

“Western Heritage, Diversity, and World Classics Courses: Problems of Coherence and Textual Selection in the Core Curriculum.”

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Trends in the Liberal Arts Core: A Vision for the 21st Century, was a three-year grant awarded by the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the American Academy for Liberal Education. I was the principal investigator on the project and, later, project director. *Trends* was a longitudinal study documenting the structure and causes of change in general liberal education at 66 colleges and universities across the United States spanning the years 1978 to 2001.

ACTC extended the Trends project, on a fee for service basis, to 15 more institutions and to the year 2004. The project represented the national proportions of affiliation and Carnegie class for four-year, baccalaureate degree granting institutions. I constructed a database that had the input of hundreds of data points drawn from catalogs during the study’s period of investigation. We, then, visited 36 campuses, interviewing hundreds of faculty and administrators to learn the causes of change we had seen in the patterns of data and to rectify any errors in patterns or data that our study might have made.¹

The Trends project gives a sense of long-term curricular trends, problems, and solutions in the United States which any faculty adoption of core text curricula based in World Classics might find useful to regard. One observation worth noting is that there really is no one solution to these curricular issues and, conversely, the solution of general, liberal education curricular issues, when centering on civilizations and world classics, while sharing some common themes and concerns, usually tends to be informed by the traditions, resources, and affiliations of each institution.

Trends found, among many surprising results, that general education increased in size and complexity of differential structure across all strata of institutions between 1978 and 2004. Indeed, if we conceive of general education as a proportion of all course work in a baccalaureate degree, then, nationally, the percentage of baccalaureate credits devoted to general education has risen significantly since 1978 – on average, from 38.5% to 41.4%.² A rise in percentage of credits is found in every Carnegie class and affiliation of institutions. General education programs are, typically, divided into categories and subcategories: e.g, into Proficiency Skills and Distribution, and under Proficiency Skills, Composition, Speech, and Math. Over the last twenty years, the median number of categories and subcategories within general education has increased from eight to between twelve and thirteen. These two trends in increasing credits and increasing differentiation of general education are important for they indicate that faculties are more and more directing the course-taking behavior of students and, thus, increasingly directing their own course-giving behavior. What, then, are the categories and subcategories toward which these increases in size and differentiation have been directed?

Between 1978 and 1998, two of the largest increases and most complex curricular developments had occurred, interestingly, in the Western Heritage-or-Civilization and Diversity categories.³ While they were not the fastest growing categories – lab courses and mathematics courses constitute the fastest growing – Diversity was the third fastest and Western Heritage-or-Civilization the fourth fastest, separated in growth rates by less than a point. In terms of institutions that require some fulfillment of these categories or subcategories, 50% of the *Trends* institutions, by 1998, had come to require some form of a Western Heritage category fulfillment and 33% of institutions required some form of a Diversity category. Most significantly, 19.6% of *Trends* institutions required both.

Moreover, this last figure is undoubtedly low, for many of the Western Heritage courses have been “globalized” or diversified and while still largely Western in their grounding, they are sites of diversity and multicultural innovations on campus.

The terms “Western Civilization” and “Diversity” are a bit like a string of Venn diagrams and the categories that are designated by these terms tend to partake of the characteristics of such strings. That is, across institutions, if you look at either the goals of the category or substance of courses offered, the category will have one meaning, another, and another, and portions of each meaning will overlap, though if you were to align the meanings one after the other, you find you have moved quite some distance in substance. For example, in 1978, we find Centre College, the University of Dallas and Samford University each required a course or more which fulfilled the category of Western Civilization courses. But each did it differently, reflecting the differences in interpretations of what Western Civilization was on each campus. Centre College required a choice of two different History of Civilization courses under the curricular category of Religion. That is, the history of Civilization was a history of religion. At the University of Dallas, the History of Western Civilization requirement was kept distinct from the Theology requirement. Dallas distinguished meanings of history from those of religion and, thus, Western Civilization appeared in one guise as an understanding of action, institutions, and societies, in another as an interpretation of sacred and meditative texts. Samford, on the other hand, required History 101, 102 Western Civilization: A World Perspective. Samford really meant World perspective for “the purpose of this basic course [was] to find in the civilizations of the Mediterranean area and Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America the origins of modern civilizations and cultures, particularly those of our own country.” Further, Samford required students to take a literature course, and one of the four offerings was “Masterpieces of World Literature,”

“a study of selected works” ranging from Homer, to Ibsen and Tolstoy, which encompassed not only imitative works, but works of philosophy as well. “Literature” was extended beyond one class of writing, one genre of works, and “World Literature” was, in 1978, European.

