

Desiderata for the core

Reflections of a College alumnus turned university president.

by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg '59

As citizens of a skeptical culture, we tend to ask about any past college curriculum: What difference did it make? When the curriculum is the one my classmates and I experienced at Columbia College in the 1950's, the answer is simple. That curriculum made an enormous lifelong difference to those exposed to it.

Back then, high schools had not yet gotten around to anticipating much of what colleges were trying to achieve. Most of the freshmen who arrived at Columbia in 1955 were very clever but very rough diamonds; many were the first members of their families to attend college. How rough we were, the Humanities faculty quickly made clear. They told us to go home for the weekend and read *The Iliad*, in the Richmond Lattimore translation.

There were all kinds of lessons we learned from that experience. First there was the lesson in humility. Sure, we might have thought of ourselves as smart guys who had actually made it to Columbia while so many of our high school classmates were condemned to lesser places out in the boondocks. But when you reached page 300 at eleven o'clock on a Sunday night, with a Humanities quiz looming on the next morning, and you still couldn't figure out what it meant when eyeballs were *again* popped out of skulls by a deftly aimed spear, why, humility was the natural result!

Our successors in the 1960's drew a different lesson. When young people began to re-edit the United States of America, starting with Grayson Kirk and Low Library, we gathered that it was no longer the role of a mere professor to tell his or her students what they ought to learn. The professor was just one more learner—blessed, for some reason or other, with a salary. So much for being told to read the entire *Iliad* on a weekend. As for the Western tradition, well, in reality, it was only one of several traditions, including those of India, China, and Japan. It was also a bastion of racism and sexism, and largely responsible for the Vietnam War.

No sooner had the curricular revisions of the 1960's been put into place, and the very idea of requirements put under permanent suspicion, than the oil crisis of 1973 marked the beginning of an altogether new pedagogical era, in which Peter Drucker was obviously a lot more relevant than Homer, Plato and the Bible com-

bined. Students, when asked to learn something that clearly didn't relate to Management, Marketing and Money, would now quite commonly ask: "What do I have to know that for?"

The new perspective that we acquired in the 60's and 70's has made the freshman curriculum look a lot less inevitable, and has made certain flaws seem more significant. Chief among these is the fact that so many of the works are read in translation. I'm assured by my colleagues, for example, that the *Iliad* in Greek doesn't sound too much like the Lattimore translation or even the more recent Fitzgerald translation—that in the original, you can actually hear the violent anger, the verbal torpedoes, that Achilles launches toward Agamemnon in Book One. The point of the *Iliad*—that heroism, however magnificent, needs to be curbed if people are to live together, reasonably peacefully, in cities—jumps up a lot more clearly in the original.

Today, virtually every self-respecting college in the United States has reinstated a core curriculum of some kind in order to restore some basic, shared foundation to the undergraduate experience. Arguments today center not on the need for such a curriculum, but on what it ought to include.

What more and more critics are loudly stat-



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ing is that the free-for-all curricula of the 60's, when they met the new business orientation of the 70's and early 80's, turned out a generation of college graduates whose brainpower is riddled with gaps and whose view of reality has mainly been shaped by the six o'clock news on TV. Moreover, a growing number of the available college-level instructors are themselves products of those 60's and 70's curricula. Those who opted for academic careers often went on to become authorities on some limited area of scholarship that has not prepared them to play a broad or ambitious role in the classroom.

I have no easy answer on the subject. All I can emphasize are a couple of major requirements—desiderata, as they are sometimes called—that any such curriculum must meet.

It must include a direct exposure to the most original materials possible, even if that exposure has to take a strictly introductory form. Those materials should include works of literature taught in such a way as to enable the student to understand why they were created to begin with and why they have survived against so much competition. They should include works of art—at least some in original rather than slide-projected form—that give powerful insight into the cultures that created them. They should include carefully chosen

anthropological and archaeological materials that communicate the very concept of "another culture"—that break once and for all the student's assumption, which is in some ways also so very American, that everybody who has ever lived was more or less like us in thought pattern, motivation, sense of time and space, and behavior.

To make such a curriculum truly viable, we may need a new kind of college teacher. How to prepare such a new generation of teachers is itself, therefore, a major challenge that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

I offer the following ray of hope. As American high schools offer more and more courses that anticipate the subject matter of the college curriculum, they also tend to relieve us of the most oppressive feeling generated back in the 1950's: the feeling that the kids don't know anything. From high school and our world of information overload, the kids know a lot—quite possibly too much. Our duty is to help them begin to make sense out of the chaos in their heads. Without that kind of help, they may go through life in a media trance whose hallmark is the notion that there is no reality and that the world is created anew every single morning.

Mortimer Adler (continued from page 36)

Allan Bloom's teaching method and the method that Hutchins and I had adopted—and shared with Erskine and Van Doren at Columbia College, and Barr and Buchanan at St. John's College—lies in the distinction between a doctrinal and dialectical approach. The doctrinal method attempts to read as much truth as possible (and no errors) into the work of a particular author, usually by devising a special interpretation or discovering that special secret of an author's intentions. This method may have some merit in the graduate school where students aim to acquire narrowly specialized scholarship. But it is the very opposite of the right method for conducting great books seminars in schools and colleges where the aim is learning to think.

When in the late 1940's Leo Strauss came to the University of Chicago, President Hutchins suggested that I get to know him. We met several times and discussed our reading of Plato and Aristotle. I soon learned that Strauss read these great authors as if they were devoid of any serious errors. I also learned that for Strauss the radical changes in our social and political institutions since antiquity had no bearing on the likelihood that Aristotle made grave errors about natural slavery and about the natural inferiority of women. In his view, these were not errors. After a very few conver-

sations, I told Hutchins that I found talking to Strauss about philosophical books and problems thoroughly unprofitable from the point of view of leading great books seminars in the college.

The word "disciple" stresses the differences between the doctrinal and the dialectical methods. Leo Strauss was pre-eminently the kind of doctrinal teacher who made disciples out of his students. Doctrinal teaching enables the disciples to learn what the master thinks. Dialectical teaching enables students to think for themselves. I would go further and say that the doctrinal method *indoctrinates* and only the dialectical method *teaches*.

The great books, read and discussed with an eye for the basic truths and the equally basic errors to be found in them, should be a part of anyone's general, liberal, and humanistic education. That should begin with what might be called "junior great books" in the early grades, continue throughout basic schooling with more and more difficult books, and be pursued on an even higher level in college. It would still be everyone's obligation to read many of them again in the course of adult learning, for the greatest among them are inexhaustibly re-readable for pleasure and profit.

A genuine great books program does not aim

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