Not By Breadth Alone: On General Education at Carleton

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A major focus of Carleton’s ongoing curricular review has been the meaning, structure, and content of general education. The following paper takes up this theme and argues for the creation of an optional general-education program centered on the study of “classic works” (especially “great books”), something Carleton has not had since the demise of the Integrated General Studies program in 2000. Recognizing that the content and even the validity of such terms as “classic works” and “great books” are contested, I first make a case for such an approach and only then explore what a program might look like and how it might fit into the Carleton curriculum. No specific program is proposed, though options and criteria are explored. My purpose is to make a general suggestion and promote discussion. In preparation for this report I investigated programs at many other institutions.¹

INTRODUCTION

A liberal education may be many things but first of all it is a general education. This, it seems, is agreed by all. But what is a general education? What are its necessary components, its aims, and its grounds? And how can these things best be reflected in the curriculum?

As the recent report by John Ramsay and Chico Zimmerman painfully demonstrates, Carleton as an institution has not articulated clear answers to these questions in recent memory.² In place of reasoned exposition of our general education requirements (our distribution requirements), the College Catalog offers only high-minded but hopelessly vague and cliched formulae. The apparent implication is that we do not offer more because we cannot offer more:

¹A terminological note: By classic works I mean writings and artworks that are widely regarded as historically important and/or especially illuminating with respect to basic, perennial themes. (The meaning of these criteria will be addressed in what follows.) I do not mean to refer to any particular era. In the sense in which I use the term, there are ancient, modern, and post-modern classic works.

evidently we lack clarity and conviction regarding the meaning of general education. Perhaps, though, we know more than we think we do. Our cliches may carry real meaning; they may even carry some truth. If so, then a good way to begin to think about general education would be to unpack our vague words and recover their meaning. I will therefore begin by offering such a formula, one that seems to me sufficiently broad and consensual to serve as a fruitful starting point: *The purpose of a liberal education is to broaden and deepen the human being.*

In what follows I will offer thoughts on what these goals ("broaden," "deepen") mean and some ways in which they might be reflected in the curriculum. I should point out that my formula is not found in the College Catalog, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor, as far as I can tell, has it been the guiding principle of any of our recent discussions of general education. My formula departs from these in one crucial respect. The premise of both the Catalog and our recent conversation has been that general education is or ought to be primarily oriented toward achieving *breadth*. *Depth*, on this view, is to be achieved by students through study in their majors. My view disputes this division of labor. That general education must be an education in breadth is certainly true. But a general education can and should also seek depth – not the depth of a major (i.e., the mastery of a particular body of knowledge or way of knowing) but what one might call humanistic or simply human depth, i.e., thoughtfulness about and insight into what it means to be a human being and what it might mean to live well. Such depth does not belong to any particular discipline. In fact in the strict sense it is *nondisciplinary*, since disciplines inevitably presuppose just the sorts of things that a humanistic depth education makes it its business to question. (Note that "nondisciplinary" is not quite the same thing as "interdisciplinary.") The kind of depth or thoughtfulness of which I am speaking can never be
perfectly attained, but it is the most radical and arguably the most humane aim of education and therefore seems a worthy goal. And if it hasn’t figured much in the Catalog or our curricular deliberations over the years, it nevertheless is implicit in our conception of general education. (To see that this is so, it suffices only to think of how we’d react to the prospect of graduating students who are widely learned but happy never to be troubled by questions concerning what it means to be a human being and to live well.) The readiest access to this kind of depth, it seems to me, is through serious encounters with classic works, and especially the careful study of what are widely referred to as “great books.”

I. THEORY

A. Breadth Education, Depth Education, Liberal Education

1. In General

If we as a faculty haven’t been able to make a substantive case for breadth (Ramsay and Zimmerman), what chance is there that we’ll be able to agree on the meaning and value of an education aiming at both breadth and depth? But raising the two together may help clarify them both, particularly if we begin with the single term that incorporates them both: liberal education.

