

## **THE PHILOSOPHY OF GENERAL EDUCATION AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS: THE INFLUENCE OF HUTCHINS**

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In February 1999, University of Chicago president Hugo Sonnenschein held a meeting to discuss his proposals for changes in undergraduate enrollment and course requirements. Hundreds of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates assembled in protest. An alumni organization declared a boycott on contributions until the changes were rescinded. The most frequently cited complaint of the protesters was the proposed reduction of the “common core” curriculum. The other major complaint was the proposed increase in the size of the undergraduate population from 3,800 to 4,500 students. Protesters argued that a reduction in required courses would alter the unique character of a Chicago education: “such changes may spell a dumbing down of undergraduate education, critics say” (Grossman & Jones, 1999). At the meeting, a protestor reportedly yelled out, “Long live Hutchins!” (Grossman, 1999). Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University from 1929–1950, is credited with establishing Chicago’s celebrated core curriculum. In Chicago lore, the name Hutchins symbolizes a “golden age” when requirements were stringent, administrators benevolent, and students diligent. Before the proposed changes, the required courses at Chicago amounted to one half of the undergraduate degree. Sonnenschein’s plan, eventually accepted, would have reduced requirements from twenty-one to eighteen quarter credits by eliminating a one-quarter art or music requirement and by combining the two-quarter calculus requirement with the six quarter physical and biological sciences requirement. Even with these reductions, a degree from Chicago would still have involved as much or more general education courses than most schools in the country. Why, then, were these changes so upsetting to many? Why do protestors continue to invoke the spirit of Hutchins?

In this paper, I will attempt to place the current Chicago controversy, which led to Sonnenschein's resignation in May 1999, within a historical context. I will begin by outlining the history of general education requirements at Chicago from their origins in the early part of the century to the present. Then I will analyze the pronouncements of the group of professors at Chicago and Columbia, including Hutchins, who called themselves the "general education movement" in the 1930s and 40s. These men helped establish general education at those schools and inspired other universities around the country to follow their lead. The writings of these thinkers form a fairly coherent philosophy of general education. While this philosophy did not dictate the precise form general education took in this country, it is the most influential component of the pro-general education forces. Through scholarly writings on education and popularized versions of their philosophy, Hutchins and his circle saw themselves as shaping undergraduate education in this country and self-consciously promoted their achievement. To some extent, they were correct. Many of the changes he and his colleagues wrought upon education are still with us. Still with us as well are the internal contradictions and inconsistencies within the philosophy of general education. By exploring those contradictions, I hope to dispel the myth of a golden age of general education. Today's educational controversies at Chicago and elsewhere in part originate in unresolved contradictions in the original philosophy of general education. In the final section of the paper, I will suggest some of the ways the philosophy of general education influenced curriculum requirements at American colleges and some of the new problems general education faces. While this paper offers no solutions to the sixty-plus year debate over general education, I hope that it will assist in placing these debates within a historical perspective.

### **The Origins of General Education: Columbia**

Today, most American undergraduates are required to take some amount of general education—a combination of training in basic proficiency in writing, mathematics, and foreign language and a

sampling of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences in either a set of distribution requirements or in prescribed survey courses. To these are added the requirement of a major field of concentration plus electives.<sup>1</sup> This pattern evolved out of a gradual replacement of the nineteenth-century classical and religious curriculum of the university.<sup>2</sup> As universities eliminated Latin and Greek requirements around the end of the nineteenth century, they adopted an elective system where students were free to choose their course of study from a wide range of disciplines. A group of educators calling themselves “generalists” united around the turn of the century, protesting against the specialization involved in the new Germanic-modeled university and the fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum. These educators devised survey courses like Charles Mills Gayley’s “Great Books” course at Berkeley, first offered in 1901 (Graff, 1987). Graff describes the philosophy of the generalists:

The common bond of the generalists was their belief that, in Trilling’s words, ‘great works of art and thought have a decisive part in shaping the life of a polity,’ and their consequent impatience with the narrow pedantry of research, which in their most pessimistic moods they regarded as a betrayal of everything Matthew Arnold had stood for. (p. 85)

The generalists did not immediately reform undergraduate education, but through their indirect influence, Chicago’s general education requirements were developed. Two courses at Columbia were used as models for these requirements.<sup>3</sup> The first course, “Contemporary Civilization,” was something of a historical accident. Contemporary Civilization developed out of a course called “War Issues” designed to teach GIs about European culture during World War I. The course, first offered in 1917, was “developed to acquaint young men with the culture . . . they would be fighting to defend” (Howley & Hartnett, 1997, p. 20). In 1919, the course title was changed from “War Issues” to “Introduction to Contemporary Civilization” and began to be required of all Columbia freshmen. While the course was originally designed as an introduction to European culture, by the 1950s Contemporary

Civilization had become a social science survey course. A 1955 collection of course readings called *Man in Contemporary Society* included excerpts from major social science thinkers like Freud, Durkheim, and Weber, organized around different issues like democracy, “Man, Mind, and Culture,” and “Self, Person, and Society.”

