THE EVOLUTION OF THE ARTS COLLEGE:
RECENT CHANGES AT COLUMBIA
HERBERT EDWIN HAWKES

The modification of a college curriculum may be brought about either through evolution or revolution. The advent of a new president in a college or university has been known to be the signal for a complete overturn both in the aim and in the methods employed in the institution. On the other hand, it sometimes happens that changes just as important and far reaching may be the result of a gradual movement of judgment and opinion in a given direction through a considerable time.

The recent changes in the curriculum of Columbia College have come about through an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process. At no time during the past twenty years has there been a violent overturn of procedures. At the same time, a tendency has been in operation which has gradually gained more and more support from members of the staff until the Faculty of the College seems to be practically unanimous in favor of the changes which have been adopted. In fact, the legislation of the Faculty at the meeting which was held on January 7 might well be thought of as merely the slipping into place of the last piece in a picture puzzle.

Everyone familiar with the development of Columbia College since the World War will recognize without detailed description the many features in that development. The course in Contemporary Civilization was organized in 1919 after the Student Army Training Corps went out of existence. During the war a course was organized by scholars in Columbia College, and adopted all over the country, for the study of war issues. After the close of hostilities it seemed to various members of the staff, notably Dean Woodbridge and the late Professor Adam LeRoy Jones, that it was no less important that peace issues be understood and cultivated. As a consequence, the course in Contemporary Civilization, which was for some years developed as a study of the insistent problems of our time with much less emphasis on the remote background than appears in the course as now presented, came into being. It has been under the
administration of the Committee on Instruction, with Professor Coss in charge, for many years.

The opposition which the organization of this course met was precisely that which one hears today from critics outside the College in connection with the course in science and the recently authorized course in the humanities. Those who have had no experience with work of this kind immediately assume that it is superficial, appealing only to the shallow mind without performing any significant function either in satisfying or creating an appetite for scholarship. Those of us who are familiar with the cultural and educational influence of the course in Contemporary Civilization know that these assumptions are far from valid and are based upon a lack of knowledge of the actual effect of the course upon the students.

In certain quarters the worst thing that one can say about a course is that it is a survey course. It is true that this term has come to have an implication which is somewhat misleading and derogatory. It implies a hurried observation of a few disconnected aspects of a large subject so superficial that it only serves to afford the student an impressive vocabulary which the gullible youth accepts as a substitute for solid understanding. It would be idle to assert that such courses do not exist. The courses to which I am referring, however, serve three important functions: orientation, coordination, and thorough preparation for future scholarly work. The critics of this kind of course focus their criticism on the first of these characteristics, forgetting the important aspects of the second and third.

The survey course at its worst may serve the purpose of orientation, at least to a certain extent. It certainly brings to the attention of the student the existence of a wide field and acquaints him with the kind of result that has been acquired by its cultivation. The criticism of such a method of presentation is that it does not go deeply and thoroughly enough to bring satisfaction or even stimulation to the scholarly appetite. It is merely a look around, as its name indicates. With such a superficial outcome as the main result of our work, we would not be satisfied. Unless a course which freshmen are asked to take provided more than a sur-
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ve, or look around, we would never have been interested in it.

To assume, however, that the incoming freshman is settled in his intellectual interests and knows where to place major emphasis during his collegiate years is certainly an assumption contrary to fact. Survey and orientation are necessary, if the College is to fulfill its responsibility to students. But more than a survey is essential. Even though much chronological ground may be involved in a course in the historical or literary background of our cultural progress during the past centuries, it does not necessarily follow that the attention to ideas in such a course is more diffuse than in one narrowly confined within the span of a few years. The point is that through some medium or another the College desires to induct the students as early in their career as possible into the intellectual life. We have learned by our experience of the past fifteen years that a broad course in the social studies, carefully coordinated, enjoying the loyal support of all of the appropriate departments, possesses the virtues which the survey or orientation course at its best is supposed to have, but what is much more important, gives the student a sound and broad and vital basis on which to build his further scholarly work. It has been said over and over again that the course in Contemporary Civilization as presented in Columbia College is perhaps the most potent intellectual stimulant and the most effective basis for advanced study that we have ever been able to provide.

The Faculty of Action January 7, 1937 consisted of three parts, all of which point in the same direction: The requirement for the degree in foreign language is expressed in terms of proficiency rather than a course requirement. The requirement in English composition is also expressed in terms of proficiency, is spread over the freshman and sophomore years, and is related to the various subject matter departments. A two-year course in humanities is prescribed for freshmen and sophomores. In all three enterprises the fundamental note is one of cooperation of the various departments in bringing about an educational result in an intelligent manner.