As the term suggests, a liberal education is an education befitting a free person. More importantly, liberal education is a means to becoming a free person. Students arrive at college with a slew of inherited presuppositions and prejudices. These presuppositions and prejudices
may well be benign, but so long as and to the extent that they are unexamined, the student’s mind
is something other than free. In principle, the promise of a liberal education is liberation from
all one’s prejudices and presuppositions insofar as these are unconsciously held: what had been
unconsciously held to be true is raised to consciousness and considered in the best light that one
is able to bring to bear on the matter. This liberation begins as one becomes aware of questions,
i.e., as one discovers that much of what one had “known” all along is in fact questionable – not
necessarily wrong, though more than likely partial even in its truth, and in any case not truly
known until recognized and addressed as questionable. This discovery takes place most readily,
in my view, by studying two kinds of works. First are the works from which our conventional
wisdom, our current presuppositions and prejudices, arose – that is, the works in which these
views were freshly and cogently argued or articulated, before they were conventional wisdom.
Encountering such works allows one to consider many of one’s own views or the sources of
those views in their most coherent and impressive form and to recognize them for what they
were, i.e. alternatives to a prior conventional wisdom. Since we today are the heirs of multiple
and competing cultural sources, ranging from pre-modern religious and philosophic traditions to
the scientific and philosophic revolutions of early modernity to late-modern and even
post-modern teachings, membership in this category is broad and varied.

The second category consists of those works whose arguments and representations are
fundamentally different from our own yet compelling in their vision or power. From this point
of view, that a work is alien to one’s customary way of thinking is all to the good: for the very
reason that we encourage mastery of foreign languages and study abroad, we should also
encourage study of works from far-away times and places. A moment’s reflection reveals that
many of the works that fall into this category fall into the first category as well, since books and artworks that are sources of our self-understanding can also contain notes and themes that are by now (or perhaps always have been) quite alien to us. The point right now is not to compile a list or decide which works belong in which categories (especially since there is no need for students to tackle one category ahead of the other) but to establish principles of selection. Meeting either of these criteria, I would argue — either being a source of our self-understanding or articulating a powerful alternative worldview — makes a work worthy and even needful of study. A work that meets either criterion offers students the opportunity for the kind of depth learning that I have been discussing. And studying multiple works that meet either criterion is an important step toward breadth as well.

The argument I have been making primarily concerns the humanities. But it also — necessarily — concerns the whole of general education, and not only the humanities, for two reasons. First, an education that addresses the basic questions of the humanities, which are also the basic human questions (i.e., what it means to be a human being and to live well), must take account of the arts and the natural and social sciences insofar as they speak to and have influenced the way we conceive of these questions. Second, a humanities education that

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3 "The basic questions of the humanities . . . the basic human questions . . . what it means to be a human being and to live well?" — What I mean by these terms are such questions as the following (and many others besides): What is human excellence, and how can it be taught? Are there conflicts, even contradictions, among its components, e.g. between moral virtue and the requirements of personal happiness? What is moral virtue, and what are its grounds: does it consist in selfless service, or in self-realization, or some blend of these? What do we owe to others — to family, to community, to humanity and the earth — and why? What is the relation between justice and interest? Are they at odds, or can they be complementary, and under what circumstances? What is the relation between justice and love? And what is love? Why do people love what they love (what is the role of beauty, and what is beauty?), and can love be the foundation of community — how, and to what extent, and with what dangers, if any? Are the varieties of what we call love really alike in any meaningful sense, and are they in accord with one another or in competition? (Is the exclusivity of eros at odds with other goods?) Do human beings naturally long for transcendence? for encounter with divinity? What are the implications, theoretical and practical (including political) of such a longing, whether or not it's natural and however one conceives of it? Serious consideration of these questions draws on many disciplines in all divisions of the curriculum, not just the humanities.
broadens and deepens the human being will necessarily inform and enhance the rest of one’s learning, including the natural and social sciences, and should help students to assimilate and benefit from those other studies. Among the benefits is the ability to make reasoned judgments about the applications of the natural and social sciences. (This ability, it’s worth noting, is important not only to individuals but also to society, since the making of reasoned judgments is one of the elemental activities, perhaps the elemental activity, of thoughtful and effective citizenship.) What I earlier described as nondisciplinary is in a sense predisciplinary, in that it prepares students to benefit more fully from more specialized pursuits. No one lives (or would want to live) a “value-neutral” life. How we interpret, assimilate, and make use of the discoveries of the natural and social sciences are determined, inevitably, by what we think about the animating questions of the humanities — not because they are the animating questions of the humanities but because they are the basic questions of value, the basic questions of our lives. Thus general education, understood in the admittedly idealized way I have described, can be general in positive, integrative ways, and not just by virtue of being broad or interdisciplinary.

