

Below is an excerpt from the April 1994 Anniversary Address on the 75th Year of the Core, given by Judge Jose A. Cabranes CC'61 and U.S. Circuit Judge for the Second Circuit Court.

*Cabranes, born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx and Queens, attended New York City public schools. Prior to his appointment to the federal bench in 1979, he served as Special Counsel to the Governor of Puerto Rico, director of the commonwealth's office in Washington, D.C., and general counsel at Yale.*

*The text of Judge Cabranes' keynote address appears here slightly edited.*

None of us ever imagined that our general education in Western Civilization at Columbia College had any particular ideological or political significance. And yet the Core Curriculum continues to come under attack, both by those who take issue with its focus on the West, and by those who challenge the idea that the faculty may be in a better position than a college freshman to determine what studies will provide a foundation for advanced or specialized learning.

The present campus controversies about Western Civilization curricula, and Columbia's understandable urge to trumpet its own (now virtually unique) core curriculum, are both part of the continuing national debate on the place of general education in a university curriculum--a debate that touches our very identity as a people.

In the face of these controversies over the so-called "canon," we who had the good fortune to attend Columbia College--and others who also have appreciated the value of a curriculum such as ours--do well to remind ourselves of what the core curriculum sets out to achieve. Let's begin in a place where critics all too often fail to look--the history of Columbia's Core Curriculum. What is often forgotten in the current debate is that one of the original purposes of the Columbia Core Curriculum was to benefit students from immigrant and less-privileged backgrounds, in the second decade of this century.

What paved the way for the democratization and diversification of the student body was the erosion of the original classical curriculum at Columbia, and in particular, the elimination of the Greek language admission requirement. As a result, more students came to Columbia from the public schools, producing what Dean Frederick Keppel in 1914 termed a "social diversity." It was for this socially diverse undergraduate body, in the wake of the Great War, that Columbia's faculty required a common course of study for all freshmen, introducing all of its students to the culture they could all inherit and share.

By effectively placing all of its students on an equal footing, the new curriculum made it possible for underprepared public school students to compete with the graduates of elite private schools. These courses stressed the reading of historical documents and great books. In Contemporary Civilization, students studied works chronicling the history of social, economic and political

ideas--from Plato's *Republic* to Augustine's *City of God*, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Darwin and Freud.

In the precursor of Literature Humanities, students wrestled with eternal questions, as revealed in a series of great works--one great book read each week, from Homer's *The Iliad* to Thucydides, Plato's dialogues, the Book of Job and the Christian Gospels, Dante's *Inferno*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

A distinguishing, if not revolutionary, characteristic of these courses was that they were taught as sequential and prescribed surveys for all students, and they were taught by faculty from several different disciplines.

Of course, there has always been a grain of truth in Professor Ernest Nagel's description of such courses as "intellectual tourism." But this "tour" of Western literature and intellectual history ensured, and continues to ensure, that freshmen and sophomores at Columbia go forward for the remainder of their college years, and their lives, with a broad, basic background in Western thought.

Education is about choices--about hierarchies of choices established by reason, by experience, and by the good sense of our teachers--and about teaching students how to make choices with informed and discriminating (as opposed to discriminatory) judgment.

The installation and continued vitality of the Core Curriculum reflects a series of choices--the choice of the lasting over the ephemeral; the meritorious over the meretricious; the thought-provoking over the merely self-affirming.

The Columbia faculty makes these initial choices for our undergraduates, so that they, in turn, can make their own choices.

Columbia not only exposes students to works and ideas that have stood the test of time--what Matthew Arnold famously described as "the best which has been thought and said in the world"--it supplies them with a foundation for common discourse, and equips them with benchmarks for a lifetime of thought and judgment. In particular, Columbia attempts to ward off the siren song of unrestrained relativism.

Let us recall what the Core Curriculum is *not* about.

- The Core Curriculum is *not* about conscripting students into particular viewpoints. The act of requiring the reading of a text does not amount to an endorsement of the view expressed.
- The Core Curriculum is *not* about politics. The commonly heard obfuscation that "everything is political" should not be serviceable as grounds for the faculty's abdication

of responsibility to make choices and to aid undergraduates in making enlightened choices for themselves.

