Connecticut College Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

Classics Department Faculty Speeches and Presentations

Classics Department

4-27-2005

What Should Students Know? Crafting a Curriculum for the New Millennium

Richard F. Moorton

Connecticut College, rfmoo@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/classfacsp

Recommended Citation

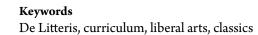
Moorton, Richard F., "What Should Students Know? Crafting a Curriculum for the New Millennium" (2005). Classics Department Faculty Speeches and Presentations. Paper 1.

http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/classfacsp/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Department Faculty Speeches and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

What Should Students Know? Crafting a Curriculum for the New Millennium



What Should Students Know? Crafting a Curriculum

For the New Millennium Richard F. Moorton April 2005

I would like to thank Marijan Despalatovic for yet again putting together a lecture series on a timely topic. Our theme is the nature of the liberal arts and how they should be represented in a program of general education. Our current system of foundation courses is a long-standing compromise, and our recent attempt to reformulate our general education program was an acrimonious failure. In the following talk I hope to facilitate the discussion in three steps. First, I will attempt the perilous exercise of unpacking the debate by discerning within it often unarticulated but powerful underlying assumptions rooted in Western culture; second, I will survey the general education programs—including some proposed changes—of other colleges and universities; and third, I will offer one man's highly tentative view of what to do and what not to do about it all.

Let me begin at the beginning. This genealogy of the Liberal Arts is quoted from the section "Elements of a Liberal Education" in the current Grinnell College Catalog:

The seven original liberal arts, in the classical world, consisted of the trivium of deductive reasoning, comprised of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of quantitative which reasoning, encompassed geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music. In Rethinking Liberal Education (1996), Bruce Kimball describes how the medieval European universities added to the seven liberal arts "the three philosophies": natural philosophy (empirical science), moral philosophy (human thought and behavior), and metaphysics (ontology or the study of being). These categories of the liberal arts, inherited from the medieval European university, find their modern forms in the science, social studies, and humanities divisions into which . . . many colleges and universities today . . . distribute [their] academic departments. Interdisciplinary programs draw upon multiple departments to examine newer areas of studies such as environmental studies, global development, gender and women's studies, technology, and Africana studies.

Thus my incipit. The liberal arts are the trivium, the quadrivium and the three philosophies and their offspring as enriched, elaborated, and improved,

by the learning and ingenuity of the generations whom they nourished, Western and Non-Western. No doubt non-Western traditions enlarged and ennobled the liberal arts with their wisdom, but the riverbed for the transmission of our educational heritage, it seems to me, ran through Western ground.

I say this not with a sense of triumphalism but because I think it is a fact with which we must deal in trying to understand what we are doing, what we should be doing, and how and how much we should change the curriculum, if at all. Our curriculum and our institution are structured and informed by Western ideas, Western categories, and a Western dynamism that create both enormous opportunities for human growth and a set of characteristic problems which I hope to explore. I am particularly interested here in those characteristics and initiatives in Western culture that arguably underlie our institutional life and our discussions on what should be the shape, the purpose, and the requirements, if any, of general education at Connecticut College. For my purposes they are five: (1) The Western sense of self; (2) Freedom vs. Equality; (3) Progressivism; (4) Western self-doubt; and (5) Multiculturalism and Diversity.

The traits of the Western sense of self are no mystery. The autonomous self, constituting itself by its free choices in pursuit of the good as it sees it, as Mel observed acutely, has defined itself in opposition to

necessity, which nonetheless it needs, paradoxically, to be free. This Western understanding of human nature contrasts with the sense of self of almost every other culture that ever was or is. The embedded or extroverted self, which finds its identity in a matrix of human relationships, a normative past, and its position in the cosmic order, however conceived, has given way to a self that looks within to its own free choices and thereby seeks to create, rather than merely discern or edit, its identity in the givenness of the world. The embedded self looks to the past, particularly the ways of the elders and the epiphanies of the gods, for the wisdom of the people in the light of which life should be lived. The autonomous self subjects the past, the communal ethos, the alleged divine powers that guide the world, and ultimately nature itself to a critical and often corrosive review to free the self from false necessities and master or at least come to terms with the true necessities in the pursuit of the good as best as the self can construe it. In terms of the definition of the good and the decision to accept or reject it, the self is sovereign. In my view this is the most momentous cultural shift in the history of humanity, and even as we speak it is revolutionizing the spiritual horizons of the human race.