The other and more influential course at Columbia was the brainchild of a generalist scholar, John Erskine. Graff (1987) points out that Erskine was less an innovator than a popularizer of an already-existing movement for generalism in the teaching of literature. The course originated as a two-year honors seminar in the humanities. In 1920, Erskine first offered “General Honors,” whose syllabus consisted of “a list of some fifty or sixty [works], from Homer to William James, masterpieces in all fields—literature, economics, science, philosophy, history—with the general purpose that students in the new course should read one of these books each college week for two years” (Erskine, 1922, p. 13). The students read and discussed the books without any historical or contextual background: “I wanted the boys to read great books, the best sellers of ancient times, as spontaneously and humanly as they would read current best sellers, and having read the books, I wanted them to form their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion” (Erskine, 1947, p. 343). This class inspired the Chicago curriculum through the influence of some of Erskine’s more prominent students. General Honors students in the 1920s included Mortimer Adler, Hutchins’s closest advisor, and Richard McKeon, later professor of Greek and Philosophy and Dean of the Division of Humanities at Chicago, as well as Mark Van Doren and Jacques Barzun, both of whom later became Columbia professors and outspoken advocates of general education. Erskine’s original list formed the foundation for the syllabus of Adler and Hutchins’s humanities course at Chicago in the 1930s, the list of one hundred great books of the St. John’s curriculum, and the fifty-four volume Britannica set of great books (Adler, 1977). Erskine’s course was first required of all Columbia freshmen in 1937, under the title “Literature Humanities.”<sup>4</sup> Today, Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization remain the cornerstones of Columbia’s core curriculum, to which have been added required courses in science, foreign language, and other subjects.

### The University of Chicago

While Columbia's courses provided the inspiration, the University of Chicago's curriculum is considered "the most thoroughgoing experiment in general education of any college in the United States" (Bell, 1966, p. 26). Over the one hundred years of its existence, Chicago's curriculum has been continually debated and revised, hardly remaining stable for ten years at a time.<sup>5</sup> The origin of general education as we know it at the University of Chicago is usually associated with its charismatic president, Robert Maynard Hutchins.<sup>6</sup> When Hutchins first accepted the presidency, Chicago had an entirely elective undergraduate curriculum. One of Hutchins's first acts was to establish undergraduate general education requirements in 1931, a step the university had been considering for several years. Hutchins's "New Plan" grouped the departments of the university into four divisions—Humanities, Social Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Physical Sciences. At the same time, the undergraduate college was established as a separate division within the university with its own faculty. Under the New Plan, undergraduates were required to take four yearlong introductory courses in each of these four divisions, followed by comprehensive exams on each subject. For these courses, mandatory attendance and letter grades were eliminated. The grades on the examinations were the only gauge of academic success (Mayer, 1993). By the time of Chauncey Boucher's book, *The Chicago College Plan*, just four years later, the original four courses had been expanded to two full years of general education. The general education portion of the curriculum culminated in seven day-long examinations—four in each of the four divisions, a reading and writing skills exam, and two other exams in fields of the student's choice. After exams, the final two years of college were devoted to specialization and electives.

From 1943 to 1953, the Chicago curriculum reached the pinnacle of its general education requirements. Although the plan was eventually abandoned at Chicago, nostalgists still speak of these as the golden years of the "Hutchins college" in Chicago mythology (see McNeill, 1991). At this time, the B.A. degree was conferred after a four-year fixed program of general education. At

the same time, Hutchins experimented with a new conception of college education. The Hutchins college theoretically ran from the junior year of high school through the sophomore year of college. After the B.A. degree, Chicago graduates who wanted to specialize in a field were encouraged to stay on and complete a Master's degree in their field of choice. *The Idea and Practice of General Education*, compiled by members of the Chicago faculty in 1950, describes this stage of the Chicago curriculum. The book compiles essays on the various requirements for the degree, reading lists, and sample examinations. Within this program, attendance was optional, and the only grades conferred were for the set of examinations on each field. Students could take these exams whenever they felt they were ready, whether they had taken courses in the subject or not, and could re-take the exams until they received the grade they desired. The curriculum consisted of three years each of the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, and one year each of English, Mathematics, a foreign language, Western Civilization, and "Observation, Interpretation, and Integration." These last two courses were intended to synthesize the accumulated knowledge of the first three years of study.

Hutchins left the university in 1950 for a job at the Ford Foundation and his visionary plan gradually dissolved. His dream of a college beginning at age 16 was destined to fail because the entire system of secondary education in America would have had to be restructured. High schools were unwilling to let their best students go after the sophomore year. Many students thus entered Chicago after four years of high school. In these situations, attending Chicago actually decelerated students' educational progress. After completing the Chicago degree, students found they had to do additional coursework to be accepted into graduate programs anywhere but Chicago. The lack of personal choice in the program, its reputed rigor, and the length of time needed to prepare adequately for the exams, sometimes five or six years, kept undergraduate enrollments low.

In 1953, the college voted to return to the regular undergraduate pattern of two years of general education and two years of specialization, running from grades 13 through 16, the pattern which still exists at Chicago (McNeill, 1991). Orlinsky (1992)

describes the years 1954–63 as a time of the loss of a uniform conception of general education. Required courses were gradually pared down or eliminated. In the late 1950s Chicago again gained national attention through the introduction of non-Western civilizational sequences, in Oriental, South Asian, and Islamic Civilization.

The next major change to the college came in 1965 when Provost Edward Levi reintegrated the separate college faculty and the graduate faculty and divided the college into divisions corresponding to the graduate divisions. Each division had slightly differing general education requirements, while the first year of college consisted of yearlong general courses in each of the four collegiate divisions, called the “common core.” After the Hutchins experiment of 1943–53, the undergraduate degree returned to something like the original 1931 “New Plan.”

