Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented, time.
men. These changes have frequently been presented in popular journalism as highly threatening, both to traditional standards of academic excellence and to traditional norms of citizenship. Parents are getting a picture of a monolithic, highly politicised elite attempting to enforce a politically correct view of human life, subverting traditional values, and teaching students, in effect, to argue in favor of father beating.

Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented, time; the same suspicion of new and independent thinking expressed in Aristophanes' brilliant portrait. But we can defend many changes in traditional models of liberal education as a response to the challenge posed by Socrates and by Seneca. The changes we witness are attempts to follow Seneca's advice—to cultivate our humanity.

In order to evaluate the changes taking place in colleges and universities, however, we have to look more closely to see what is changing and why. What does our liberal education mean? How do we gain new, fashionable ideas about human diversity affect what we do?

Campus models

To answer these questions, we should look only at one or two well-known institutions, as so many books on this topic have done, but at a wide range, representative of the variety that currently exists in American higher education. Let me give examples.

St. Lawrence University is a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. In a highly publicized seminar on race, a group of young faculty members faced off in a debate about the supposed superiority of whites. The debate, which lasted several hours, was attended by hundreds of students and faculty members.

The seminar was organized by the university's office of multicultural affairs, which was established in 1989 to promote diversity on campus. It was also part of a larger effort to make the university more inclusive, as the university's president, Robert H. Baine, had said in a speech earlier that year.

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Contemporary liberal education

In contemporary America, as in ancient Athens and Rome, liberal education is changing. New topics have entered liberal arts curricula of colleges and universities—the history and culture of non-Western peoples and of ethnic and racial minorities within the U.S., the experiences and achievements of women, the histories and concerns of lesbians and gay people. These topics have not been as widely embraced on campus as they have been in the past, but they are gaining traction.

One reason for this is the growing awareness among students of the need to broaden their understanding of the world. Many students today are more interested in learning about other cultures and other ways of life than they were in the past, and they are willing to put in the effort to learn about them.

Another reason is the growing diversity of the student body. As the population of the U.S. becomes more diverse, students are more likely to encounter people from different backgrounds and to be exposed to different ideas and ways of thinking.

All of these factors make it clear that liberal education is changing, and that the changes are for the better. But it is also clear that there is still a long way to go before we have achieved our goals. We must continue to work hard to ensure that our students are prepared to live in a diverse world, and that they have the knowledge and skills to do so.
when I was a freshman, it seemed really off the wall to me, and it was kind of an unconv- 
vincing argument, but now, looking back on it, it seems as though I can understand why he 
would do something like that—because you come into contact with people like—you know, 
different types of people—all the time, and maybe it's an understanding of their belief 
system." He laughs nervously.

On a dark evening in February 1995, I go to my 
Cambridge health club. There's a young man 
behind the check-in desk whom I've never seen 
before. He tells me that his name is Billy, 
and he's reading from Plato's Apology and Crito.

So you're reading Plato, I say. "Yeah. You 
like that stuff?" he asks, and his eyes light up. I 
tell him I do like it. He takes a look at my 
composition book and nods. It's at Benet's, a college 
in nearby Waltham, focused on business educa-

What's the instructor? I ask him. "I don't 
remember," he says. "She's foreign." The syl-
labus reads, "Dr. Krishna Mallick." Krishna 
Mallick, originally from Calcutta, as I found 
when I met her later, has written some won-
derful study questions about Socrates' mission 
of self-examination, his obedience to the laws 
of Athens, and his willingness to die for the 
sake of the argument. Soon students will go 
on to use the techniques they learn from Plato 
and stage debates about moral dilemmas of our 
time. We talk for a while about why Socrates 
didn't escape from prison when he had the 
chance. And it's plain that Krishna Mallick 
has produced real excitement. "You know I re-
ally like this philosophy," he says. "In most 
courses you have to remember lots of little 
facts, but in this one you want to think and 
ask questions." And, finally, Scott Braithwaite, a young guy 
Momen, recent graduate of Brigham Young 
university, gives a SAC meeting talk in 
Cambridge, where he refers to the importance 
of including discussion of the history and vari-
ety of human sexuality in the liberal arts cur-
riculum. This is currently a topic of intense 
controversy at BYU, and Braithwaite's talk 
was widely referenced both to biblical texts 
and to Mormon scripture and history. "Ide-
ally," he concludes, "we should love everyone, 
but it is often difficult to love someone un-
known to oneself from oneself."