Often, if not always, reality will fall short of the ideal I have sketched. But against this concession it’s worth making one more positive claim — namely, that the study of classic works is typically an enlivening and joyful experience for students. (I base this claim not only on my own impressions but also on those reported to me by the many professors I have consulted who teach in various “great books” programs at other institutions.) This alone is a powerful argument for creating a formal program aimed at facilitating such experience.

In the preceding paragraphs I have sketched an argument that applies to many if not all times and places. It seems to me, though, that the benefits stemming from the study of classic
works are especially important to our particular time and place, and that the case for this
approach to general education is best made by considering the current context.

2. Here and Now, Especially

In many ways contemporary life militates against general education and the
thoughtfulness and freedom that general education both requires and promotes. And what is
ture of general education as such is all the more true with respect to general education that is
oriented toward the close study of classic works. This means that the case for the kind of
approach to general education that I have been propounding is hard to make today. It also
means, however, that the case is all the more worth making.

Many of the features of contemporary life that I have in mind predate the current moment.
Tocqueville identified them over a century and a half ago and diagnosed them as endemic to
modern democratic culture. One of these features is the endless and passionate pursuit of
material well-being. Another is a tendency to value things only according to their perceived
utility, so that what is concretely useful, which usually means useful toward material ends, is
prized over benefits that can’t be empirically measured: work is primary and leisure secondary, in
that the latter is defined in terms of the former (leisure defined as non-work, or a break from
work) and justified for the sake of the former. Other features include suspicion of claims to
greatness, which are seen as evidence of an unjust “elitism” or even “authoritarianism,” and
skepticism toward if not suspicion of that which isn’t already popularly embraced. The latter
expresses a general inclination to revere public opinion, or “conventional wisdom,” so much (and
so unconsciously) as to render real freedom of thought a more difficult attainment in modern democracy than in other kinds of regimes. Finally, though one could go on, Tocqueville observed a shrinking of time horizons and a concomitant loss of interest in the products of prior ages: the old, formerly and often unjustifiably revered for being old, is now often unjustifiably dismissed for being old.

These phenomena (and others) contribute to a cultural scene that isn’t very favorable to general education of any kind and is downright unfavorable to general education that is centered on study of classic works. But the antagonism works both ways: general education of the kind I’ve been describing, aside from its other benefits, is a way of countering the phenomena I’ve listed. The case is made by Tocqueville, who advocates classical liberal education as a check against these unfortunate byproducts of democratic culture (as he sees them) without compromising democracy’s basic principles or stifling its finer possibilities – far from it. In order for general education to achieve this end, of course, students must be open to it; the contravening cultural currents must be less than all-powerful. In my experience, this is in fact the case. I don’t know if this is because students sense the treasures that such education offers, or because they’re inclined to resist whatever conventional wisdom happens to prevail. More than likely, both reasons hold true, and others too. I also don’t know what proportion of our students will be open to this education. My own experience and the experience of colleagues with whom I’ve consulted, while encouraging, can hardly claim to be representative, since our students come to us self-selected. But to judge from the proliferation, popularity, and success of related programs at other institutions, there is reason to think that many students would be open to such study if it were given some kind of formal recognition in the curriculum. What this
recognition could look like will be explored in the final section of this report.

B. Objections, Responses, and Obstacles

Many criticisms have been leveled against the classic-works approach to general education. To address these criticisms comprehensively would not be fitting for a report that aims only to begin a conversation, not end one. I do think it would be worthwhile, though, to acknowledge what I take to be the most common objections to the classic-works approach to the humanities (or, as it is more commonly put, the great-books approach) and to offer a few words in reply.

