

Core Syllabus Preserved Despite Recent Criticism

BY DENNIS PAUL

Recent trends in the required curricula of American private universities point toward greater incorporation of multiculturalism in undergraduate studies. Despite calls from some Columbia College students and faculty members for such adjustments in Columbia's Core Curriculum the general consensus among Columbia professors is that multiculturalism can be addressed within the confines of works traditionally used in the Core. No major revisions of Core courses will occur in the near future.

Other universities, like Stanford and Harvard, have overhauled their required curricula and replaced many of the works of "dead white European males" by those written by female, minority or non-Western authors. While generally adhering to its more traditional curriculum, Columbia has added two or three authors of minority or female descent, at the instructor's discretion, instead of through formal restructuring of the required syllabus.

In an attempt to alleviate pressure for the reform of Contemporary Civilization (CC) and Masterpieces of European Literature and Philosophy Literature Humanities (Lit Hum), the Core Curriculum staff developed a system to allow for syllabus adjustments. Every two years, a committee of five or six professors randomly selected from the CC or Lit Hum staff present a new syllabus to the entire staff of CC or Lit Hum instructors, who then vote to adopt the syllabus for

use in the next two school years.

However, this mode of implementation has rarely been employed as a vehicle for actually changing Lit Hum. Lit Hum syllabi dating back to 1937 show only minor differences from the syllabus in use today. "There have been few changes up to the present, and the changes which have been made were done to allocate more time

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Despite Criticism Core Remains Largely Unchanged

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for individual works rather than actually add new works," said Professor Eileen Gillyoly, Chairman of the Humanities Review Committee.

Rather than altering syllabi, many professors attempt to incorporate non-Western cultures within the traditional boundaries of the Lit Hum syllabus. Recently, instructors have actively discussed contemporary issues of class and gender within the themes of the selected works, in an attempt to promote new and more relevant discussions of age-old literature.

"Because so many young people are teaching the Core now, there is a sense of modernity to the teaching style," said James Mirolo, Professor of English Composition and Literature. "Recently, teachers seem to have agreed that modern issues of gender and class can be addressed in Lit Hum. If we want a more multicultural course that requires some new thinking and something pedagogically viable—no one has presented me with a model reading list yet."

Professor of History Marc Van de Mierop, an instructor of Core classes for four years, agrees that

the subject of change within the Core is a difficult one. "At present, it appears that there will be no major changes in the Core. If there are to be changes, they should be genuine and not just token."

In contrast, Gillyoly describes CC as an organic course, constantly adjusting to contemporary issues. CC readings have changed drastically since 1919. Only John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* remains from the original reading list. Contemporary matters addressed, however, are not necessarily multicultural, but often pertain to general trends of thought. "CC is meant to change. It will stay alive as long as it does change. As soon as it simply becomes a great book course, it loses its purpose. This year we are conducting a timid experiment by including readings on imperialism and nationalism on the syllabus," said Mark von Hagen, Professor of History.

Students appear to be divided on the issue of whether or not to change Lit Hum and CC. "I feel Lit Hum and CC provide students with an excellent background in the classics, which is extremely valuable to an undergraduate education," said B. Teal (CC'95).

Catherine Van Deusen (CC'93) stated that changes could be beneficial, particularly if they included adding non-Western works and authors of diverse backgrounds. "CC and Lit Hum are supposed to teach people to think but not necessarily propagate the ideas they study."

"By not incorporating books of diverse cultures in CC and Lit Hum, we are not able to learn of their significance and influence on other people around the world," said Jill Gottesman (CC'93). "Some revisions should be made so as to provide different perspectives and give proper attention to works of non-western descent."

CC, first offered in 1919, emphasizes works on political and social philosophy, exposing students to authors such as Plato, Hobbes, Hume and Rousseau. Added in 1937 to supplement CC, Lit Hum focuses on literary and historical works, including works written by Homer, Sophocles, Cervantes, and Goethe. Both courses examine literature that have provided the foundations for Western thought, from ancient Greece through the twentieth

century.

To provide for more diverse studies, Columbia established the Extended Core, otherwise known as the Major Cultures requirement, in 1988. In order to fulfill the Extended Core requirement, students must take two courses dealing specifically with non-Western cultures or minority, women, and homosexual issues. The Committee on the Core Curriculum hoped that the Extended Core, in conjunction with

CC and Lit Hum, would provide students with a well-rounded education of both Western and non-Western culture without sacrificing the importance of either.

"There is much more enthusiasm in teaching the Core now than there was five years ago [when disagreement among instructors over the need for revamping the Core was at its peak]," said Professor Mirolo. "I think it has now reached the point where it's the best of its kind."