In the most recent set of curriculum reforms in 1985, requirements were standardized for undergraduates regardless of the division in which their major resided. As it stood before Sonnenschein’s recent adjustments, an undergraduate at Chicago is expected to take a year each of humanities, social science, biological science, physical science, civilizational studies (Western or non-Western), and a foreign language, plus two quarters of calculus and one quarter of art or music. Sonnenschein’s reforms and the source of the most recent controversies reduced these requirements by three quarter courses.

### **The Philosophy of General Education**

The complexity of Chicago’s curricular history results from the institutional battles over the content and scope of general education. Within this history, however, a fairly coherent philosophy of general education can be gleaned from the writings of the self-proclaimed “general education movement.” In the 1930s and 40s, this philosophy guided the establishment of the “common core” at Chicago and inspired other universities to follow suit. The general education movement consisted of a circle of influential professors and administrators, including Adler, Hutchins, McKeon,

and R. S. Crane of Chicago, Barzun, Erskine, and Mark Van Doren of Columbia, and Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr, of the University of Virginia and later of St. John's College. The movement flourished in the 1940s: "Why is it that in the 1940's we cannot open a periodical without finding a discussion of the *new* 'classical curriculum' at Chicago or St. John's College, Annapolis?" (Barzun, 1944, p. 138). In these writings, the philosophy behind general education can be examined apart from its specific embodiments in institutions, where board and faculty opposition resulted in compromises in Hutchins's original proposals. This philosophy contains a set of internal contradictions in purpose and method, some of which continue to inform debates over curriculum requirements at Chicago and elsewhere.

The purest institutional embodiment of this ideal of general education still exists in the United States at St. John's College. The experiment in general education at St. John's was a side project of some of the men involved in the movement for general education.<sup>7</sup> In 1935, Hutchins assembled a "Committee on the Liberal Arts" to discuss radical changes he wished to make at Chicago. On Adler's recommendation, Hutchins brought in Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr of the University of Virginia. The university community rejected the scope of Hutchins's proposed changes, and the committee was dissolved. In 1937, however, the nearly bankrupt St. John's College in Annapolis offered Hutchins a chance to enact the committee's plans. Hutchins accepted the chairmanship of the board of St. John's and appointed Buchanan as president and Barr as dean. The board of St. John's gave Hutchins and his colleagues *carte blanche* to save the school from bankruptcy. Unlike at Chicago, no institutional forces at St. John's opposed the complete realization of Hutchins's vision. The undergraduate program they devised, which still exists today, consists of a four-year fixed curriculum centered around the study of a list of one hundred great books, based on an expanded version of Erskine's original list. These books are discussed in seminar format, supplemented with lectures, laboratory experiments, and language tutorials. St. John's offers no electives and no undergraduate majors. Since 1937, the curriculum has changed very little. The only major adjustments to the reading list involve the inclusion of a few



female authors like Jane Austen and George Eliot, and the addition of classical music to the course of study (Smith, 1983). For better or for worse, St. John's remains unique in the extent of its commitment to Hutchins's vision of general education.

Hutchins had bigger plans than merely establishing an idiosyncratic liberal arts college. As his later work with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the Committee to Frame a World Constitution, and the Ford Foundation demonstrates, Hutchins dreamed of changing the world through education. After World War II, he became an advocate of world government. In a 1949 address to the University he declared: "The critical task of our time is to try to save civilization by the creation of a world community" (p. 35). Earlier though, Hutchins's political visions revolved around a rational version of democracy. He elaborates his educational philosophy most clearly in the 1936 book *The Higher Learning in America*. His brand of education, he claims, can change "the character of our civilization" (p. 118). James Sloan Allen (1983) sees Hutchins's commitment to education in the great books as part of a larger utopian vision: "The Great Conversation at once expressed the coherence of Western culture and clinched the case for humanism, democracy, world peace, and global unification in a world threatened with destruction by the atom bomb" (p. 108). By providing mandatory and free general education through the second year of college, Hutchins argues, "We can come to prefer intelligible organization to the chaos that we mistake for liberty" (p. 119). He believed that for a true democracy to function, all of its citizens must be educated enough to make rational, intelligent voting decisions. This tenet became one of the cornerstones of the philosophy of general education. As Van Doren (1943) puts it, "Education is for all, and there can be no compromise with the proposition" (p. 30). In the 1920s, three of Hutchins's closest allies—Adler, McKeon, and Buchanan—all worked for the cause of adult education. They lectured to recent immigrants living on the Lower East Side of New York, discussing the great books at the People's Institute at Cooper Union (Smith, 1983).

This experience with the People's Institute helped to shape Adler's philosophy of education for democracy, which he then imparted to Hutchins. When translated into the confines of a se-

lective institution like Chicago, however, a contradiction developed between the belief in education for all and the exclusionary practices of the school. High-priced and selective colleges obviously were not providing education for all. The course of study they offered was historically aristocratic. The notion of an education in the classics and of knowledge for its own sake was part of the nineteenth-century ideal of a gentlemanly education, providing refinement and culture to the upper classes rather than training them for a profession. When this kind of education is then provided to working-class students, it becomes part of a democratic philosophy. If it is provided only to a select group of upper-middle-class students, it carries residual traces of its aristocratic origins.

