, the result would be two coherent courses instead of one that tries to do too much unsatisfactorily.

Or, in a darker mood, we might imagine continuing Lit Hum in a different format. Abandoning the current, terrifically expensive system, we could swallow our pride and risk our reputation by having group lectures and larger subsections taught by preceptors. We would do the same with “Voices and Cultures,” and thereby perhaps be able to staff both. The customers we would lose might be made up by the attractiveness of the triple offering of C.C., Lit Hum and “Voices and Cultures,” which would probably be unique in American undergraduate education, but would nevertheless entail an irrecoverable loss of identity for the College.

There has never been a single doubt in my mind about the value and enjoyment to be derived from Humanities A as it has flourished over the years. I do not agree with the Village Voice that Columbia College has been engaged since 1937 in the futile teaching of the same dead white boys. Nor do I agree with a recent colleague’s assessment that the books we teach contain “a pack of lies.” If, as the Roman writer Terence says, “Nothing human is alien to me,” we cannot lightly dismiss books that continue to speak to our common humanity, that stimulate eternally important and urgent ideas, that are powerful and resonant enough to overcome whatever lies they may include or promote.

Yet I am also aware that we live in a world that has changed drastically since 1937, and that other voices and cultures must be heard. While I still admire the vision and dedication and purpose of the founding faculty, I also understand that there are good reasons why a faculty of the future, which is already here, might not share that vision and cannot feel the same confidence and commitment as did the founders, although there will surely always be those who would want to teach something like the traditional Lit Hum syllabus.

That is why in my various scenarios I have tried to retain a place for the course, for the value it can still have in a new core-curricular context. I know that I am acknowledging that change is inevitable, that the status quo cannot
A dissenting commentary

A member of the junior faculty challenges some assumptions underlying the core curriculum.

by Siobhán Kilfeather,
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Editor's note: Last fall, when the Commission on the Core Curriculum was drafting its report to the dean, Siobhán Kilfeather, a Commission member who teaches Humanities A, offered to the Commission her objections to the draft report. She prefaced her remarks, "In this submission I represent many of the professorial staff at large, but all opinions are my own." Excerpts from that document follow, interlarded with editorial explanation, in italics, of the context of her remarks.

A number of faculty, senior as well as junior, question the desirability of teaching "classic" texts without reference to the cultural and historical contexts in which they were written, and even the notion of a classic text. The de Bary Commission, acknowledging a degree of discontent among the junior faculty, observed that some of these complaints were as old as the courses themselves: "That only specialists have sufficient authority to teach the individual works. . . . or that any fixed reading list represents an implicit canonization of these works. . . ."

What the Commission seems to understand as a rigid resistance to teaching any texts that don't appear in one's thesis might better be understood as an unease at going into a classroom to present in four hours a long and complex work from another language and culture to a group of beginning students unskilled in reading texts. Many students have great difficulties with both the quantity of the reading and the attention to language demanded by the course examinations. An epic poem in translation is a bad place in which to teach close reading of poetry, and an enjoyment of reading in general. This is not the place to bemoan the high school system (in which many of our students apparently read Homer, Sophocles, and Dante to very little intellectual profit), but it is a place to ask in what ways a program of general education addresses such problems. Is it the feeling of many junior staff that the present structure of Humanities A, with its inflexible syllabus and its emphasis on coverage, substitutes for the cultivation of intellectual discourse a kind of superficial cultural literacy that might be attained by reading Cliff's Notes?

I realize that this description of Humanities A is alien to many senior colleagues who teach the course. . . . The Commission has insufficently considered the changes in ideas of reading, translation, the relationship of text to context, and changes in pedagogy that have occurred since the Thirties. The small minority of our senior colleagues who continue to teach in the core are no doubt enabled to do so because they can in good faith present the material as it might have been presented to earlier generations of students. Younger teachers bring to the core the convictions about history, cultural context, language and reading which inform the rest of their teaching. . . . They cannot be expected to teach against the grain of these convictions, and therefore they become burdened by an onerous preparation in which they have to research problems of history and translation and consider how best to present them in a syllabus which spares so little time for each text.

One question addressed by the Commission was, "Should the readings in Humanities A end with the eighteenth century?" One danger of ending the readings with the 18th century is that students might be misled into supposing that this canon only came to be disputed in the last two centuries, when we would wish them to understand how far it is a modern
invention. Moreover I am troubled by the current tendency of Humanities students to suppose that the syllabus is so masculine and Eurocentric because there are no other choices available for the earlier texts. Neither women’s writing, nor writing by racial and ethnic minorities within Europe and North America begins with the 19th Century, and I hope that the standing committee will recommend a Humanities syllabus that emphasizes the diversity of “Western” culture from the earliest times.

Defending the boundaries of the core curriculum, the Commission wrote: “The Western tradition remains, after all, the tradition out of which this country and culture have developed, and its influence has been decisive in shaping the modern world. . . . The real issue here is not whether or not to include Asia, but whether it is wise or necessary to do this at the substantial expense of the West in the core curriculum. . . . What may well alarm conservatives, or even liberals for that matter, is the more radical claim that today East and West should be treated on a par, with no privileged status reserved for traditional values or Western civilization. . . .”

I strongly dispute the claims of Humanities A to survey the “Western” tradition, and I am troubled by the unchallenged assumptions underpinning the discussion of this issue. The draft report sets up an opposition between East and West, and insists on the separation of each field. I have no desire to dispute the construction of the East within the college curriculum; but I do dispute the dominance of Hellenic and Christian texts in the construction of the West, and dissent from the view of our own diverse culture that insists on these aspects of our many traditions being regarded as the most important. . . . Once again Asia is raised to block a discussion of the meaning of the West, and a nonexistent consensus of opinion on “great books” and “traditional values” is presumed.

In its section on “Recommendations for the Extended Core,” the Commission’s draft report contained the following language, which was deleted from the final report:

“The extended Core . . . would minimize any element of ethnic self-assertion, ideological special interest or minority advocacy partaking of a politicized struggle that could turn the curriculum into a jungle of educational conflict and competition. A core course should approximate a multi-cultural forum, rather than serve as a platform or pulpit for the promotion of a particular ideology or religion.”

I have previously protested the report’s distinction between major and minor cultures on the grounds that such distinctions are antithetical to the discussions of emerging knowledges that might be appropriate to the extended core. I have also expressed my reservations about definitions of “our” cultural values that con-

If we discuss “ethnic self-assertion” in Vergil we are training our students in “civil discourse,” but if we undertake a similar discussion with Fanon we are “partaking of a politicized struggle.”