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“Why We Need a Core Curriculum for College Students”

Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities

Editors' Preview: *Where once virtually all schools taught an accepted canon of great Western works, many components of the traditional humanities curriculum are being discarded in favor of allegedly neglected minority authors, texts and views. Are we moving in the direction of healthy diversity, pluralism and broadened perspective, or are we justifying an ideological assault on Western culture? Moreover, are we abandoning the very notion of a core curriculum since all courses of study and all subjects are increasingly being treated as equally valid?*

NEH Chairman Lynne V. Cheney first addressed these questions in her widely remarked 1988 report on the uncertain fate of the humanities on the college campus. This month, *Imprimis* features an edited excerpt from her latest report, 50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students, which she discussed at Hillsdale last fall.

Reporting about curricula, Professor Rudolph once observed, is hardly the same as writing about the winning of the West or the collapse of the Old South. The word curriculum is, for many, almost pure denotation, almost pristine in the way it refuses to call up images that compel interest. It is a dull word, dry and dusty, and yet it goes to the heart of formal learning. It is through the curriculum that college and university faculties establish a design for education. It is through the curriculum that they communicate what it is an educated person should know.



While the matter of what should be taught and learned is hardly one on which we should expect easy agreement, the confusion about it on many campuses has seemed extraordinary in recent years. Entering students often find few requirements in place and a plethora of offerings. There are hundreds of courses to choose from, a multitude of ways to combine them to earn a bachelor's degree, and a minimum of direction. In the absence of an ordered plan of study, some undergraduates manage to put together coherent and substantive programs, but others move through college years with little rationale. All too often, as *Humanities in America*, a 1988 report from the National Endowment for the Humanities, noted, it is “luck or accident or uninformed intuition that determines what students do and do not learn.”

The Endowment's report was by no means the first to make such observations. Indeed, throughout the 1980s there has been growing

concern about the fragmented state of curricula. In reports, books, and conferences, educators have talked about the need for greater structure and coherence—particularly in the area of college study known as “general education.” It is here, outside the major, where students can gain insights into areas of human thought that are not their specialties. In general education, as the Harvard “Redbook,” a classic study of curriculum, noted, the primary focus can be on the student's life “as a responsible human being and citizen.”

But recognition of the importance of reforming general education has far outpaced actual reform. A recent survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities showed that in 1988-89 general education requirements were still so loosely structured that it was possible to graduate from:

- 78 percent of the nation's colleges and universities without ever taking a course in the history of Western civilization;
- 38 percent without taking any course in history at all;
- 45 percent without taking a course in American or English literature;
- 77 percent without studying a foreign language;
- 41 percent without studying mathematics;
- 33 percent without studying natural and physical sciences

Explanations abound for the slow pace of reform. A contributing factor may well be the highly general nature of national discussions. Wise commentaries set forth important aims for undergraduate education, affirming, for example, that students should learn about science and history, understand institutions and symbols, and be able to think critically. But exactly how these ends might be accom-

plished has been a subject of less attention—and for understandable reasons.

There are, first of all, many possible ways to organize a curriculum to achieve agreed-upon goals. Indeed, the variety of options is part of the intellectual challenge of reorganizing undergraduate study. Even more important is the diversity of American colleges and universities. Student bodies and faculties differ, as do resources and missions. As Edwin J. Delattre notes in *Education and the Public Trust*, each institution must ask itself: "What should be the curriculum here, in this school, college, university? Why should we and our students study this curriculum?"

Nevertheless, different institutions can learn from one another, can profit by seeing how other colleges and universities have solved problems with which they are wrestling. Curriculum reform that proceeds in awareness of what is happening elsewhere is likely to move at a faster pace.

The NEH report, *50 Hours*, is a way of informing colleges engaged in curricular reform about how other schools are managing the task. Its aim is to be specific; its central device for organizing details is an imagined core of studies—fifty semester hours—that would encourage coherent and substantive learning in essential areas of knowledge.