- Some critics read into this kind of approach, which is sometimes described as “traditional,” a political intent. Yet the radical nature of these works (which often means a greater emphasis on posing questions than on providing answers) and their differences from one another with respect to life’s basic questions, including political questions, suggest that “the tradition” as a whole points in no single political direction. That some conservatives have assumed otherwise is evidence only of their misunderstanding – or of an understanding of greatness that departs from that of traditional liberal education. The “Tradition” is a tradition of questioning. It is no canon.

- Others argue that this kind of approach amounts to an unwarranted endorsement of Western learning over other traditions. But this is not the case, and nothing precludes the inclusion of non-Western classic texts in a general humanities program. Indeed, the second of the two
criteria for selection that I proposed makes no distinctions based on the cultural origins or site of a work. The first criterion, however, does suggest that there is a particular need to study the powerful works of the Western tradition – not because we hold them superior to the works of other traditions, but because, for better or worse, they are the sources of so many of our current prejudices, presuppositions, and commitments. I have already suggested that liberal education can be truly liberating by affording students the chance to encounter consciously and critically the sources of views they have hitherto been holding unconsciously and uncritically.

- Third, some argue that there are no nonarbitrary grounds on which to value some books or works of art over others. All value is held to be subjective. This is perhaps the most philosophically fundamental criticism of those I am listing. In response I would only like to say that although the criteria according to which certain works have been judged important or valuable are assuredly subjective in part, they are not simply subjective. The judgments of greatness are at least inter-subjective, as seen in works that have enjoyed high esteem over a great length of time; and the merits of these works can at least be argued in terms that admit of rational discourse. And of course some works and ideas can fairly, even objectively, be said to have been influential, which surely makes them worth studying for the reasons discussed in the preceding paragraph, irrespective of their intrinsic merits.

- Fourth, one hears sometimes that in an ever-changing world the emphasis of education ought to be on learning how to learn rather than on transmitting any particular body of knowledge. Whatever the merits of this assertion, though, it seems to me that the value of the great works of
the humanities is precisely that they do teach us how to learn. They do this, however, not by teaching technical skills but by opening us to the questionable nature of the world and by teaching us, through our engagement with the works, to consider much that we might never otherwise have considered.

- Finally, some seem resistant to a classic-works approach to general education on the grounds that to lay out a coherent program presupposes that we have a grasp of how the various disciplines and domains of learning relate to each other and form a unified whole, whereas in truth we don’t have that understanding and don’t even know that there is a unified whole. The latter is certainly the case: unlike our forebears in prior centuries, few of us today suppose that we can articulate the relations between the disciplines, let alone assimilate all their learning. Yet, far from arguing against a classic-texts approach to general education, these limitations argue for it, in two ways. First, our awareness of our inability to see an integrated whole removes at least one obstacle to encountering classic texts freshly and on their own terms. If we don’t suppose that we know in advance what to make of a work, we are more apt to hear what it actually has to say. Second, our awareness of our inability to see an integrated whole may lead us to look for such a whole. A good part of what it means to study great works of the humanities, or to study great works of other domains from a humanistic standpoint, is to encounter insights into the possibility or impossibility of constructing a coherent worldview. Looking for a whole doesn’t guarantee finding it. Far from it. But this kind of looking is also thinking, integrative thinking, and thus itself constitutes a liberal education.
Each of the objections I have just raised is based on a legitimate concern and reflects a real danger or unfortunate possibility (though not, in my view, an inevitable outcome). Each, accordingly, deserves our attention. Two other unfortunate possibilities also deserve our attention. Neither of these is frequently cited as an objection to the study of classic works, but each is a perennial temptation and should be guarded against in any new program.

The first tendency is to promote a tourist-like approach to classic works, satisfied that students are encountering these or those works with little concern for how they do so or how seriously they do so. The laudable desire to introduce students to a certain number of texts can create pressure to race through them. This needs to be avoided if general education is to be an education in depth in the way I described above.