If Western Civilization could admit of varying interpretations and World Literature was European in 1978, the subsequent growth of Diversity or Alternative Cultures categories admitted even wider interpretations. In addition, by the nineties and well into the 21st Century, not only the content of so-called Western Civilization had changed, but the interactive relation between these two common categories of general education structure was changing, too. In a mid-80's reform Colorado College constructed two curricular requirements, Alternative Perspective A, Western Tradition and Alternative Perspective B, Other and Non-Western Tradition. As Tim Fuller, former Acting President and Dean of Colorado College remarked in a *Trends* interview, “There is a difference in character between A and B courses. All the A courses are two [sequenced] courses and virtually all of them are also used as entry-level courses into majors in the departments that teach them. [‘Most of the B courses are [single] courses and fall into many different disciplinary categories’.] The B requirement was never defined so precisely, in part to insure that there would be sufficient offerings to satisfy the B requirement; that requirement includes non-Western studies, Women’s Studies, and American ethnic minority studies. [‘The proliferation of B courses reflects as much the new interests of scholars as it does the B requirement as such.’] Some of the courses in the B category could be seen as really in the mainstream of Western Studies. The wide range of the B courses has been a matter of contention for a long time with no resolution of the issue. In addition, we also have some courses we call C courses. The latter are

designed in such a way, and usually team taught, to satisfy both the A and B.”⁴ Fuller’s remarks encapsulate all the forces that, often in contradictory fashion, lead to coherence and splintering of the undergraduate curriculum.

Martha Nussbaum’s mid-90’s book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, in a discussion of diversity requirements across the nation, reduces Fuller’s campus observations to a difficult choice for faculty; she writes, “basic ‘diversity’ requirements come in two varieties. There are elective requirements that allow students to choose one or two courses from a wide range of offerings ... [or] the more arduous, but potentially more satisfying approach is to design a single basic ‘multicultural’ course, or small number of such courses, to acquaint students with some basic concepts and methods.”⁵ Thus, the problems of textual selectivity, categorical coherence and integration with other aspects of the general education program, as well as faculty cooperation in building one or a limited set of courses, are the institutional contexts in which explorations of Asian and World Classics have been taking place within the United States.

After Nussbaum’s book’s publication, ACTC not only extended the *Trends* database to characterize diversity efforts, but it also has held its annual conference, every April, where are exhibited the efforts by individual faculty members and programs to internationalize the curriculum based on classic, core texts. Of the 15 institutions in the Trends extension to 2004, 4/5ths had adopted some kind of diversity requirement, but the coherence that Nussbaum yearned for, not surprisingly perhaps, tended to be found only in institutions having core curriculum, core text programs: of the 15 post-1998 Trends institutions, these include six institutions from a wide range of institutional types:

Benedictine University, Fresno Pacific University, Drury University, Kentucky State University, St. Mary's College of California, and St. Olaf College.

The tradition of core text education, of course, has its origins on the Columbia University campus in the 20th Century development of the Contemporary Civilization, Lit/Hum, the Core Curriculum more generally, and specifically, the Oriental Humanities program of the mid-to-late 90's. The latter, of course, has depended on the career dedication to Asian Classics and to the conceptual recognition by Professor Wm. Theodore deBary that the initiation of liberal arts, core text courses grounded in Western Civilization and Lit/Hum were propaedeutic to the expansion of core text, liberal arts education to World Classics and the many civilizations of both the East and West. ACTC participates in this educational tradition, with its colleges and universities – many represented at this conference – developing curricular tracks, courses, and texts that can contribute to our understanding of how to build World Classics programs. I have, in this talk, avoided discussion up to this point of several research universities which are very central to ACTC -- Boston, Columbia, and Temple University -- because faculty representing those programs can speak of some of the particulars of their integrative efforts at this conference. I have mentioned those comprehensive and collegiate institutions which are in the 7000-or-fewer student range because the broad range of U.S. higher education institutions, I think, offers collective curricular insights into the problems and, for the future, possibilities of World Classics programs. How have institutions moved their core curricula toward World Classics and what texts tend to be involved?