The old idea of education as refinement points toward a latent agenda within the content of general education courses: “‘Great books’ can be considered a type of ‘Americanization’ program with all the antidemocratic characteristics associated with the term” (Rubin, 1992, p. 177). In the early part of the century, “Americanization” became institutional anti-Semitism.<sup>8</sup> Harvard, Columbia, and Chicago all claimed to have a “Jewish problem” in the years between the two wars (Wechsler, 1992, p. 218). Daniel Bell’s 1966 study of general education identifies three impulses that directed the establishment of general education programs: anti-professionalism, a need to replace the old classical curriculum, and the changing character of student body caused by the wave of immigration around the turn of the century. In the 1920s through 40s many universities, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton, placed admissions quotas on Jews, parallel to the immigration quotas that existed at the time (Synnot 1979). Although Chicago never established the same sort of quota system, Wechsler (1977) argues that “Invidious discrimination began at Chicago some time after 1932. It does not seem to have survived World War II” (p. 230).

At the same time, these schools adopted admissions procedures based on a combination of test scores, a personal essay, and even a photograph to weed out the undesirable. While universities could not exclude Jews entirely, they tried to keep the Jewish population low. At the same time, they tried to “Americanize” those they did accept through a healthy dose of Western culture.

In the writings of educators, concern about Jewish students centers around the recent influx of Eastern European, especially Russian, Jews. These students were Orthodox rather than Reform, and not yet assimilated into American culture. One dramatic example of this type of thinking can be found in Dean Keppel's 1914 book *Columbia*. In it, he addresses the claim that that Columbia was "overrun with Jews":

What most people regard as a racial problem is really a social problem. The Jews who have had the advantages of decent social surroundings for a generation or two are entirely satisfactory companions....There are, indeed, Jewish students of another type who have not had the social advantages of their more fortunate fellows....Some of these are not particularly pleasant companions... (qtd. in Bell, 1966, p. 20)

After World War II, admissions quotas were dropped. Jews were admitted freely to the university and hired in significant numbers to university faculties (Synnot, 1979). The contradiction between belief in democratic principles and institutional exclusion in this guise has disappeared, only to reappear in other forms. Today the largest immigrant populations in universities are from South and East Asia and the former Soviet Union. In these cases, the interest in "Americanization" persists in a not entirely unadmirable concern for English language proficiency. In recent years, debates over affirmative action at Berkeley and open admissions at CUNY present the more controversial heirs to this problem.

The general education movement promoted democratic values within exclusionary institutions. A similar irony can be detected in the reaction against the perceived vocationalism of the university, which Hutchins in *The Higher Learning in America* attributes to "the love of money" (p. 4) in our culture. Hutchins rails against universities that only train students for a job: "Vocationalism leads, then, to triviality and isolation; it debases the course of study and its staff" (p. 43). The Hutchins university of the 1940s and St. John's attacked this problem by eliminating all undergraduate specialization. Even today, Chicago offers no pre-professional majors like engineering, journalism, or business.

The problem inherent in this type of study is that students graduating with a B.A. degree are not prepared for any career. If students are not trained for a career because of the debased “love of money,” they are unprepared for any sort of job after graduation and must go on for further training unless they are independently wealthy. Working-class students, even on scholarship, could not and still cannot afford the luxury of the acquisition of ideas for their own sake. Despite the populism of Hutchins’s rhetoric, a great books education, like the nineteenth century classical curriculum, trains students to be leisurely “gentlemen.” Of course, students with a great books education frequently go on to become doctors, lawyers, or academics. These professions, however, require further training and expense. On its own, a B.A. degree in the great books does not prepare a student for any particular career.

Hutchins’s attacks on the “love of money” are at odds with the implicit profit motive in his actions. Despite Hutchins’s attacks on materialism, much of his self-promotion and the changes he implemented functioned to set Chicago apart from other universities at a time of increased competition for undergraduates. Chicago’s “New Plan” was first implemented during the Great Depression. While it attempted to remedy the problems of the undergraduate program, it also served as a means for Chicago to distinguish its undergraduate curriculum from that of the thousands of other colleges competing for the small number of students who could afford to attend college in those years. Chicago emphasized the rigor and uniqueness of its curriculum, and printed books like *The Chicago College Plan* describing these qualities, perhaps as a means to reassure parents that they were getting a “good value” for their money by sending their children to Chicago.

Hutchins’s belief in the great books extended beyond the confines of the university. Hutchins and Adler conceived of a program for adult education in the great books that drew national attention to their ideas. Critics of Hutchins in the 1940s claimed that his attention was increasingly devoted to promoting a show-businesslike version of his great books idea outside the university. In 1944, Hutchins and Adler established adult discussion

groups on the great books for Chicago businessmen. The height of the frenzy came in September 1948 when the mayor of Chicago declared "Great Books Week" (Mayer, 1993). Adler and Hutchins conducted a discussion of Plato's *Apology* before a capacity crowd of 3,000 people in Orchestra Hall. Adler's attention was diverted from the university earlier in the decade by another profitable endeavor, his best-selling *How to Read a Book* (1940). In this work he outlines a method of close reading and appends a list of the great books similar to the Erskine list. At the same time that Hutchins and Adler were attempting to promote their adult great books classes throughout the country, they were hard at work compiling a set of the *Great Books of the Western World* for Encyclopedia Britannica. The advisory board for this project included many of the key figures of the general education movement, including Erskine, Barr, Buchanan, and Van Doren. The fifty-four volume set, published in 1952, was based on Erskine's list and its expanded version, the St. John's curriculum. The first three volumes of the set comprised an introduction by Hutchins, a ten-year course for reading the great books, and a two-volume index called the "Syntopicon."<sup>9</sup> Adler's Syntopicon was a list of 102 great ideas, from "Angel" to "World" and a list of the places within the great books where you could find discussions of them. The index came about when the publisher asked Adler and Hutchins for a "special idea" to enhance the marketability of the set and distinguish it from similar sets like the Harvard Classics (Allen, 1983). In practice, the index defeated the ostensible intentions of the great books set. Rather than reading these works over the course of ten years, buyers would employ the Syntopicon to use the books as reference works. Whether or not they were read, they were extremely successful. The great books set sold 150,000 copies at \$250 a set from 1952 to 1962 (Allen, 1983). While Adler and Hutchins personally earned royalties for their work, the bulk of the profits went to the University of Chicago, which owned two-thirds of Britannica.<sup>10</sup>