Where were these examples connected with 
Socrates' ideal of a liberal education and the 
cultivation of humanity? Today's teachers are 
shaping citizens in an age of cultural diversity 
and increasing internationalization. Our coun-
try is inscrupulously plural, and citizens are fre-
quently called upon to make decisions requir-
ing understanding of racial, ethnic, and 
religious groups in our nation and the situa-
tion of its women and its sexual minorities. As 
citizens, we're increasingly called upon to un-
derstand how issues such as agriculture, human 
human rights, ecology, even business and industry, 
are generating discussions that bring people to-
gether from many nations. And this must hap-
pen more and more if effective solutions to 
presenting human problems are to be found.

A new emphasis on diversity in college and 
university curricula is, above all, a way of grap-
pling with the altered requirements of citizen-
ship, an attempt to produce adults who can 
function as citizens, not just in some local re-
gion or group, but also, and more importantly, 
as citizens of a complex, interlocking world.

Cultivating humanity

Three capacities, above all, are essential to 
the cultivation of humanity in today's world:

First, it is the capacity for critical exam-
ination of oneself and one's own traditions.

Second, we have to engage with others, we 
call the examined life. This means, a life that 
accepts no belief that is authoritative simply 
because it has been handed down by tradition 
or becomes familiar through habit; a life that 
questions all beliefs and accepts only those 
that survive reason's demand for consistency 
and for justification.

Training this capacity requires developing 
the capacity to reason logically; to test what 
one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, 
accuracy of fact, and, finally, of judgment.

Testing of this sort frequently produces 
challenges, to Socrates knew well 
when he defended himself against the charge 
of corrupting the young. But he defended his 
activity on the grounds that democracy needs 
citizens who can think for themselves rather 
than simply deferring to authority, who can 
reason together about their choices rather 
than just trading claims and counter claims.

Our democracy, like ancient Athens, is prone 
to haisty and flabby reasoning, and to the sub-
stitution of instuctive and sound bites in jour-
nalism for real deliberation. We need So-

Now, Socratic reasoning 
can be infused into a college 
curriculum in different ways, 
through instruction in many 
different departments. But my 
general conclusion, after ex-
amining a wide range of insti-
tutions, is that a two-semester 
requirement in philosophy is 
the best way to promote the 
examined life. That may seem 
like professional chauvinism, 
but I really did find that working well in insti-
tutions of widely different types.
The campuses I've studied that do have such 
requirements are a highly mixed group, 
including Harvard, which has made moral 
reasoning a part of the core curriculum; Notre 
Dame—and of course the major Catholic col-
leges and universities where all undergradu-
ates take philosophy in addition to the theo-
logy requirement; the University of Pittsburgh, 
where a similar requirement produces exciting 
teaching in ethics across the curriculum; and, 
finally, Bentley College, where students like 
Billy Tucker, bound for careers in marketing 
and advertising, nonetheless take quite rigorous 
philosophy courses.

Transformation is what Socrates and the 
Scoics had in mind: the idea that one would 
take responsibility for one's own reasoning 
and exchange ideas with others in an atmos-
phere of mutual respect for reason. It is an es-

World citizenship

The second part of my proposal is the idea of 
world citizenship. Citizens who cultivate their 
"humanity needs." Further, ability is just the 
ability to be citizens of some local, regional 
groups also, and above all, as human beings, bound 
to other human beings by ties of recognition 
and concern. We very often think of ourselves 
in narrow group terms: as Americans first and 
foremost, and as human beings second. Or 
even more narrowly, as Italians-Americans or 
heterosexuals or African-Americans first, 
Americans second, human beings third—if at 
all. We neglect needs and capacities that link 
us to fellow citizens who live differently or 
look different from ourselves. This means that 
we're unaware of many aspects of communica-
tion and fellowship with them, and also of responsibilities 
we may have to them. We also 
often err by neglect of differ-
ences, simply assuming that 
lives in different places must 
be like ours, and lacking curios-
ity about what they're really 
like. Cultivating our humanity in a complex, interlocking 
world involves cultivating an understanding of the 
way common needs and aims are differently real-
ized in highly different circumstances.