So far as I know, this particular core curriculum does not exist anywhere. Parts of it can be found at different colleges and universities; so can alternatives to both the parts and the whole. Many alternatives are described in this report in order to call attention to the variety of ways in which substantive and coherent learning can be achieved.

Because it is not the proper role of government to determine a nationwide curriculum, it needs to be emphasized that *50 Hours* is not offered as a single prototype. Instead, it is a way of providing information about vari-

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ous models to individual faculties that must decide the undergraduate course of study. *50 Hours* is intended as a resource for the many dedicated and thoughtful men and women across the country who are working to improve undergraduate education. It is meant to support them by placing their individual efforts into a larger context of national questions and concerns.

Administrators, as well as faculty members, often initiate discussions about reform; and this report is also intended for them. Governing boards, too, sometimes encourage reform: In 1986 the Louisiana Board of Regents mandated general education requirements for state colleges and universities in order to ensure study of essential areas of knowledge; in 1989 the Massachusetts Board of Regents called on that state's public colleges and universities to revise general education with the aim of developing in students a broad range of abilities and knowledge.

Why is a core important?

A 1989 survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and conducted by the Gallup Organization showed 25 percent of the nation's college seniors unable to locate Columbus's voyage within the correct half-century. About the same percentage could not distinguish

only know what Plato wrote but also understand the allegory of the cave. When education is rightly conceived, events and ideas become, in philosopher Michael Oakeshott's words, "invitations to look, to listen and to reflect." But students who approach the end of their college years without knowing basic landmarks of history and thought are unlikely to have reflected on their meaning.

A required course of studies—a core of learning—can ensure that students have opportunities to know the literature, philosophy, institutions, and art of our own and other cultures. A core of learning can also encourage understanding of mathematics and science, and *50 Hours* includes these fields of inquiry. The National Endowment for the Humanities must be concerned with the literature major who has no understanding of physics as well as with the engineer who graduates without studying history. Both are less prepared than they should be to make the subtle and complex choices today's life demands. Both bring limited perspective to enduring human questions: Where have we come from? Who are we? What is our destiny? Kant struggled for answers in his study; Boyle, in his laboratory. Thoreau, Gauguin, and Einstein took up these questions, approaching them in different ways, but sharing a common goal. All the various branches of human knowledge, as physicist Erwin Schrodinger

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Churchill's words from Stalin's, or Karl Marx's thoughts from the ideas of the U.S. Constitution. More than 40 percent could not identify when the Civil War occurred. Most could not identify Magna Carta, the Missouri Compromise, or Reconstruction. Most could not link major works by Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton with their authors. To the majority of college seniors, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" were clearly unfamiliar.

Education aims at more than acquaintance with dates and places, names and titles. Students should not only know when Columbus sailed but also perceive the world-altering shock of his voyage. They should not

once observed, have the same objective: "It is to obey the command of the Delphic deity," to honor the ancient injunction, "Know thyself."

To the task of learning about oneself and the world, a required course of studies can bring needed order and coherence. At one midwestern university where there is no core, students choose from almost 900 courses, with topics ranging from the history of foreign labor movements to the analysis of daytime soap operas. The result is all too often "a meaningless mosaic of fragments," in naturalist Loren Eiseley's words. "From ape skull to Mayan temple," he wrote, "we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sight-seers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways, and sunken galleys convey no present instruction." A core of learning shows the

patterns of the mosaic. It provides a context for forming the parts of education into a whole.

A core of learning also encourages community, whether we conceive community small or large. Having some learning in common draws students together—and faculty members as well. When that common learning engages students with their democratic heritage, it invites informed participation in our ongoing national conversation: What should a free people value? What should they resist? What are the limits to freedom, and how are they to be decided?

