THE COLUMBIA COLLEGE COLLOQUIUM

JAMES GUTMANN

Much has been done in recent years for college students of exceptional ability in specific fields; much, perhaps too much, has also been done for students, so-called, who seem to have little or no ability in any field of study. For the latter, in more colleges than one likes to think of, the road to learning or, at least, to a degree, has been leveled and graded, not to say degraded. The former group, undergraduates of marked competence in some or several academic disciplines, may in almost any University college pursue courses of postgraduate rank in their senior year or earlier if they have adequate preparation. Together with junior or senior seminars, these courses help the nascent historian or the incipient chemist to serve a valuable apprenticeship while still a member of the College. As is well known, Columbia College students may, if properly qualified, take courses in the graduate schools of the University, and the exercise of professional options open the appropriate professional schools to undergraduates aspiring to become lawyers, physicians, engineers, or business men.

Meanwhile other students of exceptional ability whose intellectual interests are in what is still called the liberal arts tradition, have not always been equally well served. For example, a college sophomore hoping to become an economist has been readily encouraged to enroll in undergraduate seminars and advanced courses, while his fellow student, intelligently interested in economics but not aspiring to vocational activity in this field, has often seemed less adequately provided for. Comparatively few, indeed, are the courses geared to the requirements of the layman—designed to meet the needs, not of the student who wants to become a physicist or a physiologist, but of one who, perhaps as an artisan or an artist, wishes to understand the significance of modern physics or of physiology. It may be that the very nature of the natural sciences makes such an “outside looking in” attitude impossible in their domain, though many scientists would surely dispute this and the prompt success of the recently organized two-year general science course in
Columbia College, for example, might furnish significant evidence to the contrary.

In any case, in the humanities there is certainly no need of abandoning the liberal arts tradition or of failing to provide for liberal arts students of outstanding ability opportunities commensurate with the preprofessional courses and seminars offered to their fellows. The Columbia College Colloquium is designed to provide one such opportunity.

The name "Colloquium" was suggested by Dr. Jacques Barzun who with Professor Raymond Weaver and the present writer had, in the winter of 1931, been appointed by the Dean and Committee on Instruction of Columbia College to prepare plans for a course which would revive the "General Honors" program. This honors course had been abandoned, for a variety of reasons, in 1929 after a trial period. While seeking to avoid the defects which had caused the Faculty to abandon the General Honors sequence, the committee was enthusiastic in recommending the revival of the plan for meetings of small, carefully selected groups of students with two members of the teaching staff in each group at weekly evening gatherings for round-table discussion of important books. The committee recommended the use, possibly in a revised edition, of the "Honors Readings" prepared for the earlier course under the leadership of Professor John Erskine. It may be mentioned, at this point, that the Colloquium staff has been constantly benefited by the interest and encouragement of Professor Erskine and others who had been active in the former honors course. The revision of the bibliography was undertaken, under the editorship of Professor J. B. Brebner, by the Colloquium staff and published by the American Library Association.

"The Classics of the Western World," constituting the "Honors Readings," present an impressively—some might say a depressingly—ambitious program of work for the two years of the Colloquium sequence. For any group of students, however competent, to undertake to master in two years the world's classics from Homer to today seems an impossible task. For any group of instructors to undertake the teaching of such a course would appear to be overwhelming effrontery. Nor is the impossibility or the effrontery greatly reduced sense a sur-

and that the bibliography classic write
loquium gro thirty authc
loquium, on the students
Is it possi
course of th
involves the
or of six or
ripides, or c
Aeneid, or I
Cervantes—
but large se
again in wee
than, or Mil
Molière, or .
Smith's Wea
or a full-len
otevsky, or .

Let it beg
pretense, of a
reading and
justice to ou
worthy of th
would do jus
concentratin,
and said"—s
Marcus Aur
Bacon, Desc
on" by us.
enterprises n
preme court
Any one o
read in succe
study and di
many years.
greatly reduced when it is admitted at once that this is in no sense a survey course, that no claim to completeness is made, and that the list of some seventy authors included in the bibliography is neither professed to be a complete roster of classic writers, nor is itself read in its entirety by the Colloquium groups. However, approximately twenty-eight or thirty authors are read in each of the two years of the Colloquium, one author in each week of the four semesters of the students’ junior and senior years.

Is it possible to carry out this ambitious program? Can a course of this sort be effectively conducted, a course which involves the reading in one week of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, or of six or seven plays of Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides, or of Plato’s *Republic* and *Symposium*, or Vergil’s *Aeneid*, or Dante’s *Inferno* and *Vita Nuova*, or Rabelais, or Cervantes—not the whole of *Gargantua* nor of *Don Quixote*, but large sections? And what of the program of reading, again in weekly assignments, such works as Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, or a half dozen plays by Molière, or Part I of Goethe’s *Faust*, large parts of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* or of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, or a full-length novel by Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens, Dostoevsky, or Tolstoy?