How should these issues be addressed in a 
college curriculum? Here solutions should be 
highly individual, with the resources of the in-
stitution and its particular student body in 
mind. And they must operate at a number of 
different levels. Building a curriculum for world 
citizenship has multiple aspects: the construc-
tion of basic required courses that expose stu-
dents to an unfamiliar cultural perspective, the 
infusion of diverse perspectives throughout 
the curriculum, support for the development of 
more specialized elective courses in areas con-
ected with business, cultural diversity, and finally, 
attention to the teaching of foreign languages.

Made from original work of 
Cantala by Della 
Robbia. 
Converse 
College
The program leaders argue that the teaching of comparative material should always contain a Socratic element. Teachers should emphasize skills of argument, and should question the native relativism that students frequently bring to the classroom, spurring students on to argue further for their views. Courses in the program, reflecting the disciplinary expertise of the instructor, range from cross-cultural perspectives on healing to African economies, to a course on the management of the female body in different cultural traditions. Significantly, students in the program are required to study a foreign language and strongly encouraged to take a junior year abroad.

This program is a model of responsible teaching in areas of cultural encounter, showing that such courses are possible without losing disciplinary focus and without producing a diffuse and ungrounded kind of relativism that appreciates all cultures without being able to argue seriously about any.

Narrative imagination

But citizens can’t think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen is closely related to my two other what I would call the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself. To try to imagine what the person’s story is and to understand his motivations and desires and to imagine the ways in which the social circumstances shape emotions and wishes and desires.

—The narrative imagination is not uncritical, for we always bring ourselves and our judgments to our encounter with the other, and we inevitably will not merely identify; we will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations. But the first step of understanding the role from the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible act of judgment since we don’t know what we’re judging until we see the meaning of an action as that person intends it; the meaning of a speech as it expresses something of importance in the context of that person’s history and social role. This third ability a student should attain is the ability to decipher such meanings through the use of the imagination, an ability that’s cultivated above all in courses on literature and the arts.

Examples of this are of different kinds and at different levels. To give you one negative example, Scott Braithwaite did not encounter this training of the imagination. Indeed his training at BYU was conducted in deliberate opposition to all three of my goals and has more in common with Aristophanes’ portrait of the old education than with the Socratic approach of the world citizen. Braithwaite, as he records, was not taught to think critically about his traditions, he was taught to internalize these teachings. In a sense, as a young Mormon in a highly international church, he was taught to interact with others from different parts of the world, but usually in the mode of proselytizing, and never with the thought that learning might travel in both directions. Finally, as he reports, his education did not invite his fellow students to imagine or know someone like him—and did not invite him to know himself. He argues that this failure of knowledge entails a failure in the kind of love his own religion asks all people to have for one another.

Intelligent citizenship means more than these three abilities. Scientific understanding, economic understanding, and many other things are of great importance. I focus on part of a liberal education that have by now become associated with the humanities, parts that are often derided as useless for—and even subversive of—citizenship. Our argument has been that these areas, as they are currently being reformed, are crucial to the development of a truly deliberative democracy, and that they will only develop adequately reflective citizens if they are pursued in the spirit of Socratic self-examination and Socratic self-cultivation.

Our campuses educate our citizens. This means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning, but it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination. Think of Charles Dickens’s image of bad citizenship in A Christmas Carol, in his portrait of the ghost of Jacob Marley, who visits Scrooge to warn him of the dangers of a blunted imagination. In life his imagination never ventured outside the walls of his successful business to encounter the lives of the men and women around him, of different social classes and of different ground. Scrooge is at the spectacle of his old friend wearing an immense chain: “I wear the chain I forged in life,” he tells Scrooge, “I made it by link by link. I made it. I put it in my own freewill, and of my own free will I wore it.” Scrooge in terror blurts out, “You were always a good man of business, Jacob.” “Business,” the ghost helpfully intones, “Mankind was my business. Charity, mercy, benevolence were all my business.” Here, in Dickens’s own Christian way, he alludes to Socratic ideas of cultivated humanity.

Scrooge, as we know, got another chance to learn what the world around him contained, a belated liberal education. We need citizens who have this education, learned when they’re still quite young, before their imagination is shackled by the weight of daily duties and self-interested money-making schemes. We produce all too many citizens whose imaginations never step out of the counting house. But we have the opportunity to do better, producing Socratic citizens capable of thinking for themselves, arguing with their traditions, and understanding with sympathy the conditions of others different from their own.

That, I think, is not political correctness. That is the cultivation of humanity.