When students are encouraged to explore the history and thought of cultures different from their own, they gain insight into others with whom they share the earth. They come to understand unfamiliar ideals and traditions—and to see more clearly the characteristics that define their own particular journey.

Is there time in the curriculum for a core?

Almost all colleges and universities have requirements in “general education”—a part of the curriculum that is specified for all undergraduates, regardless of major. The hours set aside for general education are the hours from which a core of learning can be constructed. The larger and more complex the educational institution, the more difficult it is to commit hours to general education. A school that offers an accredited engineering program has to recognize that few engineering students will be able to graduate in four years if they devote much more than a semester to the humanities and social sciences. Schools offering a bachelor’s degree in music must face the demands of the National Association of Schools of Music, an accrediting association that expects students to devote 65 percent of their coursework to studying music.

Nevertheless, even doctorate-granting universities, the most complex institutions of higher education, require, on the average, more than thirty-seven semester hours in general education. For all four-year institutions, the average requirement in general education is fifty-two semester hours. There is time at most schools for a significant core of learning.

As it is now, however, these hours that could be devoted to a core are all too often organized instead into loosely stated “distribution requirements”—mandates that students take some courses in certain areas and some in others. Long lists of acceptable choices are set out in catalogs. Specialized

offerings for the most part, they often have little to do with the broadly conceived learning that should be at the heart of general education. Indeed, some courses seem to have little to do with the areas of human knowledge they

including those in science and mathematics. The practice of organizing ideas and presenting them coherently is a useful tool for learning in all subjects. Students who write in every course also come to understand that

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are supposed to elucidate. At a public university in the West, it is possible to fulfill humanities requirements with courses in interior design. In 1988-89 at a private university in the East, one could fulfill part of the social science distribution requirement by taking “Lifetime Fitness.”

Some core programs do offer choices: Alternative possibilities for mathematics and science are almost universal. Choice within a core can work well, so long as each of the choices fits within a carefully defined framework and aims at broad and integrated learning. The University of Denver’s core, for example, offers five, year-long options in the arts and humanities. In one course, “The Making of the Modern Mind,” philosophy, literature, music, and art are studied from the Enlightenment to the present. A second course, “Commercial Civilization,” emphasizes history, political thought and institutions, and classical economic theory from the origins of capitalism to contemporary times.

Is a core too hard for some students? Too easy for others?

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, recommended that college-bound high school students take four years of English, three of social studies, science, and mathematics, and two years of foreign language. Students who have completed such a course of studies should be ready to undertake the work required by a program like *50 Hours*. Entering students who lack necessary verbal and mathematical skills should prepare for core work by taking remedial courses. Such a plan benefits the core and can be of value to remedial programs as well by providing a well-defined goal for teaching and learning. The faculty of the remedial and developmental programs of Brooklyn College of the City University of New York recently dedicated a conference to Brooklyn’s core curriculum to recognize its importance for their work.

In *50 Hours*, students are expected to write papers of varying length in every course,

clear and graceful expression is universally valuable, not merely an arbitrary preoccupation of English departments. Some students who are prepared for core work may still need extra practice in composition. For them, writing-intensive sections of required courses can be designated—as they are at Brandeis and Vanderbilt universities.

Students who come to college well-prepared may have read some of the works assigned in the core. But so long as those works are profound, provocative, and revealing, these students will again be challenged. Indeed, a criterion for choosing works for the core should be that they repay many readings. They should be books that remain fresh, full of power to quicken thought and feeling, no matter how many times we open their pages.

Why is establishing a core so difficult?

Curricular change has never been easy: Henry Bragdon, writing about Woodrow Wilson’s years at Princeton, called it “harder than moving a graveyard.” And the way in which higher education has evolved over the last century has complicated the task.

The forces that have come to dominate higher education are centrifugal rather than centripetal, weakening the ties that individual faculty members have to their institutions. As professional advancement has come increasingly to depend on the esteem of other specialists on other campuses, there has been less and less incentive for scholars at any single college or university to identify fully with that institution and the shared efforts necessary for a complicated task like curricular reform.

