

(Jan/Feb 79)

Special Dean's Day Section:

60th Anniversary of Columbia's General Education Program

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# The Core of the Core:

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After sixty years, Contemporary Civilization still presents its challenges—to students, faculty and alumni.

by Professor J.W. Smit  
Chairman of C.C.

On March 24, Columbia College will celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of its General Education program in conjunction with Dean's Day. In good (or bad) academic tradition, the celebration will consist of lectures and panel discussions and, of course, for the faculty, the usual dinner which will quite probably underscore the superiority of spiritual food.

A good deal of the discussion will center around the Contemporary Civilization course which is, after all, where it all began, and which still defines much of the College's core program. Since the guiding principle of CC is the superiority of critique over celebration, the special panel discussion devoted to CC on Dean's Day is specially designed to elicit criticism: the discussion will open with statements by two members of the teaching staff and one student, followed by the response of two distinguished guests and the reactions from the audience, students, faculty, and, we hope, many alumni.

The editor of *Columbia College Today* has anticipated this critical festivity by inviting a piece about CC by a student. Mr. Lessoff must be a mild mannered man, however, or already far enough removed from the traumas of CC to afford an ironic smile rather than a pained groan. Other students (and alumni?) would have accepted the editor's invitation with more malicious glee. Yet it is also true—and we should never forget it—that many of the most critical students confess to feeling an emptiness as soon as they have completed the requirement. The most consistent thing about CC is that throughout its history, it has always inspired a love-hate emotion in its victims, students and teachers alike. For both groups, CC is an impossible task and a life necessity at the same time. Taking or teaching CC means living a paradox—and as such it provides one with a nice paradigm of life in general. It also makes for a controversial course.

Before our discussion becomes all too existential, let us return to more basic concerns: the problems of CC today, which,

I hope, will form the substance of the panel discussions at Dean's Day. The staff, I am sure, would hope that the panel will provide a sounding board for the many hot debates fought out during the staff lunches. The announced theme of the "symposium," "How contemporary is Contemporary Civilization?" covers some, but certainly not all of the topics under debate, although it points to some very basic ones. In its double entendre this title asks: "How important is the study of the historical roots of our civilization?" as well as: "How well does a course dealing with texts from Plato through Freud, omitting most of the 20th century, serve the understanding of a civilization which has gotten further and further removed from its parochial European origins?"

But there are other problems that exercise us and which we hope to see taken on in public. We know, for example, that the creation of CC sixty years ago originated in a concern with the world situation after World War I, and expressed (from our vantage point) the somewhat naive belief in the world-saving potential of normative education. The ambiguities of liberal education—its contradictory claims of impartiality and normative validity—were not as sharply seen then as they are now. But, although the emphasis falls now more strongly on CC as a learning process of a common scholarly and civic language in a "neutral" way, it remains in its essence a normative course. It is a mandatory experience of powerful texts, selected authoritatively by the teachers, taught as they see fit. There is a built-in check on what one could call "brainwashing" in the quality of the texts, which do not allow simplistic interpretation. But the charge is heard nevertheless and makes the teachers less than comfortable about the legitimacy of the enterprise, as it should. There are other substantial questions. Not everybody likes the way CC nowadays is approaching the model of Humanities in the emphasis on teaching great texts. It is a legitimate point of view that perhaps the concrete history of crucial institutional changes should determine more strongly the organization of the course.

Looking over what I have written so far, it occurs to me that again the weighty problems of educational goals have taken first

place. Obviously, more practical matters—like the organization of the courses, harmonization of readings, exams, grades and requirements—take up much of our time. And to go from the mundane to the outright materialistic: one should point to the financial constraints, preventing a program from realizing its fullest potential. Let me formulate some of the issues in the form of questions. First, if the emphasis on discussion classes in general education is what distinguishes the College from its competitors—and it does and should—is it then educationally responsible to do this in sections of no less than 25 students as we have to do now? The answer is no. The time is ripe for fund raising aimed at improving the student-teacher ratio in CC and Humanities. Secondly, if the preceptors are as crucial to the success of our enterprise as is generally maintained, should they not be paid a living wage? The answer in this case—and who will contradict it—is yes. Again, the funds seem not available. Thirdly, if preparing one's classes well is pivotal to the quality of teaching, then shouldn't there be a special work-library for the teachers of CC and Humanities, where they have the necessary primary and secondary literature at hand? Answer again: yes. Objection again: lack of funds.

When writing for alumni it is always gratifying to be able to point to areas of need in which one can really believe. On behalf of the staff and students of CC, I invite you to join us in our discussions on March 24, with your experience and College-honed intelligence. Somewhat bashfully we also point out that more material help will fortify a program which is alive, but can be made a lot stronger with your help.

slayer +  
mike -  
medicine;  
hard going  
down but  
feel better  
after

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