The second tendency is to approach the past in a spirit of condescension, convinced that while it might be interesting to learn about those who have preceded us, we have little to learn from them. Our predecessors, on this view, may deserve great respect and admiration, but only for prefiguring or discovering what we, their heirs, now know. There is something to this view, of course, with respect to cumulative endeavors such as natural science. (High school physics students today know things it took a Newton to discover.) But even the natural sciences aren’t simply cumulative, at least from the standpoint of general education (high school students don’t have Newton’s depth of understanding), and there is no reason to think that the great works of the arts and humanities are at all cumulative in this sense. This may seem obvious when we think about it, but we often don’t think about it. And when our moral and political commitments are concerned, we often don’t want to think about it. This second tendency is a little like the first in that it too is fed by a quick-survey approach. Without sufficient time,
students are less apt to reach the real but unfamiliar riches of old books.

The tendencies I have cited are real but hardly insuperable. They can be most easily and naturally checked, it seems to me, by leaving course design and teaching to faculty who know the works well – who know their depths and riches and how to help students uncover them. Thankfully, Carleton seems well equipped in this regard.

II. PRACTICE

A survey of Carleton’s courses and faculty shows that the opportunity for a general education centered on the close study of classic works already exists at Carleton and does not require great effort or ingenuity to come by. It does require some knowledge, however, which in turn often requires a bit of guidance – preferably in the form of a program that articulates principles and suggests or designates courses. Since the termination of Integrated General Studies in 2000, however, Carleton has not had a formal program oriented toward this approach to general education. The existence of such a program would presumably enable more students

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4The IGS program consisted in a sequence of six courses taught by faculty drawn from at least that many departments. No major or concentration was offered. Students could take as few or as many of the six courses as they wished, in whatever order they preferred. Completion of the sequence was not recognized on students’ transcripts. The program was revised periodically over three decades (it was initially known as “Studies in the Arts and Sciences”) but was consistent in conception over the years of its existence. (The program lost steam and was terminated when several of its leading teachers and promoters retired or left Carleton.) The following description appeared in the 1999-2000 Carleton Catalog: “Integrated General Studies consists of a coordinated series of six seminars on several crucial phases of the Western tradition. In that tradition, what it is to be a human being – presumably the chief issue to be addressed in a liberal education – has been conceived in at least three different ways: 1) in relation to the divine or the gods, 2) in relation to nature, and 3) in relation to the ‘scientific.’ The IGS courses bring a variety of approaches and materials to bear on the conceptions. In the first year-long sequence of three courses (IGS 125, 126, and 127) attention is focused on the development of biblical views of human destiny in terms of faith in a creative and judging but loving god, on the rise of rationalism in classical Greece against various poetical forms of self-understanding, and on attempts to wed these two strands of thought in European Christian thinking. In the second sequence (IGS 230, 232, and 234) attention turns to that most powerful of modern intellectual movements, modern science and mathematics, looking first to its seminal stages and early development
to avail themselves of the opportunity for this kind of general education, and to do so more fully and more coherently, than is now the case.

What might such a program look like?

There is an enormous range of possibilities. In preparation for this report I discovered over one hundred and sixty-five programs at four-year colleges and universities in the United States, ranging from required core curricula to honors programs to majors or concentrations to programs aimed at providing the foundation of a general education during the first two years of college. Some of these programs seem to have been designed to provide a special opportunity to the more capable or ambitious students among middling student bodies. A good number of programs, though, exist at highly selective universities, such as Columbia (required core), the University of Chicago (required core plus some notable majors, such as Fundamentals: Issues and Texts), Princeton (Program in Humanistic Studies), Notre Dame (Program of Liberal Studies), and Yale (Directed Studies). Programs of note can also be found in such prominent liberal arts colleges as Davidson (Humanities Program), Kenyon (Integrated Program in Humane Studies), Reed (Humanities), and Rhodes (Basic Humanities Requirement), not to mention St. Olaf (The Great Conversation). There is no reason to try to model a Carleton program on those of any other institutions. Carleton has its own character and needs, and so do they. But it is instructive to find that so many programs exist, that new ones continue to be created, and that so

and then to several ways in which humans have tried to think of themselves in relation to modern science and to the world it depicts.”