A decisive result of this cultural pivot is the elevation of the self. The person is no longer properly subject to a supreme good, a divine order, social custom, or nature, except where these factors are deemed to be real

and inevitable or freely chosen. We move from the world of the Greek proverb "all things lie on the knees of the Gods" to Margaret Sanger's battlecry "No Gods, No Masters!" This appears to turn the life of the mind towards the view of Protagoras: "anthropos to metron," "man is the measure of all things," a position that is consonant with a democratic polity, whether ancient Athens or a modern Western state.

It is not difficult to find this vision of the active modern self in the life of the modern liberal arts college. Williams College, one of the best, has this statement in its catalogue:

In spite of change, however, the guiding spirit of the College has not wavered from the sentiment by Mark Hopkins in his inaugural address of 1836: "We are to regard the mind, not as a piece of iron laid upon the anvil and hammered into any shape, nor as a block of marble in which we are to find the statue by removing the rubbish, nor as a receptacle into which knowledge may be poured, but as a flame that is to be fed, as an active being that must be strengthened to think and to feel—and to dare, to do, and to suffer."

There you have it in black and white.

Our construction of the self is at the heart of our educational debate. It has consequences, even dangers. One temptation of the autonomous self is a kind of solipsism that sees knowledge exclusively as an instrument of power rather than the object of wonder and delight. I sense this danger come to life in the instrumentality of the academy's approach to learning and the reduction of knowledge to a pawn in the game of power. "Be suspicious," I overheard a colleague counsel a student. "The author has an ax to grind: what is it?" God knows that in a world such as ours the students have need to be guileful as serpents, but there are after all even now authors who write less to perpetrate rhetorical rape upon the reader than to share hard-won knowledge with their fellow human beings.

The point was made better than I could in John Coat's Convocation Address in September 2004. Let me call his words to witness:

The view I have to present—a view clearly at odds with the current emphasis on "relevance" and political and social "consciousness raising"—is of the liberal arts academy as a "place apart." By this phrase, I mean a place apart from the various practical and technical and political concerns and struggles which have dominated the civilized conversation for at least the past three centuries, and now threaten to take it

over; I mean a place where our entire civilized inheritance can be reflected upon, not just its practical dimensions; a place where the best parts of this inheritance can be passed on to succeeding generations through cultivation of habits and arts of discriminating insight and judgment. In brief, if there is a "mission" or "function" of liberal arts institutions, on the view I am presenting, it is the very general one of passing on to others an entire civilized inheritance, rather than simply a passage or two in it, and most certainly distinguished from the contemporary project of "plundering history" for examples to support the political project of the moment, or to "sniff out" ideas and practices with odds with our particular moral sensibilities and values."

You will not be surprised to find that this proposition is attractive to a Classicist. I think that others might take it seriously as well. As Coats observes, our students come to us at a crucial time in their lives. They are old enough to think critically and young enough to be adaptable. In the vast majority of cases, never again will they have the leisure—and scholarship takes its name from the Greek word for leisure—to simply think and learn as the chief end of their existence. In search of themselves, they will discover

that the way to self-knowledge runs through the world. In learning as objectively as it is possible for human beings what is past, and passing, and to glimpse what may be to come they have a chance to start to understand self and other in a way that will provide a foundation for the intelligent and humane enactment of the rest of their lives.

Marx has famously said "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. . . . The point is to change it." Well and good. Let our students spend the bulk of their time here learning about the world and the ways in which it has been interpreted. They have the rest of their lives to effect intelligent change. The world needs change. The world needs educated activists. The other kind may with the best of intentions throw out the baby with the bathwater. Parts of our world and its past are treasures, not trash. As Saint Paul said in 1 Thessalonians, "Test everything; hold fast to what is good." That for me is part of the mission of the liberal arts college.

Freedom and equality are the primary principles of Western civilization, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the slogan of the French Revolution. They are in tension because they limit each other in the social order. Perfect equality is possible only where freedom is foreclosed, and individual freedom is limited by the fact that all people have an equal right to be free. Freedom plays two roles of interest in our curricular debate, one positive and one less so. The intellectual freedom of

the professor is a principle we all accept.. This is a godsend. Intellectual freedom has preserved such diversity of viewpoint as we have here —we could use more—and it has no doubt prevented a good deal of ideological mischief making in the shaping of our curriculum. Academic freedom is the last, best refuge against any attempt to induce a monovocal ideological or political doctrine as the official position of Connecticut College.