Let it be granted at once that there is no expectation, no pretense, of doing justice to any of these authors in a week’s reading and study. It may rather be said that we would do justice to our students in offering them a program of reading worthy of their fullest and continued application, that we would do justice to our own sense of educational values by concentrating attention on “the best that has been thought and said”—some of it, at least, certainly not all. Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius and Augustine, Montaigne, Shakspere, Bacon, Descartes, and Jonathan Swift need no “justification” by us. It is rather we ourselves whose educational enterprises need to be justified, or at least tried, in the supreme court of their jurisdiction.

Any one of the works which students in the Colloquium read in successive weeks could well constitute the subject of study and discussion for many weeks, or many months, or many years. Each and every one of the authors listed in the
Colloquium bibliography could well be, and doubtless has been, the focal interest of many a scholar and specialist. But, after all, even the greatest scholar and the most distinguished specialist must once have read for the first time the work to which he subsequently devoted many years of study. Moreover, most of the so-called classics were surely not written for the research of the specialist but for the delight of the cultivated layman without benefit of glossary or lexicon.

The recognition of these facts may indeed accentuate the importance of the question as to the value of reading such works in translation. No one would deny that, other things being equal, there are incalculable advantages in reading a work of literature in the language of its author. But other things seldom are equal. We are certainly far from the historic conception of humanistic studies when students whose special interests lie in the field of the humanities have no more Latin that the Q.E.D. of their geometry text and less Greek than Euclid might inspire. One gratifying consequence of such a course as the Colloquium is the definite evidence of increased interest in linguistic studies which it arouses in its students. It has been said that the college graduate who can read more than two, or even two, modern languages with fluency, is today the rare exception. Even though the Colloquium is a course for upperclassmen, there are each year a number of juniors who, by reading Homer and Herodotus, the dramatists and philosophers of Greece, in translation, are roused to begin a study of Greek—the more’s the pity they had not done so sooner. Reading translations of Dante, of Machiavelli, and Leonardo da Vinci, has led more than one student in the Colloquium to begin the study of Italian. But even at the worst, is it not probable that a larger part of Montaigne comes to fruition for American college students in English than in French? May it not be that a college senior who reads Faust, even in a lamentably imperfect translation, gets more of Goethe’s thought than does his friend who reads three pages per assignment and forgets the Prologue in Heaven before he has reached Auerbach’s Cellar?

An answer to some of the questions which have been raised and a partial defense against these and other legiti-
matte criticisms may be found in the method of conducting the Colloquium and of choosing its membership. A very considera-
table part of such success as the course has had, has pro-
ably been due to the care with which students have been selected. Each applicant for enrollment is interviewed at
the end of his sophomore year by a committee of members
of the Colloquium staff. Though such an interview may seem
something of an ordeal for the student and hardly less trying
for the staff, it has seemed to provide a reasonably effective
method of selection when many complicated factors have to
be considered. The various points of view and judgments of
the committee members serve to check one another and it
may be that during the interview the discerning student
learns as much about his inquisitors as they about him. The
committee's impressions are amplified by careful examina-
tion of the applicant's previous academic record and by con-
sultation with some of his former instructors and advisers.
All this takes much time and not a little trouble, but it has
proved itself well worth while.

The aim has not been to secure a standardized group of
precious prodigies, nor to have a student body isolated
from other groups on the Campus by their exotic interests
and esoteric preoccupations. Though the Colloquium is of-
fered for students "of high academic standing," this has not
been interpreted in a narrow sense by exclusive attention to
previous course grades. Each applicant's interests not only
in literature but also in science and the arts are taken into
consideration as well as his mastery of languages and com-
petence in expression. The result has been a group of stu-
dents of wide and varied outlook.

As the student group represents a variety of viewpoints
and preparation, so the instructing staff is drawn from sev-
eral cooperating departments. The present staff has rep-
resentatives from the Departments of Classical Philology—
Dr. Hadley and Mr. Westbrook; from English and Compara-
tive Literature—Professor Weaver and Mr. Trilling; from
History—Dr. Barzun and Mr. Miner; Dr. Carey from Eco-
nomics; and the writer from Philosophy. It may be men-
tioned that of these eight members of the present Collo-
quium staff, six were associated with the former General
Honors course—three as instructors, three as students. While gladly seeking to maintain the traditions of General Honors, we have felt free to depart from its precedents whenever this seemed desirable. Much was, of course, implied by the change of name and the elimination of the honorific aspects of the old title, and this change has apparently been an advantage. Students seem to be attracted to the Colloquium because of their interest in the content and procedure of the course, without other motives suggested by a special honors degree and prestige. That a large proportion of students in the Colloquium have achieved a variety of collegiate distinctions, including graduation honors, the Phi Beta Kappa award, and numerous scholarships and fellowships for continued study, may well add to our satisfaction as well as theirs.