In 2000, a delegation of ACTC representatives traveled to Central Asia to review

a truly internationalized core text program, the Aga Khan Humanities Project. Stephen Zelnick of Temple University, co-founder and then-president of ACTC, will speak to that effort, tomorrow. At ACTC conferences from 1998 to 2001, the Aga Khan project represented what I would characterize as the only program approaching a wide-ranging integration of world classics covering the areas of concern – Western and Asian texts – in this conference. St. John’s College, Santa Fe, has had for years an Asian Classics program, but while it very much can be thought of as a fifth-year program, it is, nevertheless, separate from their fine baccalaureate degree in Western great books and liberal arts. If, then, we think of Columbia University, the Aga Khan project, and St. John’s as a kind of frame of integration, since 2000, what do ACTC annual conferences show about the landscape of integration of World Classics into curricula?

ACTC attracts roughly 120 institutions to its annual conference, with between 250 to 275 attendees, 200 of whom participate in about 50-60 panels at each conference. Within that context, first, there is a persistent eagerness by core text institutions and faculty to attempt such integration. Every ACTC conference since 2002 has had different forms of “internationalizing the core” panels, and between 1/10th and 1/5th of our conference panels will contain papers on international or world classics. Second, within interpretations of the meeting of East and West there is clearly a kind of search for commonality as a way to stretch across civilizational boundaries, and the core curriculum seems to be thought of as the locus wherein to achieve this stretch: thus, we find paper titles like, “East is East and West is West (Except in the Core),” “Different Cultures, Similar Issues,” or “East-West Classical Studies: An Approach to World Humanities.”

Third, varying strategies on internationalizing core curricula are taking place

across the spectrum of U.S. higher education. Programs at Lynchburg, Drury, and Hendrix colleges have all adopted core programs that are structurally reliant on offering core texts from many civilizations. Quite clearly, such programs are formed not only as intellectual expressions of faculty interest, but as ways to differentiate institutions in a highly competitive educational marketplace. Other programs are conscientiously using selected texts within a still Western-oriented curriculum: e.g., a paper from Samford University makes this relationship explicit: “Incorporating Eastern Texts into a Western Core: Teaching the *Tao Te Ching* in Conversation with Wallace Stevens.” Still other programs ground their core in an examination of Western literature and, then, add on an exclusively Eastern course. No one strategy dominates. If our earlier *Trends* research is any guide, it is unlikely that one model will ever become the cookie-cutter fitting all institutions’ core programs.

Fourth, at the ACTC conference, well over half of the papers involving international world classics that are not from the West are found in panels that are not devoted to internationalizing or to international topics within the core. But when coherence of panels about internationalizing does emerge, given the nature of ACTC, the preferred method is, not surprisingly, through texts: e.g., complete panels on topics like “Reading Asian Texts,” or “Japanese Literature” appear about every other conference. As with the East, the West has had a textual conversation for more than 2800 years, with which Western faculty and students are varyingly familiar. But, as the titles of these panels and of the comparative paper cited above indicate, integration presents its challenges. One solution seems to be parallelisms; another, as indicated by the following title from Transylvania University almost seems to be reversing the field while

addressing the problems in such approaches: “Teaching Comparatively While Teaching the Text: Confucius’ *Analects* On Its Own, Sort Of.” Both the employment of these texts in the core and the divergence of strategies in curricular development indicate the re-interpretation of an underlying principle that has informed core text programs since their inception: it is possible for the ordinary reader to examine fruitfully the texts of non-Western cultures and to create solutions to the problems of teaching texts across vast civilizational divides.

Fifth, Professor deBary has argued, justifiably I think, that the 19th Century is an important era in our concerns with the integration of core texts, for that is the period where sustained cultural interaction between East and West begins. It is interesting, therefore, to note that of all international texts originating outside the West that have been examined at ACTC, the proportion of texts discussed by ACTC conferees are three (3) pre-19th Century texts for every two (2) 19th and 20th Century texts. The balance, however, shifts when we examine Asian texts to nearly an even split.

The actual list of authors and texts used narrows the scope of this material even more. Ancient authors and texts are pretty much confined to Confucius and the *Analects*, Mencius, Zhuangzi, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Maharabata* and *Bhagavad Gita*, Lady Murasaki and the *Tale of Genji*, the *Dream of Nine Clouds*, and Basho. With the exception of selected works of Gandhi, 19th and 20th Century authors include almost exclusively Japanese novelists: Kobo Abe (*Woman in the Dunes*), Kawabata (*Snow Country*), Oe (*Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*), Endo *Silence*, Soseki (*Kokoro* and *Sensei*). Of course, this latter preference probably reflects both a textual/literary history of similar forms reaching as far back as the *Tale of Genji*, and a close cultural interaction between

Japan and the United States that extends back into the 19th Century. However, also striking about the list is how absent is the period that is similar to the absent, in core programs, medieval period of Western literature, philosophy, and science. Is this Western comparative cultural blindness or accidental historical concurrence? I leave the more qualified to explain this absence, and, perhaps, to enlighten us on how and whether to include such medieval Eastern texts in our own efforts, even when we cannot find authors or subjects to parallel with Western traditions. Somewhat less striking but more readily explicable is the absence of 19th and 20th Century Chinese political thought; still, it is hard to imagine that in 1965 Mao's *Little Red Book* would not have appeared in a similar list of 20th Century Asian core texts.