- The Core Curriculum is *not* tantamount to a repudiation of other cultures. Exponents of a Western Civilization curriculum at Columbia and elsewhere have not suggested that such a curriculum results in the exclusion of the study of other cultures or the contributions of all our people--and, least of all, that it forecloses the study of our various sins and imperfections. Columbia College, for example, long ago pioneered area studies and a famous undergraduate elective sequence on Asian Civilizations and Asian Humanities.
- Finally, the Core Curriculum is *not* about self-affirmation and self-esteem--although surely it *does* empower the individuals who gain an understanding of our civilization. As the student body becomes more diverse, Columbia's mission remains constant to teach its students the intellectual history of the culture in which they all live; to train its students to tackle problems with analytical rigor; and to outfit students with the requisite vocabulary for critical inquiry.

This enterprise often produces discomfort, particularly when the questions outnumber the answers, when the concepts veer off the map of familiarity. But it is the successful grappling with this discomfort that yields *true* self-esteem--a self-esteem which should not be confused with the fleeting psychic comfort of hewing to charted territory.

Columbia's Core Curriculum is of special value to those of us who emigrated to these shores or whose families were newcomers or have been marginalized here.

Indeed, I am prepared to defend the proposition that one good reason to preserve Western Civilization programs is to benefit and liberate minorities.

Columbia teaches us that a student's religious, racial or ethnic identity is no barrier to entering the ranks of the educated. Columbia does not define its academic program on the basis of our backgrounds.

It invites us all, regardless of our origins and with full respect for our origins, to join in the common study of our shared Western heritage, and to do so with an appreciation that criticism and reform of our institutions is an integral part of the tradition we describe as "Western Civilization."

Neither Columbia College nor others should yield to those who--purporting to speak for minority groups--urge that we abandon a common curriculum in favor of one largely shaped by personal identities.

The fears and anxieties of minority students that today are invoked to justify demands for a curriculum of "relevance," mirror the fears and anxieties that gripped me and all my classmates, and that grip all college students.

Those who yield to pressures to reject a Western Civilization curriculum--in the name of "diversity," or in the name of sensitivity to minority groups--do minorities a singular disservice, by depriving us of the great opening to the world represented by this sort of curriculum. We are demeaned by the assumption that our self-fulfillment and growth depend on a reinforcement of what we know, rather than on a confrontation of the unknown--by suggestions that we have an affinity only for the familiar or the self-referential in academic affairs.

We are demeaned by the intimation that we are now and forever alien to the Western heritage. Indeed, we are isolated and marginalized ever more by being deprived of engagement with the texts that have influenced or inspired humanity for centuries.

As the history of Columbia's Core Curriculum suggests, the content of a prescribed general education program at Columbia or elsewhere does and should change over time.

But if relentless cries for relevance and diversity should ever lead to dismantling the program of common studies in Western Civilization, then all students--including minority students--will be left ill-prepared for the role we all face as participants in a democratic society.

Our system of government under law--itself a triumph of the Western tradition that nations around the world continue to admire and emulate--will inevitably suffer.

As a judge, I cherish this country's system of constitutional government, the principles of fairness to which our law aspires, and our society's dedication--through its laws--to the protection of the individual. And yet, I am all too aware of the system's fragility and vulnerability. Our system of democratic self-government can be no better than the people charged with maintaining it--both public officials and citizens. That is one more reason why we must defend and preserve those educational programs that ensure an understanding of the system's foundations, its development, and its shortcomings.

Even if we look to "relevance" as the guiding principle of higher education, I wonder who could dispute the relevance of studying, say, the Magna Carta of 1215, to the protection of civil rights today?

I still recall reading in my freshman year the following passage: "To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice."

The ideas of due process, trial by jury, indeed of limited government--each of these bricks in the foundation of Anglo-American democracy was laid in the Magna Carta. Even the American notion of a *written* constitution and bill of rights--perhaps our greatest contribution to democracy around the globe--traces its origins to this ancient document.

Put simply, we must defend and preserve the common study of the Western heritage, which unites us in all our diversity and which reminds us that we can and do share in a common tradition that enlightens and empowers us all.

The Core Curriculum is for all of us--including those of us who are most hurt by parochialism, isolation and segregation.

We should continue to hope that others under the stress of contemporary political pressures will find in Columbia College the same inspiration as its alumni, and that they will repeat with us our ancient motto: *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen* --In your light, we see light.