

# ACADEMIC QUESTIONS

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In December of 1999, I notified my students in the Wright College Great Books Curriculum in Chicago that a New York Times reporter would shortly be flying across the country to sit in on their class and interview them concerning their experiences in, and feelings about, the program. The students quite naturally asked me what they were doing to inspire such interest, unprecedented in Wright College's entire history.

I told them that, frankly, the general public and most educators, including those teaching in community colleges, believed community college students lacked the intelligence, the skills, and the capacity to read, to understand, and therefore to appreciate classic literature of Western civilization—the best that has been thought and said. Not only that, I said, these same groups all think minority community college students cannot perceive universal truths in great literature. Their assumption is that minority students can only take an interest in books written by an author from their particular ethnic origins, and so ought therefore to be assigned only such books because they won't read them otherwise.

I paused briefly to let my Hispanic, African American, immigrant, and work-in-class students reflect on the insulting absurdity of this, and then we went back to our discussions of Gulliver's Travels and William Wordsworth. For indeed, the ensuing New York Times story about the students' enthusiasm for the Great Books was considered so startling and important it was run on the front page and was picked up by the International Herald Tribune.

Located on the far northwest side, Wright College is one of the City Colleges of Chicago, the second largest community college system in the United States. In this Great Books curriculum, established in 1996, about eighteen full-time faculty, nearly 20 percent of the school's staff, teach classic works in a program available to all Wright's students in English, the Humanities, Physical Science, Social Science and Biological Science. About nine hundred largely minority students are enrolling on average, every semester.

Administrative budgetary costs of getting the courses off the ground in a coordinated program were nonexistent. This is because the City Colleges of Chicago has for decades listed or required most of the courses that have become the Wright curriculum. When these classes became reincarnated as the Great Books curriculum, however, in most cases their assigned reading lists underwent a profound reformation. To qualify for the program, a minimum of half their readings had to be primary sources drawn from the list of Great Books authors published by the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Mortimer Adler and the University of Chicago's Robert Hutchins initially conceived of that list, which also was the model for Chicago's community college curriculum seventy years ago when it was established. In practice, Wright's Great Books courses often rely almost entirely on these texts.

To expand on these assigned readings, the Great Books curriculum faculty agree on a theme for each semester. Recent themes include "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "Questions of Good and Evil," and they have lent coherence and depth by providing a sustained focus of intellectual inquiry over seven-teen weeks. Such motifs also encourage faculty to choose texts

that implicitly echo each other.

In assessing the impact of the Great Books on students at Wilbur Wright College, and projecting the reception of such curricula onto other institutions, one must attempt to gauge the worth of a tradition of learning where individual merit counts for everything and where shared inquiry into the truth transcends secondary characteristics of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

And while outcomes are important as measures, the process of acquainting oneself with the Great Books has value in and of itself.

A typical assignment-part of the semester theme "The Pursuit of Happiness"-has students examining 175 pages of Schopenhauer and drawing parallels from it to *The Old Man and the Sea*. Another assignment guides these students closely through John Stuart Mill's beautiful but challenging prose in *Utilitarianism*, bringing the ideas they encounter to bear on Aristophanes' *Women in Assembly*. These readings stand in stark contrast to the work in conventional modern community college curricula, where students might be assigned to view contemporary films or read popular novels as sources for research papers. You are invited to consider which students are better served.

The Great Books Curriculum quite deliberately goes far out of its way to reward and showcase outstanding scholarship. When meager funds permit, modest books scholarships for deserving students are given. More crucially though, curriculum committee members nominate student papers for what I believe is the only publication of its kind in the nation-a student-written scholarly journal concerning the Great Books called *Symposium*-whose second issue was lauded in the *Wall Street Journal*. This is another outcome to consider when viewing the value of a Great Books Curriculum.

There is a lifelong sense of accomplishment that attaches to a student who writes an essay on *Beowulf*, sees it published in a scholarly journal, knows that it is available to all on the World Wide Web, and receives in front of a large audience that includes family and fellow award Nor is it unlikely that there will be an effect on the contributor's younger siblings or friends, who aspire toward something similar. One Great Books faculty member, Maria Jaskot Indan, established a classical theater course and not long ago staged Plautus' *Menachmae* which employed student thespians with Filipino, Polish, Spanish, working class Italian, and African-American accents-a multicultural production indeed. They are also importantly broadened emotionally and culturally by participating in the obsessive hatred of an *Electra*, or the anguish of an *Orestes* in a classical drama class. Great Books courses lend a timeless perspective and equip students for encounters in their own lives that neither they nor their teachers can anticipate.