Less happily, freedom is a curricular issue as well. It is possible to view the recent curricular initiative of the EPC as an attempt to restrict the range and number of general education requirements here. At least one person on the committee expressed to me an impatience with any requirements at all. The idea, I surmise, is that students are autonomous selves, free agents whose education, goal formation, and very self-definition ought not to be impeded by other peoples' idea of what they should know. This issue clearly takes me right to heart of my topic and I want to examine it with some care.

"No man is an island," wrote John Donne, "Apart from the main."

And no woman either. We are born into a world with a complex, vibrant and often violent past and present, and they live in us whether we know it or not.

We are bound to one another by a shared heritage and a shared nature.

Physical law rules us all. We are virtually genetically identical. We are all subject to the poet's cycle of birth, copulation and death, whether we

copulate or not. Mel has described human life as an interplay between freedom and necessity. The past is part of the realm of necessity. It is fixed. But it is not destiny. We are not doomed to repeat it again and again, like Santayana's historical ignoramus, if we come to know the past and how it has created the world of the present moment. We can discriminatingly and freely act to embrace that which is good and work to alter that which should not be, and we can do this most powerfully if we can understand the causes and ways of the human and natural world. Inevitably, this means education in breadth.

I do not mean education at random. There is not a department on campus that sets its majors free to range at will among the courses in the department, or (why be elitist and oppressive?) through the courses of the general catalogue to be certified a major when the pile of courses reaches eight. Rather, every department has a definite conception of what a student should know within the field in order to master the field, and they are set a regimen beginning with broad introductory courses and proceeding to more advanced and specialized work. The students have some choice within the major they have freely chosen, and they can select directions or specialties, within professional limits. But older, wiser heads have already mapped out the domain and its byways, and to achieve mastery the students must follow the masters. It is not for nothing that we call a field a discipline.

Now it may seem to some that the courses in the general catalogue do not cohere, as do the courses in a field. I'm not so sure. We are a liberal arts college. Our curriculum is the liberal arts, and the liberal arts consist of an interrelated constellation of fields growing out of the trivium, the quadrivium and the three philosophies that taken together cover tolerably well the range of human experience. The college has a serious duty, in my view, to give our students at least an overview of the whole, since it is our hope to produce well rounded, fully realized and in consequence fully free human beings. To illustrate the potentially dismal results of the failure to do so, let me resort to a parable. Imagine a student abroad traveling to Paris alone. Suppose that following his fancy rather than his Boedeker he saw no more of the city of lights than the inside of his hostel and the closest bistros and babettes. Could he truly be said to have ever seen the city of Paris at all?

The role of equality in the shaping of our curriculum and our general education requirements is so extensive and so intertwined with some of my later categories like Western self-doubt and Multiculturalism that a proper treatment of this vital subject is best deferred a bit. Consequently I would like to turn now to what I have set as the third educationally influential category of Western thought, progressivism.

The search for the origins of the ideal of progress has spawned libraries. Some locate the seeds of the idea in Zoroastrianism or the

parousia, the second coming of Christ at the end of time. If the idea had sacred roots, they became secularized with the rise of science and Enlightenment rationalism in the West. Science showed us a world that seemed to have no need of the hypotheses of eternal cycles or the divine or magic in order to operate in an orderly and irreversible way. The arrow of time pointed forward. Science used both inductive and deductive reason to interrogate nature with extremely powerful results. The Enlightenment took notice, and applied the twin tools of reason and empiricism to interrogate the human world and its traditions, especially the sacred, the philosophical, and the political. Those ideas and institutions which could not justify themselves when cross-examined by the evidence of the senses and hard eyed rationality were discredited. The result was experienced at first by the philosophers and the salon intellectuals and ultimately by the bourgeoisie and the common people of Europe as a liberation. The modern individual was born, wresting his or her freedom from the dying grip of traditional culture and stepping forward into a future freely constructed by self and society in pursuit of private or collective but generally sublunary goods.

We live for the future. The valorization of progress, the preference of the new to the old, and the magic of the simple word "change" is so patent in our world that it scarcely requires demonstration. I have heard it said that on the floor of the faculty senate one faculty member arose during the debate on curricular change to argue that we should change because change is good.