5 There is also a handful of schools in which degrees are or may be earned exclusively through the study of classic works; the best known of these is probably St. John’s College (Annapolis and Sante Fe). Such programs are not irrelevant to our curricular conversation, but they strike me as too far afield from Carleton’s ethos to serve as any kind of model.
many of them are popular and even beloved by students and faculty alike.6

The size and shape and even the plausibility of any new program at Carleton depend on a number of variables. Chief among these is doubtless faculty opinion, but two “structural” variables are particularly worth noting. First, would new resources be committed to the program? Second, will Carleton retain its current general education requirements, or will a new system be put in place? If the answer to either or both of these questions is yes, then the range of possibilities for a new program would be comparatively great. But even if the answer to both questions proves to be no, there is still a considerable range of possibilities. For example, a group of courses could be specially designated as forming a “classic works” (or “masterworks,” or “great books,” etc.) path or track through which students could satisfy some or all of their distribution requirements. (This could be one of several general-education tracks offered to students.) And there are other possibilities as well. It would be presumptuous, or at any rate premature, to sketch any proposals here. I do think it would be appropriate, though, to lay out some of the important structural questions that would need to be considered if Carleton were to move toward creating a program. In each case except the last the issue can be stated in terms of

6."[T]hat so many programs exist": A list of most but not all of the programs I have found, along with links to the programs themselves, appears on the website of The Association for Core Texts and Courses (ACTA): <http://www.coretexts.org/great_books.htm>. I mentioned above that I have discovered over 165 programs. William Casement offers the “guesstimate” that there are over 200 such programs in the country, of which more than 120 consist of four or more courses. See Casement, “Whither the Great Books?” Academic Questions, 15, 4 (Fall 2002): 36-51 (see esp. p. 42). Casement provides a useful (if slightly dated) overview of “great-books programs” in the United States.

"[T]hat new ones continue to be created": According to Casement’s survey, roughly three quarters of the more substantial programs (i.e. those consisting of four or more courses) were created after 1970, with roughly equal numbers in each decade since; see “Whither the Great Books?,” p.42. Also see the ACTA website (cited above), which provides the year in which each program listed began.

"[T]hat so many of them are popular and even beloved by students and faculty alike": As noted earlier, my evidence is impressionistic and anecdotal. But it is at least wide-ranging: I surveyed faculty who teach in programs at Yale, Chicago, Princeton, Columbia, Davidson, Kenyon, and St. Olaf, and received overwhelmingly positive reports of student interest, satisfaction, and benefit.
a single continuum. Programs can be found that fall at both ends of each continuum.  

One question concerns a program’s degree of directiveness. Would students who opted to participate in a program be required to take a prescribed set of courses, or would there be choice, and how much choice?

Another question concerns the status of a program vis-à-vis the College’s disciplinary structure. Would each course be based in a home discipline, or would courses be inter- or multi- or cross-disciplinary? If the former, would new courses be created, or would the program consist of specially designated courses that already exist?

Would the program be conceived chronologically, with courses focusing on particular epochs, or would courses be thematic, taking up a question or theme as it has been addressed by figures writing or working in many periods?

How would courses negotiate the trade-off between the depth that comes with the sustained close study of fewer works and the breadth that comes with the necessarily briefer study of more works? And would complete works be preferred, or would excerpts suffice?

Should a program limit itself to books, or, as I have signified by referring to “classic works,” should it also include experimental natural sciences and the arts?

Finally, the most basic question: what criteria should determine the content of these courses? (Subsidiary to this question is the question of whether and to what extent “non-traditional” works should be included, e.g. non-Western classics and more recent works that specifically challenge the older criteria of greatness.) This is not a question that can be

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7 There are two questions that I do not ask because I assume that they are settled in advance. First, I assume that any new program, as a program in general education, will not offer a major. Second, I assume that student participation in any program would be optional.
represented in terms of a single continuum. I have already suggested two basic criteria. I hope that others will consider these and offer their own.