Through the Great Books curriculum, such students glimpse a new world and conceive a role for themselves within it. Growth happens when students meet others of similar interest and talent in a genuine academic setting, unavailable anywhere else in their environment that stimulates them intellectually. Once a person has, for the first time, stayed late after classes to debate Plato or T.S. Eliot, it is but a small logical step and revolutionary one in the intellectual growth of a student to write for the school newspaper or to participate in the academic honors society.

The Great Books Curriculum sponsors two campus-wide colloquia every semester. In the fall, a faculty panel presents brief papers that address the semester theme. Panelists then welcome student comments and critiques. In the spring, a student panel is featured in the same format, with the goal to create a true sense of intellectual inquiry that invites students to contribute personally. That also enables faculty to convey their special interests and expertise.

The Great Books Curriculum includes lectures, seminars, and discussions of classic

dramas at the Graham School on the University of Chicago campus. Following these activities, students attend a performance of the particular play at the university's Court Theater.

In addition, the Great Books Curriculum is present on the web at <<http://www.ccc.edu/wright/gb/home.htm>>. The site enables students to conduct Internet research, as well as to email their professors, and download syllabi, assignments, and the entire contents of the curriculum's journal, Symposium. Links from the site go out to museums, libraries, and online classical radio stations. There are also connections to Great Books literature in the public domain that students can acquire as part of their required reading for the course. In the fall of 2000, an Introduction to Literature class downloaded Aeschylus' *The Persians* and Joyce's "Molly Bloom's Soliloquy"-which would have been all but impossible to assign otherwise, because the cost of such primary texts is excessive for community college students

The web site is also useful for posting recordings of the curriculum's public colloquia and for fund raising through shared links with major online booksellers. Wright College's status as a Great Books campus has proven appealing to many who have their college degrees but who are interested in continuing the study of classic literature. The college has recently offered a new course in response to that demand. In further reaction to Wright's academic success and national recognition, Chancellor Wayne Watson committed \$15,000 to each of the campuses in the City College System to be applied either toward a Great Books or an honors program. And, more recently, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley has agreed to serve as honorary chairman of the advisory board to a National Great Books Institute, which will attempt to take from what has been learned about improving cultural literacy and critical thinking at Wright College and apply it for the benefit of underserved college students across the country. While there are few concrete data by which to compare the reading skills and cultural literacy of students who have studied the Great Books with the training of those who have not been so fortunate, the faculty has compiled anecdotal evidence, as well as a few simple surveys and feedback from student evaluations that attest to the worth of the Wright program. In those evaluations, students typically make two points.

The first is that reading the Great Books is difficult and time consuming. This verdict that Great Books courses are challenging is an important accomplishment, especially when seen in conjunction with the second most common observation on teacher evaluations that, when asked what they liked most about the course, students often say "reading the Great Books," "learning about the Great Books," and "our discussions about the Great Books." Statements of appreciation for the texts are far more prevalent than those expressing satisfaction at the skills that courses have conveyed-how to write a research paper, how to construct an argument, or some such.

Those who enroll in more than one Great Books course in a semester are pleased to come upon the themes of Classical Greece or Enlightenment England in their second class, where they are eager to display their budding expertise. Often the workload seems less daunting in subsequent classes, and veterans proudly rise above the agony and panic of students who are new to such readings. They have usually conquered the fear of writing, and with one course under their belts, old hands are much less prone to give up and drop a second or third. This accomplishment imparts confidence and the durable experience of real learning. The Great Books curriculum also better prepares students for transfer to four-year institutions. Over and above the badge of academic distinction that jumps off the transcript at college admissions officers, the student will also be less intimidated, say, by discussions of Greek philosophy or nineteenth-century Russian literature under the gaze of a new professor at a higher level.

This is because Great Books students have already learned the basics about the authors

and the historical periods being discussed and have been patiently tutored in them, in many cases line by line. Having mastered some of the best of Western thought, immigrants can use the Great Books to bridge the gap from their own parochial intellectual background to their adopted culture and to a far more commonly shared universal one. Indeed, the number of Wright students graduating with a Great Books certification has doubled each of the past two years and now represents about 20 percent of a graduating class. Most Great Books graduates leave with high honors. When assigned eight-to-ten-page research papers, students in the Great Books curriculum regularly display the ability to write cogently about such great thinkers as Thucydides, Schopenhauer, Aristophanes, and Swift.

