

COMPLEX SOCIETY  
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# Columbia Moves Away From the Unified Courses It Pioneered

By FRED M. HECHINGER

Since the early Nineteen Twenties, general education in college has been considered the all-American road to the all-around man. Different colleges have mapped out that road in different fashion, but all had in common the aim to pull together the scattered areas of knowledge and to try to make Western civilization emerge as a comprehensible idea. Last week, Columbia College publicly uttered some doubt, not about the ideal of such comprehensive understanding of today's world, but about the feasibility of arriving at this understanding by way of a comprehensive course.

Dean John G. Palfrey, of the college, said that the hitherto compulsory sophomore course, Contemporary Civilization B (CCB), would be "suspended" for three years as a requirement. Students may still take the course, but merely as one alternative among many others.

## Several Disciplines

The "suspended" course was an interdepartmental one, involving teachers of several disciplines. It followed on the heels of a compulsory freshman course, CCA, which is taught mainly by historians and philosophers. It will continue to be required and has been declared successful by the same faculty committee which expressed doubts about the second-year course.

The Columbia story will be watched by the academic world. Columbia pioneered in the general education field by introducing CCA in 1919 and CCB in 1929. Its review of the purposes of this approach, a book called "A College Program in Action," published in 1937, was considered a cornerstone of the general education movement, perhaps the most significant one, at least until Harvard, in 1945, published the book, "General Education in a Free Society." The Harvard study then became the handbook of the movement.

Harvard's approach was somewhat different. It mapped

out several academic areas—the social sciences, the humanities and the natural sciences—from which freshmen were required to build their course of study. Thus, the burden of synthesis was placed on the student. In some form, the Columbia and Harvard ideas of general education, or a mixture of the two, symbolized the movement.

The movement was a true revolution. It was the reaction to the earlier, extreme elective system, itself associated originally with Harvard, descended from the German universities and then considered a triumph of academic freedom. But laissez faire led to an excessive specialization.

The general or liberal education movement was an attempt

to pick up the pieces and re-create the Renaissance Man during the undergraduate years.

As time went on new ideas developed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, as chancellor of the University of Chicago in the early Thirties, chose the road of the "great ideas" of Western civilization and "The Hundred Great Books."

In 1937, under the leadership of Stringfellow Barr, St. John's College at Annapolis, Md., introduced an all-college program with the Great Books at its heart.

## Wide Influence

Dartmouth inaugurated its Great Issues Course in 1947, and a year later Amherst made a key requirement of "Problems of American Democracy."

Columbia's influence was unmistakable. CC materials and techniques have been borrowed by about 200 colleges, among them the country's most influential institutions.

This adds significance to the news that Columbia has aired doubts and difficulties which have been discussed on many campuses. Those doubts are:

(1) While most original interdepartmental courses, including CCA, dealt with the classical unity of the Western tradition, the attempt to cope with the truly contemporary scene in a similarly sweeping fashion runs aground on the lack of contemporary unity.

CCB encompassed the world since 1914. While CCA could rely on mutual understanding among the historians and philosophers, CCB failed to reckon with the growth in importance of the sociologists, anthropologists, scientists and economists. There is less agreement among them about contemporary problems. They are increasingly divided from each other by the jargon, training and thought of their specialized disciplines.

(2) The "unity" of the Western tradition has been seriously thrown off balance by the new importance of non-Western cultures.

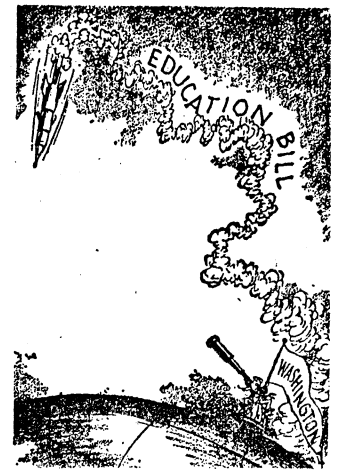
(3) Experienced, senior faculty members often refused to teach the interdepartmental courses. This left this difficult task to young instructors, and even graduate assistants in some institutions.

## Bright Students

In addition, the improvement of high-school teaching in recent years brings to the colleges many students too sophisticated not to spot the unseasoned instructor pretending to cope with the controversies of a perplexing world.

In an essay on "The American University and Changing Philosophies of Education," (in the recent book, "Issues in University Education," edited by Columbia's Charles Frankel) Harvard's Prof. Robert Ulich underlined some of the dangers of renewed fragmentation. "The history of higher education," Professor Ulich wrote, "shows that its institutions have alienated themselves from the spirit of their periods, or have decayed into glorified trade schools, whenever they have not seen the necessity of a productive interaction between scholarship and human culture."

Columbia's faculty committee, headed by Prof. David B. Truman, was conscious of that danger. This is why it has retained the basic Contemporary Civilization course. This may also be why, by "suspending" the less harmonious second year, it appears to ask the sociologists, anthropologists and economists to find the key to a new academic synthesis.



Justus in The Minneapolis Star  
"...four, three, two, one...!"