That story, like good myth, is true whether it ever happened or not.

There are several problems with the reflexive readiness for change in our society that concern me as an educator thinking about general education. For one, I fear that we may be tempted to change our curriculum simply because it's time, not because it's good. For another, I fear that our students may be tempted to dismiss, or at least view as piquant curiosities, the lives, accomplishments and ways of people in the past or people in other, traditional contemporary cultures for whom their own past is normative. This devaluation need not be and probably would not be conscious, but it can be real and potently operant nonetheless.

Every year we dispatch CISLA students overseas. Usually the students head for relatively Westernized nations but sometimes they do indeed end up in remote enclaves of basically premodern cultures. They mean only the best for the people among whom they are to live. I taught them, and I know. But I often felt misgivings about sending those bright young things to live among African villagers or Brazilian Indians. They carry Western ideas that ultimately mean cultural disruption for the people whom they befriend. Marx understood very well the devastation portended for traditional cultures by bourgeois man freed from the past by the modern pivot and obsessed with the commoditization of the world. Marx planned no

respite for the children of the past in the coming of communist man, who would have simply consummated the ruin that his crude precursor had begun. Like the apostles, Marx lived for the paradise at the end of time, and he eagerly anticipated the passing away of the old world. Perhaps he thought that the old men would become new men. But he never asked the aborigines what they thought of his project.

As a Classicist inevitably I stand between the future and the past, and I like to think I sense the beauty as well as the ugliness of both. Greece gave us slavery and the subjugation of women. It also gave us Sappho and the Parthenon. I do not contemplate the latter simply because they are stepping stones to some utilitarian good. I study them because they are unreproducibly beautiful. Years ago I asked one of the best and brightest of the young Turks at the College whether we shouldn't be more gentle with the past then he was being at the moment because it had given us treasures such as, say, Aeschylus. "Culture is a commodity," he replied. "We are making more of it all the time." To this day I don't think that that was an adequate answer. Aeschylus will not come our way again. The canon of Greek Tragedy is closed forever. So are the treasure houses of Mayan Art, the Pharaohs, Imperial China, and Vedic India. Every culture is a way of being human, and when we lose them because of the attrition of time or worse, because of intentional demolition, we lose part of our collective humanity.

I do not say this with the intonations of Jonah preaching repentance to the Ninevites. Surely we all get it. But I am trying to make a point: when we walk into the future we carry the past with us, not as shackles, but as the systems, the structures, the energy and the knowledge that enables us to walk at all. I draw my own model of the thoughtful educator from Roman lore, specifically the Roman god of portals and the new year, Janus. Standing on the threshold of the future, he has two faces, one looking back at the journey that has defined him, and one looking forward into the future he will make with what he has learned. Between these faces he thinks a thought with which I have bored many an undergraduate class: without continuity there is no self; without change there is no life.

My last two categories are substantially interconnected. The Western World has entered into an age of self doubt caused by a rash of shocks. Part of the crisis is philosophical, but a technical description of the Western subversion of the grand metaphysical tradition is best left to specialists. Part of the self criticism is politically and morally based, as the West has come to see its territorial and economic expansion of centuries past as fueled, in part, by a moral and cultural hybris that made possible, for instance, the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. Furthermore, the West has looked inward and

found that some of the fundamental principles by which it ordered its social and economic relations were deeply unjust. The burgeoning Western self-confidence of the nineteenth century was broken by the enormous human cost of two world wars and a cold war fueled largely by the competition between Western regimes and ideas. Our failures made us think.

The moral awakening of the West to what it had wrought and the consequent ability to actually listen to the criticism and resentment of those harmed by Western hegemony has had a palpable effect in Western education. The naive self-confidence of earlier generations is gone. Education is far more critical of Western ideas and Western history than before, and far more likely to look with sympathy and respect on other peoples and their cultures. The center is out and the margin is in. This change of heart has inspired reform movements including feminism, principled and organized opposition to other forms of discrimination, and concomitantly, the emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity.

The multiculturalism and diversity movement promoted by President Fainstein's initiatives has been characterized by enthusiasm, great curricular influence, and certain problems and internal contradictions. To a degree the movement preaches to the converted. I'm not aware of any serious hostility to other cultures or to minority groups at Connecticut College, at least on the level of the professoriate. But the pluralism drive does encounter resistance

among some of us who, ironically, are by conviction friends of the principles of justice and cultural dignity at stake in this issue.