To experts in various literary, political, religious, philosophical, and scientific traditions of Asia east of the Himalayas, this limited bibliography represents, no doubt, a grievous truncation of an enormously rich literature. And there are participants at this conference who will attest to teaching courses in programs with far wider reading syllabi than are represented above. But the significance of the list above is that when core text professors and representatives of programs choose to describe their Asian World Classics efforts to similarly minded core curriculum professors, these are the works and authors they choose to present. This conference is designed to produce a wider list than this. Possibly, it might be worth our discussion to ask why an archipelago of these authors and works has surfaced above wider core text seascape of Asian world classics and what bridges we might build to construct a more connected road from island to island. Or, we could consider whether there are later "synthetic" works of literature or history that might indicate paths of textual and cultural syntheses to pursue. We might at that point, then,

begin to address the questions of coherence of alternative culture presentation within the context of core text, core curricula both on the North American continent and elsewhere in the world as well.

Originally published in *Classics for an Emerging World: Proceedings of a Conference on Liberal Education and the Core Curriculum*, January 19-20, 2008. Ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, Shang Wei, and Rachel. E. Chung. New York, Columbia University Committee on Asia and the Middle East, 2008, 21-27.

¹ J. Scott Lee, Principal Investigator, George R. Lucas, Jr. Project Director. "Assessing Trends in the Liberal Arts Core: A Vision for the 21st Century" FIPSE/Andrew W. Mellon/American Academy for Liberal Education and Study of the Evolution and Causes of Change in General, Liberal Education in the United States from 1978 to the present, with a continuation in a second phase by the Association for Core Texts and Courses. Final Report to FIPSE." Posted in this section of the Respondeo Books additional materials.

² Trends... Final Report "Trends data indicate that the average percentage of baccalaureate credits in all institutions devoted to general education programs in 1978 was 38.5. The average in 1998 was 41.4. Frederick Rudolph in *Curriculum* noted that Levine and Weingart in their *Reform of Undergraduate Education* had found that 'a survey of curricular developments from the period from 1967 to 1974 confirmed persistent trends — increased specialization, choice of electives in the field of concentration, the increase of electives at the expense of general education but not at the expense of majors' (248). Our data indicates, then, a gain by general education at the expense of electives." (p. 7).

³ **Error! Main Document Only.** Allen Bloom and Lawrence Levine, though disagreeing on its significance, find that the opposition of general distribution/elective systems versus the required courses of a core curriculum, often of great books, adequately describes the structures of higher education and, prior to their discussion, Frederick Rudolph in his *Curriculum* may have been said to set the stage for this debate for he finds that general education had fallen into two patterns during the course of the 20th Century: requirements "to take certain core courses or else to select unspecified courses in various subject areas" (253-254). Contrast, for example, Lawrence W. Levine's assertion that the "elective system ...in myriad patterns ... is the system that remains the norm today" in baccalaureate education, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, 46-47, and Allen Bloom's assertion three models prevail: "general education [as a] sample [of] a variety of fields," "composite courses" which tend to trendiness, and "great books" courses which almost nobody teaches, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987, 342-344. Levine has gone further to assert the "Western Civilization curriculum... was a twentieth-century phenomenon [whose] decline as the dominant feature of the humanities curriculum was brought about by alternations in the spirit and temper of the times..." (73) *Trends* would indicate that Levine spoke too soon about decline and that Bloom's worries were also reflective of a period, not a permanent condition, of general education. And, more importantly, the opposition of required courses versus distribution, one which many faculty and administrators still seem to carry, does not do justice to the history of general education in the last 20 years.

⁴ **Error! Main Document Only.**“Western Heritage, Diversity and Global Perspectives Courses: Mutual Growth and Strengthening of the Curriculum,” in “*Trends in the Liberal Arts Core: A FIPSE/Mellon/AALE Dissemination Grant on the Changing Face of General Education*” Presentation at AACU Annual Meeting, Washington DC, January, 2002.

⁵ **Error! Main Document Only.****Error! Main Document Only.**Martha Nussbaum. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (72).