At the same time, faculty responsibility for the curriculum has grown. If it is to change, the faculty must come together and act for the common purpose of changing it. “We have a paradox,” Professor James Q. Wilson observed after curriculum reform at Harvard. “The faculty is supposed to govern collegially, but it is not a collegium.”

The increasingly specialized nature of graduate study is also an impediment. Many

Ph.D.'s do not receive the broad preparation necessary to teach courses in general education. Even those who do often step uneasily outside their specialties, concerned that it is unprofessional to teach Dante when one's expertise is Donne. They perceive hours spent teaching in general education—and days consumed devising its courses and curricula—as time away from the labor that the academic system most rewards: research and publication. One young professor called curriculum reform “a black hole,” and the time and energy it absorbs are seldom professionally recognized.

Crucial to establishing a core of learning is administrative leadership: college presidents who make general education a priority by putting institutional resources behind it; deans who support those faculty members who are willing to invest the time necessary to develop coherent requirements and seek consensus for them. A recent survey by the American Council on Education suggests that students, parents, alumni, and trustees can also play an important role in encouraging curricular reform: Thirty percent of doctorate-granting institutions that were revising general education requirements reported that the initiators of reform were people other than faculty or administration members.

Successfully establishing and sustaining a core may well require efforts aimed at encouraging intellectual community. Seminars in which faculty members read together the works to be taught in core courses can create common understandings, while at the same time providing background for teaching. At Rice University in Houston, where extensive curricular reform is under way, faculty members met in day-long sessions for two weeks to discuss works to be taught in the humanities foundation course. A classicist led discussion of the *Iliad*; a philosopher, of Plato's *Republic*; a professor of music, of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*.

How should courses in the core be taught?

“The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture,” an 1828 report from Yale University noted, “are the *discipline* and the *furniture* of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge.” For a core of learning to encourage intellectual discipline as well as the acquisition of knowledge, some small classes are essential. Students must have opportunities to participate in discussion and to be encouraged by teachers and peers to think critically about concepts and ideas.

Every course in the core should be taught with other core courses in mind. Students reading Descartes's philosophy in a Western civilization course should be reminded of his contributions to mathematics. Students reading Darwin in a science class should be encouraged to explore in their social science and humanities courses the ways in which evolutionary theory affected social thought and literature. Such connections help demonstrate that human knowledge is not a disconnected series of specialized subjects but interrelated domains of thought.

An institution's most distinguished faculty should teach in the core. Philosopher Charles Frankel once reported that Philipp Frank, Einstein's biographer and collaborator, expressed surprise on learning that in the United States he would not be allowed to teach elementary courses. In Vienna, where Frank had previously taught, beginning courses were considered the greatest honor—one to be bestowed on only those who had mastered their fields sufficiently to be able to generalize. “But in America,” Frankel noted, “we thought that was for fellows who know less. Frank believed not—you had to know more and in fact you had to have lived your field and felt the passion of it . . . to communicate it.”

Graduate assistants and nontenured faculty, to whom much of the responsibility for undergraduate teaching falls today, are often fine instructors. But the stature of general education is diminished when a college or university's most distinguished faculty do not teach in it. The quality of instruction is diminished when they do not bring their learning and experience to it.

Good teaching is crucial to the success of any curriculum, and it can take a multitude of forms. But teachers who inspire their students to intellectual engagement are themselves always engaged. They do not agree with every book or idea they discuss, but they approach them generously, demonstrating that neither agreement nor disagreement is possible until there has been the hard work of understanding. Learning is not a game for them, not simply an intellectual exercise, but an undertaking that compels mind and heart. Recalling his great teachers, Leo Raditsa of St. John's College in Maryland recently described I. A. Richards. “He conceived reading as the cure of souls. . . .” Raditsa wrote. “And he included his own soul.”