There is a tendency among some of those in the vanguard of multiculturalism to excoriate the West past reason and to idealize uncritically all nonwestern cultures. Not so long ago, in response to the idea that the West was in some way a singular example of violent militarism in history, Bruce Kirmmse published a powerful riposte on the faculty listserve pointing out, after all, only a few of the cases in which non-European peoples launched devastating warfare against others. It was never rebutted, and in my view it is incontestable. The West has been guilty of serious offenses against equity on a global scale, but it is not a republic of demons and other cultures are not enclaves of paradise. To insist otherwise is naive or tendentious.

On the other hand, there is a core of sound principles in the multiculturalism movement. Other cultures are the ways of life of human beings endowed with an intrinsic dignity and therefore worthy of respect. Other cultures are also experiments in being human that have something to teach us about our possibilities. I would go further. Other cultures have achieved insights into human nature and the world that we have either never discovered or have forgotten. We ignore them at the risk of our own impoverishment. Furthermore, we live in a pluralistic world and we must

either get along or fight. Coexistence is better. But there is a problem with multiculturalism in the West, a problem that is probably incapable of resolution but may perhaps be ameliorated if we recognize it.

Multiculturalism seeks to respect all cultures and put them all on an equal footing. But we run here immediately into difficulties. Cultures and the religions so often at their hearts are systems of authority that make often truth claims that routinely conflict with those of other cultures. Of such claims Lester Reiss used to say, "they can all be wrong, but they can't all be right." Moreover, cultures compete with one another for human hearts. We deal with such conflicts by suspending judgment of truth claims and insisting that all cultures operate on a level playing field. When conflicts arise they are dealt with according to the rules of Western liberalism. Should any culture assert too aggressively values that conflict with liberal values, such as overt hostility to other groups, the advocacy of patriarchy, or the insistence that the indigenous religion is due preferential treatment, it is checked by the rules of liberal egalitarianism. We can do this for several reasons. For one thing, we take the truth claims of other cultures with a grain of salt and can be tolerant of their assertion, as long as they don't challenge the supreme principles of freedom and egalitarianism. For another we view culture as a resource for the self in the free construction of its identity rather than a communal system of authority with overriding claims on the individual. For a third, we own the playing field. When push comes to shove, Western rules reign. We use culture to trump culture to create a system in which there is room for all cultures under a framework of Western liberal values. I'm not saying that this is a bad thing. It's simply that we should be clear on what we are doing.

The second part of my paper is meant to fill a gap. As far as I know, the College discussion of change in the GE requirements has been conducted in a vacuum. If anyone has disseminated a survey of the state of GE requirements at our peer institutions, it's new to me. Therefore, I offer you two handouts. The first is a summary of the GE requirements at forty-three liberal arts colleges in the so-called Oberlin Group, including many top schools. The second is a report from the Berkeley Commission on Curricular Change surveying similar initiatives at many of the most important Universities in the land. These documents have much to tell us.

Some have reported that many other educational institutions are phasing out General Education requirements. That claim does not square with my findings. Of the forty-three liberal arts colleges surveyed in one handout, no school has neither course requirements nor expectations outside of the major field. The least demanding, perhaps, are Amherst, Smith, and Wesleyan. Amherst requires a freshman seminar, and then expects that the students and advisors will discuss whether or not the students have selected

courses that meet six goals that taken together look very much like a vision of liberal Arts General Education. What happens if the students have not I cannot guess. Smith requires a writing intensive course, and recommends that the students take courses in seven areas. The areas are optional, but no one receives Latin honors unless they have complied with the recommendations. Wesleyan has a set of expectations which include a first year initiative, nine distribution courses, a writing across the curriculum course, and a gateway course for exploring a potential major. The courses are not required, but the language of the catalogue suggests that the advisors are empowered year in year out to nag the socks off the students if they do not meet "expectations."

Of the remainder, Vassar has the most modest list of requirements, stipulating a freshman seminar, a quantitative analysis course, and a foreign language requirement. All the others have requirements ranging from substantial to extensive. Williams almost boasts about having no core requirements, but they do mandate distribution requirements totaling twelve courses. Grinnell is worth mentioning because they require a freshman tutorial from all students but then offer the students one of three models in general education programs, (1) developing a set of academic skills, (2) studying several areas of advanced study, and (3) study across a wide range of academic fields.