Along with vocationalism, another target of the general education movement was specialization, which caused the fragmentation of knowledge in the university. These thinkers sought a principle for the unification of knowledge as a counter-force to

the creation of new disciplines, to the increasing specialization within academic disciplines, and to the vocationalism they saw as a fault of most undergraduate programs. Erskine's essay "General Honors at Columbia," written for the *New Republic*, expresses this desire for a unifying principle: "In Columbia College, as elsewhere, the advantages of the elective system have been somewhat offset by the loss of intellectual tradition from college life—by the disappearance of any body of knowledge with which all the students are familiar and all the alumni once were" (p. 13). Erskine recommended a common course for all undergraduates in the great books. This course would simultaneously give students a common experience and common topic of conversation and would unify their knowledge under the principle of the "great conversation" of Western thought. In the first issue of the *Journal of General Education*, editor Earl McGrath claimed that general education is "the unifying element of a culture. It embraces the great moral truths, the scientific generalizations, the aesthetic conceptions, and the spiritual values of the race, ignorance of which makes men incapable of understanding themselves and the world in which they live" (1946, p. 3).

Julie Reuben's *The Making of the Modern University* asserts that general education humanities courses replaced the moralizing and unifying role of religion: "In the late nineteenth century intellectuals assumed that truth had spiritual, moral, and cognitive dimensions. By 1930, however, intellectuals had abandoned this broad conception of truth. They embraced, instead, a view of knowledge that drew a sharp distinction between 'facts' and 'values'" (1996, p. 2). Even after the importation of the Germanic-model research university in the late nineteenth century, undergraduate education in America still contained a principle of unity in religion. Reuben claims modern moral education fell into three overlapping stages. A period of religious education lasted until about 1910. For example, the University of Chicago, established in 1892, offered credit for Sunday school classes in its first years. As the religious content of the university faded away, science and the social sciences next bore the burden of morality and unity in the first two decades of the twentieth century:

Until the 1910s social scientists generally agreed that the aim of their research was the production of morally relevant knowledge. Only in the late 1910s and 1920s did advocates of value-free science gain a significant voice in American intellectual life. The association of 'objectivity' with moral neutrality significantly changed the debates among social scientists. (p. 157)

As this ideal of value-free science rose in popularity, the function of moral education was transferred to humanistic enterprises and extracurricular activities, from around 1915 to 1930. Reuben claims that the aesthetic appreciation cultivated in humanities classes contained a kernel of morality: "Just as religion had been dissociated from 'cognitive' truth, morality became divorced from 'factual' knowledge and aligned instead with 'fictive' and 'aesthetic' truth. The good, then, became associated with the beautiful, not the true" (p. 7).

Reuben (1996) connects the moralizing function of education and the unifying principle of knowledge. In the nineteenth-century curriculum these two qualities were united by a belief in Christian doctrine. Christianity provided a coherent ethics and an order to the universe. In the twentieth-century secular university, however, religion lost its power to serve as education's master narrative. For the special breed of general education practiced at Chicago and St. John's, philosophy assumed the role of the master discipline—both by unifying knowledge as a "great conversation" on the "great ideas" and by providing a philosophical system of ethics. Humanities courses at Chicago were heavily weighted towards classic texts of Western philosophy. For example, one of the most popular Humanities sequences during the 1980s and 1990s, "Form, Problem, Event," focused on the problem of ethics and spent a month each on Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The curriculum changes that produced courses like "Form, Problem, Event" were part of Hutchins's larger reconception of the university. By restructuring the university and creating interdisciplinary committees Hutchins also attempted to provide a principle of unity and organization to the separate fields of knowledge

represented by the different disciplines. One of his first acts as president was to group academic departments into the four divisions of Humanities, Social Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Physical Sciences. Even more strikingly, over the next twenty years he and his colleagues created a number of interdepartmental committees. As Dean of the Humanities, Richard McKeon created interdepartmental committees on the Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Methods, Language and Communication, the History of Culture, and Comparative Studies in Art and Literature. With these committees, he hoped to work toward “preventing the fragmentation of the humanistic enterprise” (McKeon, 1990, p. 16). The most notable and notorious committee was located within the Division of the Social Sciences—the Committee on Social Thought. Founded by Hutchins and three others in 1941, Social Thought took a great books approach to graduate studies. In a catalog of interdisciplinary programs, Elizabeth Bayerl (1977) quotes from the 1975-77 catalog description:

[The founders of the committee] were concerned that the world of thought had been losing touch with its common classical and Christian inheritance. Overspecialization meant that the human and moral implications of questions in particular fields were no longer being discussed; academic inquiry was therefore becoming less relevant to the total life of society. The sign of such overspecialization was the division of the university into a number of departments, to each of which was assigned a field distinct from all others. (pp. 345–46)

Interdisciplinary committees aimed to bring people from different disciplines together and thus to unify their enterprises. Particularly in the case of Social Thought, the committee in reality became an autonomous entity with its own unique methodology. Today Social Thought is something of a pariah among graduate programs at Chicago. The influence of conservative former faculty members like Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom has kept the committee resistant to recent theoretical trends, while its approach, based on the close reading of great books for a particular idea (like justice) across historical and cultural boundaries is antitheti-



cal to the kind of close, culturally specific work that prevails today. While the attempt to find common ground among the various disciplines is a laudable project, Social Thought has become a separate and unique discipline that has little or no contact with the more progressive factions within the university, such as the faculty involved with the journal *Critical Inquiry*.

