



JOE PINEIRO

# Other voices, other cultures

*A progress report on Columbia College's mandate to extend the core curriculum.*

by Professor J. W. Smit

What is a "major culture"? Is Latin American culture Western or non-Western? Is Islamic Africa part of Middle Eastern or of African culture?

Although these are not the central questions of our time, they do give the flavor of the ongoing discussion the College faculty is having as it begins a larger task: extending Columbia's core curriculum to include other major civilizations and contemporary issues.

The College's required core—which traces its origins to 1919—has increasingly been cited as a model of curricular excellence. The content has certainly changed from what older alumni may remember, but the courses are still at the heart of the undergraduate curriculum: We try to provide a common experience to students, to make them reflect on where they came from, to speculate on where they may be going, to create an environment of small discussion courses where they can grow to become articulate, responsible, and critical individuals.

In 1988, at a time when Stanford students were marching against their Western civ course, College Dean Robert E. Pollack '61 established a faculty commission to review the core curriculum. The commission, chaired by Professor Wm. Theodore de Bary '41, produced a hefty document: It found that the traditional courses were healthy and that the haphazard inclusion of the kind of material critics asked for—works from non-Western cultures or by minority or female writers—would undermine the coherence and integrity of the course. At the same time the commission acknowledged that the present core curriculum, however central to our educational aims, indeed failed to address a host of new realities like the encounters with non-Western cultures in and outside of America, or the growing ethnic, racial and gender consciousness that is having enormous social, economic and political consequences.

The de Bary Commission therefore proposed, and the College faculty accepted, a new two-semester requirement consisting of two courses in major non-Western cultures. Students could opt to substitute for one of those semesters a course in what provisionally was named "Contemporary Issues." The commission also proposed that a set of courses along these lines should be developed on the model of the old core courses: small discussion classes of 25 to 30 students.

The College had made a historic choice. It had rejected the idea of making merely token changes in the old core. Instead, the faculty recognized the need to give fuller attention to those new areas and problems, and it had taken the lead in curriculum reform for decades to come.

But few realized the enormity of the task they had taken on. A Standing Committee on the Core Curriculum was

formed to find the concrete forms for the general—all too general—directions that had been given. Meanwhile, a new "major cultures" requirement was approved by the faculty before any special new courses had been created. For the time being, the new standing committee could not do much more than cull from the bulletin a list of existing courses that could satisfy the requirement. Courses in Oriental studies, anthropology, and history were soon filled to overflow.

While we can be grateful that the Extended Core already exists (with a name that is an unfortunate contradiction in terms), we must also admit that it remains more of a Harvard-style distribution requirement; our mandate remains unfulfilled.

The standing committee has begun its real work courageously enough. Even the task of designating suitable courses for the interim period has led to fascinating and heated debates: Would courses in allegedly dead cultures, for example, in Mesopotamian art or Aztec architecture, give students the kind of intellectual experience that would confront them with a living reality of cultural diversity, of different ways of thinking, feeling, acting?

If these arguments came up in the merely preliminary steps of rating existing courses for provisional approval, we may wonder what mayhem will break loose when the committee begins to build a true program requiring some 35 new course sections per semester—a logistically and financially staggering task.

Where are all these courses going to come from? The departments most heavily involved will be mostly small ones, already stretching to keep their courses staffed. If anything has become clear, it is that this new program cannot be done cheaply, and that is a bitter conclusion in a time of budget deficits.

So our strategy must be practical, not grandiose. As a head start, we are fortunate to have two excellent Columbia programs of more than 40 years' standing: Oriental Humanities and Oriental Civilizations, taught like Humanities and C.C. in small sections. We can also try to adapt existing courses for double duty as departmental and Extended Core courses. And we can try to design new courses in African, Latin American and other civilizations, with each course subdivided into smaller sections; the same organization should exist for some courses in the "Contemporary Issues" category.

It is important to keep the number of courses small: a mere

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## Jack is back

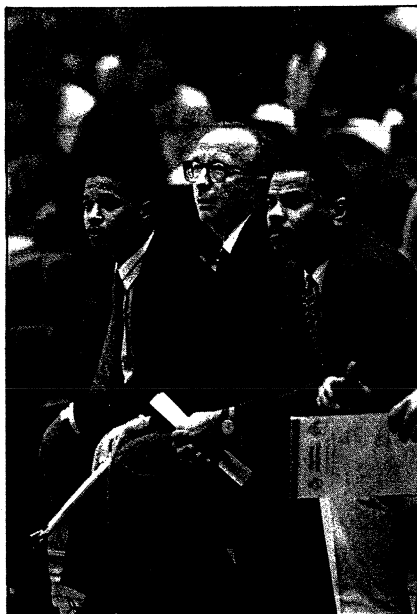
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say. "Why don't we have a slow-run league, like slow-pitch softball? We could all get on the phone and find out which other schools would like to play in the slow-run league. We could make up schedules and have games and tournaments and things like that."