Common requirements include freshman seminars, foreign language (almost ubiquitous), composition courses and/or writing across the curriculum, quantitative reasoning, divisional courses (e.g. humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, arts), field requirements, interdisciplinary studies, and even P.E. Emphasis in skills such as critical thinking and research often appears in G.E. lists, and more than half of the schools require some variety of multicultural, diversity, social justice, and/or non-western cultural studies. Particularly ambitious, rigorous or creative programs include those at Agnes Scott, Barnard, Middlebury, Rhodes College, University of the South, and Wellesley. The average program is robust, well-balanced, and reasonably well thought out. General Education is thriving at the top tier Liberal Arts Colleges in the land. They are certainly not leaving learning in breadth to chance or whimsy.

Complementary to this review is the survey of University Initiatives in General Education issued by Berkeley. This document includes statements on the preservation or renovation of general education programs at world class universities such as Columbia, Duke, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and Yale, including précis of their current programs, their programs for change, if any, and, in most cases, interment links to institutional sources. It is striking to me how often such major research institutions—including, hearteningly, MIT—have ambitious

programs for general education in the liberal arts. A number of these schools, including Harvard and Yale, have recently released major reviews of the subject of liberal arts education. Harvard's report is outstanding. And it's on the Net. If you pull down the Academics menu on the Harvard College website, you will find a link to the curricular review. There you will find links to General Education Essays, a series of eighteen short but very fine papers on the subject by luminaries such as Harvey Mansfield, Helen Vendler, and E. O. Wilson. The Harvard Curricular Review is available on the same web site. The report recommends a curriculum that "emphasizes lifelong learning, critical and creative thinking skills, a large breadth of knowledge, and local and global citizenship." General Education in the great institutions of our country—after almost total collapse in the antinomian days of the sixties and early seventies—is alive and well. In many it is in vigorous and creative transition— sometimes to a privileging of learning over knowledge that I think skewed—but it is certainly not in decline.

In the finale of my talk I would like to offer, not anything so presumptuous as a plan for general education at Connecticut College, but rather a few suggestions for your consideration.

It seems to me that our current area requirements provide for the liberal arts ideal of education in breadth and that we should consider retaining them. However, they lack a rationale. We should be able to explain

clearly to the students why they are asked to take courses in each group. As a sample, and perhaps even a model, of such an explanation, consider this statement of suggested areas and their rationales from the Smith catalogue:

- "1. <u>Literature</u>, either in English or in some other language, because it is a crucial form of expression, contributes to our understanding of human experience and plays a central role in the development of culture;
- "2. <u>Historical studies</u>, either in history or in historically oriented courses in art, music, religion, philosophy and theatre, because they provide a perspective on the development of human society and culture and free us from the **parochialism of the present**;
- "3. <u>Social science</u>, because it offers a systematic and critical inquiry into human nature, social institutions, and human relationships;
- "4. <u>Natural science</u>, because of its methods, its contribution to our understanding of the world around us and its significance in modern culture;
- "5. <u>Mathematics and analytic philosophy</u>, because they foster an understanding of the nature and use of formal, rational thought;
- "6. The arts, because they constitute the media through which people have sought, through the ages, to express their deepest feelings and values;
- "7. A foreign language, because it frees one from the limits of one's own tongue, provides access to another culture, and makes possible communication outside one's own society.

The distributional approach is not perfect. I have heard students complain that taking isolated courses in a set of areas does not necessarily give a "big picture" view of those areas. One possible alternative is to offer true foundation courses that are designed to present a cluster of disciplines as a unity with underlying principles. The dangers of this approach are obvious. One would above all want to avoid a "math for jocks" approach in which platitudes substitute for rigor. But with sufficient imagination, high intellectual standards, and a will to make it work, the approach could be effective.

Be it noted that keeping distribution requirements is not incompatible with a question based or problem centered approach to learning. No one is more anxious than I that our students learn to think. There is much to be said for using questions as a heuristic device to prompt students to analyze and thoughtfully integrate their general education course work. There is already an outstandingly successful model for such an approach in the three questions at the core of the CISLA program. They run as follows:

- 1. What are the origins and dynamics of contemporary society?
- 2. What is the relevance of the past in understanding the present and the possibilities of the future?