The cross-cultural work of Social Thought is made possible because it is founded upon a belief in the universality of human nature. In the writings of the general education movement, human nature is taken to be universal and thus understandable within a system of universal knowledge. Hutchins states this position clearly in *The Higher Learning in America*: "One purpose of education is to draw out the elements of our common human nature. These elements are the same in any time or place" (p. 66). Hutchins learned this anti-historicist, universalizing approach to education from Adler, who in turn learned it from John Erskine. In *The Delight of Great Books*, Erskine articulates the anti-historical approach adopted by many general education courses, which he asserted in opposition to the philological approach of departments of literature at the time: "A book which of itself says nothing to us, is doomed, and no amount of historical knowledge can rescue it" (pp. 12–13). The "truly great" books, he claimed, "are those which are capable of reinterpretation, which surprise us by remaining true even when our point of view changes" (p. 21). Erskine was trained as an Elizabethan scholar. He knew how to read and teach a book within a historical context. In his General Honors course, however, he emphasized the contemporaneity of the books he taught in order to engage his undergraduates in lively discussion. His student Adler then took this technique and turned it into an educational philosophy. Adler (1940) claims that "the fundamental human problems remain the same in all ages" (p. 333). In the Britannica set he helped assemble, the books are arranged chronologically, but without prefaces or historical background. Similarly, students read the texts in Humanities and Social Sciences courses at Chicago non-chronologically, without contextual information, and are instructed to avoid prefaces or secondary works on the texts.

The anti-historicist pedagogy encouraged at Chicago and at St. John's conflicts with the idea that the content of the courses is a historical product—"Western culture" or tradition. In the preface to *The Great Books of the Western World*, Hutchins calls the great books our "birthright." Although these books constitute an inheritance from the past, Hutchins shuns the idea of supplying a historical framework. "The books," he claims, "should speak for themselves" (p. xxv). In the Chicago curriculum of the 1940s, the Western Civilization course was intended to supply the historical framework for the knowledge the student had gained of the humanities, social sciences, and the history of science. Even this course, however, emphasized primary sources by great thinkers. Thus Chicago undergraduates learned history as the history of ideas, without the social, economic, and cultural background needed for a richer historicist understanding of the texts. Sample exam questions from the 1950s demonstrate the anti-historicism of the curriculum. One question asks students to combine the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Marx and Engels, and Pope Pius XI into an essay on private property, while the "Observation, Interpretation, and Integration" exam pairs statements on themes like pleasure from thinkers as historically diverse as Aristotle and Mill (Present and Former, 1950). The contrast between the historical content that the promoters of the general education movement called for and the anti-historical approach they advocated forms a contradiction in general education that remains unresolved. Although the pendulum of academia has swung back to the side of historical contextualism, at places like St. John's and Chicago many students are first exposed to the great books within a historical vacuum.

Another problem beset the establishment of general education programs and continues to plague educators today: the balancing of the teaching of factual content and the teaching of the basic skills of reading, writing, and thinking. In the program outlined in *The Higher Learning*, Hutchins yokes the study of great books to the acquisition of basic skills: "We have then for general education a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the Western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, the best exemplar of the processes

of human reason” (p. 85). Central to many of the thinkers of the general education movement was a belief in the ancient “seven liberal arts,”<sup>11</sup> particularly the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. These skills, of course, can be taught in any number of ways. The offspring of the general education movement teach them using the specific content of the great books. In a 1931 letter from Chicago professor R. S. Crane to Dean Chauncey Boucher, Crane points out the tension between the acquisition of basic skills and the teaching of a particular content:

There is also the problem of forming or developing what may be called basic intellectual habits—basic in the sense of being fundamental to all more advanced and specialized intellectual effort whether within the University or without. The ability to see problems, to define terms accurately and clearly, to analyze a question into its significant elements, to become aware of general assumptions and preconceptions upon which one’s own thinking and that of others rests, to make relevant and useful distinctions, to weigh probabilities, to organize the results of one’s own reflections and research, to read a book of whatever sort reflectively, analytically, critically, to write one’s native language with clarity and distinction—the development of these powers...would seem to me to be no less the business of “General Education” than the communication and testing of knowledge, and I am not sure that they are not, in the long run, the most important and valuable fruits of a well considered “General Education.” (qtd. in Boyer, 1999, p. 52)

In his separation of skills and knowledge, and his emphasis on the former, Crane was a dissenting voice at Chicago. For Hutchins and Adler, the only way to teach people to think and express themselves clearly was through an education in the classics of Western culture. Many colleges around the country require a basic skills course like Expository Writing at NYU or Logic and Rhetoric at Columbia. At Chicago, however, the Humanities course in particular bears the burden of teaching composition and critical thinking skills.