The students may have needed a great deal of patient, painstaking explication to get there, and their papers may contain standard analysis and dull, awkward, often flawed prose, but that does not detract from the achievement. Practically every paper is intellectually competent and informed. Practically every paper illustrates mastery of some basic element, of history and high culture, and reveals that its author has contemplated some problem of lasting importance. This is an intellectual accomplishment for which the Great Books Curriculum can justly claim credit—one that ought to be available, as it once was, to all students regardless of ethnic and educational background.

Symposium is tangible proof of the impact of the Great Books curriculum. Its topics range from Beowulf to Alexander Pope to Ralph Ellison and beyond. The student work is sincere, solid, and reflective. Indeed, readers have insinuated that the faculty advisors to Symposium must have edited and heavily rewritten the contents.

On the contrary, faculty do not have to do much rewriting. But the insinuation that such work is beyond what Wright students and those at comparable institutions can think meaningfully and write about is flawed and damaging. Symposium demonstrates that universal questions—What moral codes do nations use when engaging in war? What is the nature of God? How does a person respond to sustained injustice?—are ones that the most average and uncultivated of intellects may ponder profitably. These fundamental questions bear down clearly, directly, and unavoidably upon us all. There is no better place to encounter them than in the monuments of human thought and art, patiently, eruditely, and carefully presented by informed professors who have made it their lives' work and avocation besides. Instruction of this nature is and ought to be the backbone of a college education and the professoriate's unique calling.

There are certainly students who do not make the necessary imaginative leaps and never delve deeply into the Great Books. But for every unappreciative student, there is another, like Oscar Martinez in the fall of 2000, who rises above initial reservations about an author and an era with which he is entirely unfamiliar, and embraces what a thinker like Jonathan Swift has to say about the world. By the time he had read through Gulliver's "Voyage to Laputa," Oscar was equating the Laputan ruling class—physically and emotionally cut off from its subjects—with the management of the company that employed him. Oscar worked out that comparison as part of a written assignment, and, shortly after turning it in, he quit his job and went looking for a new one. (Although the Great Books Curriculum cannot claim the entire credit, it is still true that when his essay appeared in Symposium and he was invited to be on the finest and most serious radio talk show in the United States—Milt Rosenberg's Extension 720 on WGN—Oscar could not make it because his new employers had sent him on a business trip to Portugal.)

Gulliver's Travels demands a great deal of elucidation and historical background—so much so that, in one class, no time remained for a discussion of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which had also been assigned. After one early evening session, half-a-dozen students lingered. When their professor wondered what kept them, they said they had read but not

understood "A Modest Proposal" and were frustrated that there was to be no explanation. Then these six working-class kids, who had never heard of Swift a few weeks before and who may have inwardly cursed their fates when they learned that this was to be the basis of their research paper, took seats in the deserted classroom and analyzed Swift's 400-year-old commentary on exploitation, suffering, outrage, and racism into the night.

The effects of a Great Books course are not always immediately apparent to the beneficiaries. In the initial sessions of recent research classes, the students were unable to contribute much of significance to the discussions of Swift. This changed incrementally until, by the semester's conclusion, they were regularly challenging their professor and each other with novel insights gleaned from independent research. In short, they were discussing the materials knowledgeably and confidently. When questioned about how that had come about, they had trouble looking back to the time when they could not recognize symbolism, irony, allegory, and other elements required to decipher serious literature and think about it meaningfully.

These were the students who welcomed the New York Times reporter into their classes, answered patiently the questions he put to them, and let him read the essays they had written as part of the Great Books curriculum. Six weeks after that visit, the article appeared on the front page. In it the reporter presented their replies. Asked why he did not enroll in courses more directly connected to his ethnicity, one Hispanic student said, "If I wanted to take an Aztec history course, I would. I am here to get a serious education." The reporter had asked a black student whether he was put off by reading about people of other ethnicities from other eras. The student replied that it was his job to get beyond race and see the common humanity in books written about other groups.

Students come to Wright College painfully cognizant of the intellectual gap between themselves and the well educated. Those who would consign GreatBooks to the "dustbin of history" and who would assign simpler materials produced by and about ethnic confreres do not understand or appreciate how self-destructive it is to immerse oneself only in what touches one parochially

Perhaps it is true that one can share some of his deepest insights into life and his most moving esthetic experiences only with people who are intellectually involved with the same materials at the same time. If that is true, then thousands of Wright College Great Books students-African-American, Hispanic, Polish, Pakistani, white, immigrant, military veteran, elderly widow, unwed mother, cultural illiterate, ex-gangbanger, ex-drug-abuser, working-class kid home from college for the summer-have shared thoughts and experiences that unite them into the exclusive community of shared literary insight.