In the core, as throughout the curriculum, courses should be taught by men and women who, though deeply knowledgeable, remain eager to learn. ▲

For a free copy of 50 Hours, write: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Room 406, Washington, D.C. 20506

50 HOURS: A Summary

18 hours: **Cultures and Civilizations**

- I. **The Origins of Civilization:** a one-semester course that considers the beginnings of civilization on various continents. 3 hours.
- II. **Western Civilization:** a one-semester course that considers the development of Western society and thought from Periclean Athens through the Reformation. 3 hours.
- III. **Western Civilization (continued):** a one-semester course that considers the development of Western society and thought from the Reformation into the twentieth century. 3 hours.
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6 hours: **Concepts of Mathematics:** a one-year course focusing on major concepts, methods, and applications of the mathematical sciences.

8 hours: **Foundations of the Natural Sciences:** a one-year laboratory course that focuses on major ideas and methods of the physical and biological sciences.

6 hours: **The Social Sciences and the Modern World:** a one-year course that explores ways in which the social sciences have been used to explain political, economic, and social life, as well as the experience of individuals, in the last 200 years.

"Doing in Western Civ: The Levellers at Stanford"

George Roche

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle asked, "What constitutes education and what is the proper way to be educated?" The answer appears to be one for which we are still searching.

We do know, however, the important part of education centers on the attempts of society to transmit the best of its culture to the rising generation. What were the goals and values of our predecessors? What were their failures and successes? For Americans, that means focusing on their national past and on Western civilization. The latter is so vast, so diverse, covering so many nations and so much of recorded history, as to allow the broadest focus imaginable.

It came, therefore, as a surprise to many of us when Stanford University recently rejected its core curriculum course, Western Culture, as too narrow and ethnocentric to be suffered any longer. The faculty has substituted a new course, Culture, Ideas and Values, which stresses non-Western and minority accomplishments. But this astonishing move was not unheralded; indeed, it is the logical result of the levelling of all standards begun earlier in this century by Progressive educational reformers.

"No one has a monopoly on the truth" is the common sense adage which they perverted to mean that truth is non-existent. One man's reality is another man's hallucination, it

"Whereas the blind Goddess of Justice was once supposed to deal impartially with all those who came before her, now she is impelled to peek and say, 'Tell me the color of your skin, your place of origin, your sex . . . And then I will tell you how I am to treat you.'"

seems, and all cultures, all ideas, all values (do the words sound familiar?) are equivalent. Any attempt to distinguish among them or favor one over the other is to be prejudiced. The very words "Western civilization" are an alleged affront to today's reformers, signifying racism, sexism, oppression, and imperialism.

But by what means do the Progressives' heirs at Stanford single out acceptable authors to include in their new sanitized and nondiscriminatory course? By race, creed, nationality, and sex. This ludicrously hypocritical behavior is symptomatic of the troubled times

in which we live. (Whereas the blind Goddess of Justice was once supposed to deal impartially with all those who came before her, now she is impelled to peek and say, "Tell me the color of your skin, your place of origin, your sex . . . And then I will tell you how I am to treat you." Can we expect our educators who are largely responsible for foisting this madness on to the courts to do anything less in their own domain?)

Ironically enough, the greatest hallmark of Western civilization is its tolerance and even encouragement of diversity. The West has seen a slow but steady expansion of liberty which is unequalled in the world. It has also produced an amazing treasury of intellectual thought that speaks to all people at all times, transcending all borders of culture or other distinctions. No single library could hold, no single person could digest all the books worth reading, which celebrate such knowledge.

By convincing the public that Western culture is "a bad thing," Stanford has pulled off one of the greatest hoaxes of all time. But the university has not done so as an isolated reaction to some perceived injustice; the war on all standards will continue and we will all be the worse for it if the levellers have their way.

(This article appeared in the Fall 1988 issue of *Continuity: A Journal of History*.)

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