Although Columbia started the season slowly, there were early signs that Rohan's teachings were having an effect, and the team's dramatic comeback and overtime victory over Dartmouth in the Ivy opener gave players and fans a taste for miracles.

During his 16-year absence from basketball coaching, Rohan had (and still has) a tenured faculty appointment, a pleasant job as a department head, substantial exposure as a color commentator and *New York Times* writer—he writes more gracefully than most of the New York press. He is a decent, civilized, highly principled human being. He is certainly the only Division I coach in the country who can quote P. G. Wodehouse and identify Wilfrid Sheed. He has the energy and the charm to run a recruiting operation, but, at 58, he knows what it can take out of him in more than a physical sense. Sometimes, he says, you feel "like the Avon lady."

When it was announced that Rohan was coming back, the newspapers were filled with testimonials from coaches and his former players. But there were



NICK ROMANENKO

Coach Rohan (center) during an early season game, flanked by assistants Ron Holt '90 (left) and Kirk Saulny.

other questions and comments. Why is he doing it? He has nothing left to prove. "He's crazy," remarked Indiana's Bobby Knight:

One of the reasons Rohan gave was that coaching basketball is fun. But it is also likely that Jack Rohan rises before dawn to explain the nuances of the clock offense for the same reason that Edward Taylor illuminates Milton's poetry and Allan Blaer makes sense of the Schrödinger wave equation. They teach what they love. That is what they do. □

## The Extended Core

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shopping list of eligible courses would destroy the coherence of the core curriculum. Only when we can get the faculty to meet regularly, to discuss syllabi and to keep the clusters of sections on similar paths, can we hope for continuity and coherence. I also believe we must commit ourselves to a timetable to move from a cafeteria sort of major cultures requirement to a more coherent structure of courses that we can require because their necessity has been made clear.

We have made some progress. A cluster of specially designed courses in Contemporary Issues was started in the fall semester; a faculty seminar has started work on a cluster of courses on

African cultures. Funds are needed not only for expansion of faculty, but for seminars to train core teachers. We should create and fund a corps of post-doctoral teaching fellows on the model of our present Mellon Fellows in the Humanities.

Columbia's definition of educational leadership has always included curricular innovation and quality. For that purpose, we must convince alumni and other donors of the centrality of our mission: that the development of an Extended Core has again put Columbia College in the forefront of curricular reform in the 90's and beyond, in an experiment that is absolutely necessary to maintain relevance as well as intellectual integrity in the relations between higher education and American society. □

## Letters

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Islamic tradition, I find books of the Old Testament indispensable reference points—and in the Islamic case, without any necessary relation to the New Testament or Christian tradition.

It is certainly true (as Peter Strachan implied) that important works of the ancient Mediterranean world, Semitic religions, and Middle Eastern civilizations are shared inheritances of both East and West and should not be identified with one tradition alone. A larger number of these works should be incorporated in Humanities courses more adequately representative of both West and East than what we have now. Certainly more could be done with these in our new Extended Core. But altogether the task is one for a lifetime of continued humanistic learning on successive levels of education. It cannot all be squeezed into one or two lower college courses.

Wm. Theodore de Bary '41  
Special Service Professor  
Kent Hall

### Inspired by de Bary

Each time my *Columbia College Today* arrives, I dive into it with great enthusiasm and mentally promise to write to you to actually tell you how much I enjoy your publication.

After rereading the article by Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Asian Classics and the Humanities," I decided the time had come for my note to you. What a great man. What a great college. What a great publication.

Thank you for your pursuit of excellence.

Maryann Ernst-Barton  
Buffalo, N.Y.

### Integrity to the wind

As a College graduate and daughter of a striking Eastern Airlines machinist, I was sickened to read CCT's article on Columbia's recent John Jay Award to Frank Lorenzo [Talk of the Alumni, Fall 1990].

Most disturbing was a quote from the award ceremony itself describing Mr. Lorenzo as one who had "done things other managers dream of but dare not try."

Since when is bankrupting airlines and busting unions for personal profit