### **The Fate of General Education in America**

The philosophy of general education, with its internal inconsistencies, guided the development of the American undergraduate curriculum. The conduit through which these ideas flowed was a 1946 book called *General Education in a Free Society*, more commonly known as the Harvard “Redbook.” The book originated in a committee formed to develop a general education program for Harvard. In it, however, the writers discuss the need for general education across the country at the college level and in secondary schools, echoing the sentiments of Hutchins and the other writers discussed above. The Redbook lists the reasons for the growing concern over general education: the rapid expansion of knowledge, the growth of the educational system, and the increasing complexity of society. It calls for “education in a common heritage and toward a common citizenship” (p. 5). The writers of the Redbook propose for Harvard a program of general education similar to those in place at Chicago and Columbia, a version of which was approved in 1949 (Bell, 1966, p. 47). In their proposal, general education will constitute one-third of the undergraduate degree, including a humanities course called “Great Texts of Literature” (including Homer, Plato, the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy) and a social science course called “Western Thought and Institutions” (featuring writers like Aquinas, Rousseau, and Mill.) The Redbook’s influence was tremendous, although less so at Harvard than at other universities. Most colleges in the country instituted some version of general education requirements in the years following its publication. This influence cannot be attributed solely to the ideas elaborated there, since the writers I have discussed above had been making similar pronouncements for twenty years. Instead, the Redbook gained national attention because its timing was right. As its title suggests, educators felt a need to assert Western culture and democratic values in the aftermath of the threat of fascism and the developing culture of the Cold War. Equally important to the Redbook’s influence was the massive influx of students after the war, particularly returning soldiers on the G. I. Bill. University enroll-

ments rose from 1.5 million in 1940 to 2.078 million in 1946 (Belknap and Kuhns, 1978).

The subsequent history of general education in American universities falls into several rough stages. At the time Daniel Bell's *The Reforming of General Education* appeared, in the mid-1960s, many schools were evaluating and cutting back on general education requirements.<sup>12</sup> Bell (1966) attributes these revisions to changes in the character of secondary education—the reform movements of the 1950s and 60s, the expanding functions of the university, the shifting emphasis on research, the rapid growth of new disciplines, and the transformation of the social and class structure, as well as the increasing power of government money in the university, the rise of popular culture, and the increasing numbers of students attending college. Many writers on general education are quick to attribute the relaxation of curriculum requirements solely to student radicalism: “The current era of curriculum reform is a by-product of the 1964 Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley” (Carnegie Council, 1980, p. 290), while Bell's account seems much more plausible because as a sociologist he takes larger social and economic factors into account. A survey revealed that nearly three-fourths of U.S. institutions reduced general education requirements between 1967 and 1974 (Gaff, 1983).

In the late 1970s universities again became interested in general education.<sup>13</sup> Requirements that had been relaxed or abolished were reestablished at many universities. Gaff (1980) identifies three events in 1977 that touched off the national effort to redefine general education: the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching labeled general education “a disaster area,” a Harvard Task Force on the Core Curriculum convened to discuss strengthening undergraduate requirements, and U. S. Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer began calling, both publicly and in print, for the reinstitution of a core curriculum. All these pronouncements were motivated by a sense that academic achievement in the United States had been slipping since the 1960s. The College Entrance Examination Board reported an annual decrease in test scores over twelve years, while the Association of American Universities decried the “nationwide increase in student ig-

norance and illiteracy” (qtd. in Belknap and Kuhns, 1978, p. 36).<sup>14</sup> After these three events, educators responded very quickly. By 1978, the *New York Times* had reported that “a counterrevolution is under way...virtually every liberal arts faculty in the country is beefing up its own curriculum requirements” (Fiske, 1978).

During this second phase of interest in general education, a phase that has not yet ended, writers on education generally agree that contemporary students are less well educated than previous generations. They attribute this decline variously to a deterioration of secondary education, student radicalism of the 1960s (see Bloom, 1987), anti-intellectualism and popular culture (see Belknap & Kuhns, 1978), and the increasing numbers of students attending college:

In recent years, however, the pressure to maintain enrollments has meant that these less well prepared students have generally become incorporated into the student population each year in increasing numbers, until the faculty has awakened to discover that former standards for university-level courses have become eroded because of the poor mathematical backgrounds of their students. (Hudspeth, 1978, p. 117)

All of these factors seem to have contributed in one way or another in creating the current state of education. For example, the rise in the number of students attending college over the last 35 years is dramatic: from 2.2 million students enrolled in 1959 to 14 million in 1997, from 50% in private institutions in 1950 to 78% in public institutions in 1997 (Andersen, 1998).

As the quote from Hudspeth above suggests, educators in the last twenty years have felt increasingly burdened with the task of remedial education—teaching basic communication and mathematics skills. As I hope I have shown above, teaching basic skills has always been a part of the first two years of college. Steven Marcus claims that remediation has always been a part of general education:

What has not always been there is the unwillingness on the part of people like ourselves to admit that [general educa-

tion] is proper and legitimate and rewarding work for specialists...And if this step can be followed by the acknowledgement...that much of the work that we have to do in the first two years is not done in secondary education and will not be done in secondary education, and that it is our proper work to do, then a step away from demoralization will have been made as well. (qtd. in Belknap & Kuhns, 1978, p. 36)