3. What are the material, spiritual, and ethical challenges of modernity?

The students spend the sophomore CISLA course developing an essay to answer these question. The results were always solid and often outstanding, as I can personally attest, since I taught this course three years myself.

This example might well be worth emulating on a college wide basis. The five questions in the EPC proposal might well serve as a template for questions on what the students have learned in their general education courses. After completing their distribution requirements, the students might be asked to write, say, a twenty page paper under the direction of their advisor or some faculty member of their choice offering their answers to the college questions based on the general education courses they have taken. Since they will have taken a set of courses unique to themselves, each essay would be singular. In it they might offer reflections on how the general education curriculum did or did not equip them to think, write and speak creatively and analytically about the bodies of knowledge they have or have not acquired, and how the system might be improved in the future. They would be thus challenged to assess critically their general education as a whole, and we would have constant thoughtful feedback on how well, or not, we are serving their intellectual needs.

Some colleges and universities are proposing to move beyond distributional requirements by constructing interdisciplinary courses or ways of learning approaches that fuse fields into a new unity governed by some mode or idea. This can be an inspired and dynamic way to teach, but in my view it should preserve the essence of the liberal arts ideal of non-vocational education in breadth that is at the heart of our pedagogical tradition. Since it has come up here, I should say more about the modes of learning or ways of knowledge approach that is beginning to figure prominently in current debate about how to craft a liberal arts curriculum for our time.

There is much to be gained by approaching learning as a Dao or way. This is, after all, what philosophy was for Socrates, a way of life aiming at the journey to knowledge. But it seems to me that the modern approach is self-centered in a way that is more akin to the educational ideals of the Sophists than those of Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. The sophists offered education that was designed to enable the student to succeed; to be a self fulfilled citizen of the polity. Knowledge was more important as an implement than as the embrace of a domain of being. The center of modern education is the empowered self, not the search for sophia. We learn the intellectual modes not necessarily to find the truth but to navigate in a Heraclitean world that changes even as we learn our way around it. I recognize that there is validity in this vision, but it seems to me to be too

pessimistic about our epistemological possibilities. A field is more than a repertoire of techniques. It is a body of knowledge, part of a repository that nature has been inculcating in life forms for billions of years and to which the human race has been adding for at least hundreds of thousands of years. Much is changing, but much abides. That repository has served us so well that today we know things and can work wonders of which the Pharaohs and the Caesars could not even have dreamt. Why despair of it now?

The college seems to be moving toward a multiculturalism and diversity requirement in general education, and, if the requirement is crafted with variety, rigor and fair-mindedness, I think it is an excellent plan. My ideal is to allow the student a series of alternatives to satisfy the requirement. One might be to permit the student to take a course in any culture other than his or her own. Another might be to take a course in the problems and possibilities of intercultural interaction. Yet another might be a course in the forms of discrimination in American society, or some other society. Another might be to allow the requirement to be satisfied by the study of a premodern culture. Yet another might be a course in gender and women's studies.

An approach that would trouble me is to narrow the requirement to a single gateway course that all students would be required to take focusing on racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic inequity in the United States or even in

the West at large. For one thing, such a course would be highly politicized and rhetorical. Students would be under de facto pressure to assent, a violation of their intellectual integrity. Such a course would represent a univocal left of center view of the American or Western experience that does not even speak for all faculty members, let alone all considered viewpoints on the subject. One of my chief puzzlements with multiculturalism, diversity, pluralism and tolerance as educational ideals is that in practice they are sometimes monocultural, monovocal, uniform, and intolerant of dissent. This seems to me to be a contradiction in terms. Diversity should be dialogical. For another, a single gateway course such as I have described would be focused more on the United States or the West than any other culture or group, and thus yet another exercise in the history of the culture that we are purporting to transcend. If we seek heterogeneity, let us come to know the other.

One final point. Talk to your students about the liberal arts and general education. Too little too late, I did, and learned a great deal. They are not indifferent, but they are not well-informed, either. We are not doing a good job of explaining to our students what the liberal arts are and why they need them. We can and must do better. And we can do this best if we talk with one another. Separately, we are specialists. Together, we are the liberal arts in action.

29

With that my ramble ends, and not a moment too soon. Thank you for

coming, thank you for listening, and please don't hesitate now to add your

thoughts to mine.

Richard Moorton

Professor of Classics

Connecticut College