In the earlier honors course the instructors in various groups frequently invited other members of the University faculties to meet with the students for discussion of works on which these scholars could speak with particular authority. We have found it preferable to invite these specialists to lecture to the members of the Colloquium, usually at the beginning of the week in which the students were to commence their reading of the author in question. In this way, a background for their reading has been provided. Sometimes groups of books or authors have been discussed in a single lecture. In general it has been our policy to schedule a lecture when a particular scholar was available to introduce specific aspects of our work on which a lecture appeared to be appropriate. A chief benefit of these lectures has, of course, been to give our students an opportunity to hear at least some of the distinguished scholars of the University whom they might otherwise not know. To mention a few instances we have had, among many others, lectures by Professor Dinsmoor and Professor Katharine Riley on Homeric archaeology; by Professor Young and Professor Margarete Bieber on the Greek theater; by Professor Westermann on the Greek historians; by Professor Woodbridge on Plato and on Aristotle; by Professor Erskine on Vergil; by Professor McCrea on Lucretius; by Professor Bigongiari on Dante and on Machiavelli; and by Professor Cons on

Montaigne; by Milton; by Pro Hayes on Gibbon; and

The gene

many other mer

may be seen, pro

In the Colloq

points of view a:

plement one an

ferences in whic

divide in suppor

point. In any ca:

background are

the junior year s

regularly a repre

ments as one of

ity to provide a

function of the st

as leaders of disc

ous to the con

designer of the t:

tern of such a ta

sign often remain

Yet as the beco

pattern may be i

In a group whe

with some cong

may gradually b

which an outsid

meeting be made

do of the groups th

as one of the welc

loquium group. Th

been discussed a

plored. But when

was long past (no
Montaigne; by Professor Van Doren on Shakspere and on Milton; by Professor Wright on Rousseau; by Professor Hayes on Gibbon; by Professor Steeves on the history of the novel; and by Professor Dewey on American pragmatism. The generous interest and willingness of these and many other members of the faculties to cooperate have, it may be seen, provided a valuable part of the course.

In the Colloquium two instructors meet each group of students and conduct the round-table discussions. Their points of view and special interests contrast with and complement one another and sometimes lead to striking differences in which the student members of the group may divide in support of the spokesman of one or the other viewpoint. In any case the instructors’ professional training and background are intended to supplement one another. Thus the junior year students who read the ancient classics have regularly a representative of the Greek and Latin departments as one of the instructors in each group. But the ability to provide necessary technical authority is only one function of the staff members. They act not as lecturers but as leaders of discussion. Sometimes the leader may be analogous to the conductor of an orchestra, sometimes to the designer of the tapestry of the evening’s meeting. The pattern of such a tapestry is likely to be complicated, the design often remains obscure, and many threads are left hanging. Yet as the year progresses and the group’s members become increasingly acquainted with one another, form and pattern may be increasingly discerned.

In a group where there is increasing intellectual intimacy with some congeniality many elementary considerations may gradually be taken for granted. Frequent references, which an outsider might find unintelligible, may in any meeting be made to previous discussions. At least in some of the groups this sort of association has been experienced as one of the welcome and excellent by-products of the Colloquium. The writer recalls the final meeting of one Colloquium group. The book assigned for the evening had been discussed and, as usual, many issues had been explored. But when the time for adjournment had come and was long past (not at all unusual in itself) no one seemed in-
clined to have the meeting come to an end. The group had been meeting together week after week for two years. They were loath to bring the association to a conclusion. Reference was just made to a “by-product.” Perhaps that term should be questioned.

The relationship of an undertaking like the Colloquium to specialized courses such as undergraduate seminars may be suggested by the distinction between educational specialization and concentration. In one sense, as noted above, the Colloquium has been an equivalent in the field of the humanities for what junior and senior seminars represent to students whose particular interests are in the field of the social sciences. There are, however, obvious differences. It may, perhaps, be questioned to what extent undergraduates in a liberal arts college are prepared to undertake original research work. In any case the work of the Colloquium is in no sense research. Nor does the Colloquium offer, except incidentally, training in methodology.

The new humanities sequence,¹ to be inaugurated for the freshman class of 1937, may help us to bridge the distinction between the Colloquium as an opportunity for concentration and undergraduate seminars as opportunities for specialization. In any event, one result of the introduction of this humanities course will presumably be a group of college students increasingly trained and prepared for the kind of reading undertaken in the Colloquium.

¹ See “The Evolution of the Arts College: Recent Changes at Columbia,” by H. E. Hawkes, page 33 of this issue.