In the foreign languages it was decided to express the
minimal requirement for the Bachelor of Arts degree in terms of a test of accomplishment in reading the language rather than in terms of passing certain courses. In order that accomplishment in the various languages, both ancient and modern, may be maintained at a somewhat uniform level, the selection of the reading test and the general responsibility for the operation of this requirement are placed in the hands of a committee of five, appointed by the Committee on Instruction and responsible to them. A majority of this operating committee is taken from the language departments. The significance of this step is twofold. In the first place, departmental cooperation in the consideration of their common problem is secured, and in the second place the minimal requirement for the degree is expressed in terms of accomplishment without concern or reference to the precise method by which the student prepares himself for the reading test. There are no less than three ways in which this can be done. One way is that he shall be able to read the language with the required degree of proficiency. It may be added that there is nothing unique in this procedure which has been in operation in several colleges for many years. We do hope, however, that we shall be able to make some contribution to the problem by either finding or preparing tests that will be comparable, thus affording some uniformity in the requirement from year to year.

The second action of the Faculty had to do with the requirement for the degree in English composition. There again the requirement is expressed in terms of writing a paper, but in terms of demonstrating a proficiency. In the past the responsibility for practice in the writing of English has resided entirely in the Department of English. Attempts to spread this responsibility have been made, but they have for the most part remained in the domain of things hoped for. The students have normally written on topics suggested by the instructors in English, often without reference to the competency or the interest of the student in other fields than that subject. Under the new regulation, the student will be required to write several themes, the subjects of which may
be taken from any field of his curriculum, or any other field, for that matter. For example, if a student is interested in the voyage of the "Beagle," or the cycle of sunspots, or the controversy between Newton and Leibnitz, he is encouraged to prepare his little essay on any one of these subjects, to present it to the instructor of zoology or physics or mathematics who will read it for content and who will then send it to the Department of English for reading for form. This procedure will certainly bring to the consciousness of the students the important fact that clear and cogent writing is of broader significance than the work of any one department.

The proposed course in humanities, however, has received more attention, and is undoubtedly a more massive project than either of the two just mentioned. The departments of the ancient and modern foreign languages, English, fine arts, and music will collaborate under the Committee on Instruction, in much the same way as the departments in the social studies have for many years been collaborating, in the offering of a two-year course normally prescribed for freshmen and sophomores. The operation of the course will be carried on by a group, or committee, selected from those who give instruction in the course, after the same general plan as that found so effective in the course in Contemporary Civilization. The subject matter of the first year of the course will be readings in, not merely about, the greatest masterpieces of literature. Of course these readings will necessarily be in translation when the original is in a foreign language. It is assumed that the first third, or perhaps more, of the first year will be devoted to the literature of Greece and Rome. It is fortunate that many of the teachers for the course, men all of whom are now on our staff, read this literature in the original, so that it will be possible to compensate as much as is humanly possible for the lack of knowledge of the classics among the students themselves. It is felt that a course of this kind, emphasizing as it does the literature which has through the ages meant the most to mankind, will serve as a basis not only for further attention to these fields in the upper College, but will carry over its values to the years following graduation.
It proved impossible to include in the portion of the course especially devoted to the arts of poetry, drama, and literature, which can best be approached in a somewhat chronological order, the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music, particularly the latter. Hence, the second year of the course will be devoted to a two-hour-a-week presentation of these arts, which proved to correlate with each other more effectively than any of them could join up with literature. This course will not be presented in its final form until the year 1938–39. A committee under the chairmanship of Professor Horatio Smith is working on the details of the entire sequence, the first year of which is being elaborated by a subcommittee under the chairmanship of Professor Irwin Ed- man. It is anticipated that a tentative syllabus will be ready sometime during the Spring Session.

From the point of view of administration, the recent action of the Faculty is no less significant than is its educational importance. It now appears that almost the entire freshman year, and a good share of the work of the sophomore year, are administratively under the Committee on Instruction, instead of under the various departments. The courses of study are devoted to fields of intellectual interest rather than limited by artificial and relatively narrow departmental boundaries. It is not a little gratifying that the Faculty of Columbia College, which, for budgetary reasons and to a considerable extent for educational reasons, is divided into the usual departmental segments should sink their special interests completely and vote unanimously for an enterprise which is devoted to an attack upon our problems with the broadest possible front.