During the first years of this revitalized interest in general education, some American universities began to look to the University of Chicago for inspiration. In the 1980s, many schools interested in strengthening their general education requirements modeled their reforms on Chicago's core curriculum. Later in the decade, another development tied to Chicago inspired a new debate surrounding general education. In 1987, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* both appeared, bemoaning the failure of American educators to teach Western Culture.<sup>15</sup> These two books sparked a national debate in the media about the content of general education courses—Western versus non-Western civilizations and the inclusion of female and non-white authors in humanities courses. This debate in turn has inspired more curriculum revision. Institutionally, change has tended to go in one of two directions. On the side of canon revision, in 1994, Columbia added a two-semester non-Western civilization requirement, "Major Cultures." On the side of "cultural literacy," NYU replaced the Liberal Education Plan, which offered a variety of options for fulfilling distribution requirements, with the Morse Academic Plan, with more stringent science requirements and a greater emphasis on the great books and a Western Civilization requirement, "Conversations of the West."

These debates over the canon have tended to overshadow the original grounds for reviving general education courses in the late 1970s—lack of student competence in basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills. Hirsch (1987) addresses this issue, echoing the arguments of Hutchins and Adler forty years earlier: "Facts and skills are inseparable. There is no insurmountable reason why

those who advocate the teaching of higher order skills and those who advocate the teaching of common traditional content should not join forces” (p. 133). Today at Chicago, while protesters point to the reduction of required courses by three credits, reporters have not mentioned another important set of revisions—adding writing tutorials to humanities and civilizational studies courses. A March 12, 1999 letter from Dean John Boyer to Chicago alumni describes the proposed changes in response to alumni protest, including the addition of writing tutors designed to strengthen general education at Chicago: “But we also want to ensure that our students have a very intensive writing experience in their general-education courses...” A fresh perspective on the case of Chicago’s proposed revisions is gained by looking at the history of curricular debate. Educators have been arguing over the balance between skills and facts, democracy versus selectivity in education, vocational training versus general courses, and universalism versus historicism for a long time. Each generation of educators has to find the proper balance between these factors in relation to external forces. In this perspective, then, Chicago’s revisions can be seen not as the weakening of a historically rigorous curriculum but as a much-needed adjustment in response to current educational needs.

#### Endnotes

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1. This combination is by no means universal. American institutions run the gamut from Brown University, which has no requirements except the major field, to St. John’s College, which has a four-year fixed curriculum (see below).

2. For a description of the nineteenth-century curriculum see Graff (1987) and Reuben (1996).

3. For the history of Columbia’s curriculum, see Howley and Hartnett (1997), Bell (1966), Hawkes (1929), and Erskine (1922 & 1947).

4. In his autobiography, Erskine (1947) disassociates himself from some of the outcomes of his original course, especially the path taken by his most infamous student, Mortimer Adler: “This course of mine in reading great books had been adopted in many colleges, but not always as I intended it. Many teachers have turned it into a course on philosophy, on some specific philosophy, and others have tried to expand it into an educational method for teaching all subjects” (p. 343).



5. For more detail on the extremely complex history of curriculum changes at Chicago, see Graff (1987), Mayer (1993), Boucher (1935), MacAloon (1992), McNeill (1991), Dell (1978), Present and Former Members of the Faculty (1950), and Orlinsky (1992). The most recent and thorough history of curriculum change at Chicago can be found in a report published by the University of Chicago: *Three Views of Continuity and Change at the University of Chicago*. The booklet collects three speeches given by John Boyer, Dean of the College, to the faculty. In his speeches, Boyer highlights the debates over curriculum that have gone on in the past fifty years, in contrast to many of the histories that smooth over differences to create a picture of continuity. Boyer emphasizes the instability of the curriculum to frame the current proposed curriculum changes in a historical perspective.
6. Several good biographies of Hutchins exist. See in particular Mayer (1993) and Dzuback (1991).
7. On the history of St. John's see Smith (1983).
8. On the history of exclusionary practices in American universities and specific examples of anti-Semitic policies, see Synnot (1979), Bell (1966), and Wechsler (1977).
9. For a discussion of the Britannica set in the context of "middlebrow culture" see Rubin (1992). On the set as the commodification of the great books idea see Allen (1983).
10. By pointing out the conflict between Hutchins's pronouncements against the "love of money" and his own profitable schemes I do not mean to suggest intentional hypocrisy. If Hutchins only wanted to make money, he could have found better means for doing so. Rather, because his ideas were embedded within a capitalist system, they had to conform to the commodity structure, as Allen (1983) suggests: "Here is the irony of the twentieth-century relationship between commerce and culture. By so successfully allying their cultural aspirations with commercial techniques, artists and intellectuals helped unify modern culture, but at the risk of turning art and ideas into commodities, things so readily and casually consumed that they must lose much of their power to criticize life and to change it" (p. 294).
11. The seven liberal arts, an ancient Greek concept, consist of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, and geometry). For a call for a renewal of the trivium in particular, see Van Doren (1943) and Adler (1977).
12. For example, Brown dropped all its requirements except the major in 1969 and Berkeley's Experimental College Program began in 1965.
13. Recent writing on general education includes Miller (1988), Williams (1968), Gaff (1983), Boyer (1980), Carnegie Council (1980), Fiske (1978), Burhans (1984), and Arden (1979).
14. In his influential *Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch (1987) cites the statistic that 56% more students scored above 600 on the verbal section of the SAT in 1972 than in 1984 (p.5).
15. For a fuller discussion of Hirsch and Bloom in the context of canon revision, see Guillory (1993).

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