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Liberal Education at UD

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The curriculum of a liberal arts program such as is offered at the University of Dallas is designed toward the production of leaders of thought and action in the half-century ahead, with ultimate extensions, of course, into the entire stream of time. Knowledge of the accumulated past, then, serves as agent of the future rather than simply as end in itself, or even as preservation of a valued heritage. Actually, the only way in which the past can +be+ preserved is through its recreation in the present imagination, which must take on a prophetic sense as it views in past wisdom what is to be carried forward in changing epochs. Whatever is of mere antiquarian importance needs to be rigorously excluded from the liberal arts curriculum as it takes on its task of forming the soul. We study the Greeks not to know the Greeks but to know ourselves and to find our future calling.

The disciplines--those great repositories of skills, customs, wisdom, and lore that have accrued around and reinforced basic outlooks upon reality--deserve the piety in which they have been held in the West. Yet they too must participate in the general move toward interpenetration that has begun during the last few decades. Linkages for their own sake, or for economy, are of no moment; but for the widening of scope and the penetration of barriers they have already borne fruit. Findings of anthropologists, for instance, need interpretation from the several angles provided by differing modes of thought. But any fruitful relation between disciplines is possible only when those disciplines view each other with interest and approbation. As scholarship becomes universally available electronically to the dimmest of protagonists, we educators, serving as critics, must step back and reconsider our disciplines from a vastly different set of perspectives.

Among the first reconsiderations that must be made of each discipline, even science as a component of the liberal arts, is the identification of a significant core in that discipline constituting the rightful heritage of every reflective being. Such a core is not likely to consist of rudiments or practicalities, of ordinary historical concepts or even contemporary accomplishments. More likely, a fit beginning point of identification would be the present aspirations of the discipline, then a retrospective view to indicate what in recent revelations gives footing for these aspirations. The fundamentals would be swept into consideration when they become necessary as equipment for the task undertaken. Such an upside-down approach bids fair to cut across the varieties of gender and preparation existing in an introductory course, catching the interest of even advanced students and putting them, in effect, on the same level as the beginner. The general problem of the entrance of the liberal arts graduate into professional, scholarly, or research graduate studies has been faced by medical schools somewhat successfully. (They tend to disregard the technical preparation of the student and start again, with all

receiving the same instruction.) It might be that an intensive summer graduate course in physics, say, similar to the Institute for teachers or for principals, might be arranged, with some sort of federation of appropriate colleges sharing the different callings. The general requirement for undergraduate science then could provide a background for the specialist as well as the general student. In any event it would seem to be more appropriate for a liberal arts program to present science in its prophetic role rather than in either its historical or domestic- science trappings. It should not appear quaint or precious.

Can we teach wisdom to the young? Of course not, nor to the middleaged, nor to the elderly. Wisdom is an individual trait, developed in an individual by the individual. Yet we can judge the quality of education by its ability to advance individuals toward wisdom. There are devices available that assist in this effort. Observance of the three moments of learning is one of them. Construction of the web of intellect is another--the interconnecting of nodules of learning so they reflect on each other. Metaphors form some of the threads; analogies make more sturdy ones and have more ramifications.

Certainly, as this college increasingly attracts the kind of student that it seeks, it will have to enhance and expand the kind of education available here--not by radical changes, but by filling in the gaps that have up to now necessarily been present. That is, there will have to be more books--or more online computers; course offerings in modern languages and in advanced science and math. There will have to be offerings in the humanities from other cultures than the West; but they will have to be able to enter into dialogue with the present curriculum. This ongoing, ever-adjusting curriculum is the necessary mark of a truly liberal education.