



America's Best Colleges

Learning How To Learn

Daniel Born

08.13.08

Caught between the platitudes of smiling deans and the stomach-churning prospects of one more Gen Ed requirement, another raft of 18-year-olds will begin its passage this fall into higher education's mysteries.

Some will come stoked by excellent scores on their SATs, precociously announcing their plans for med school. Still others will arrive with the ease of seasoned veterans, nursing



Daniel Born

fantasies of baseball careers, professionals in their mastery of the tobacco wad and stealth spittoon in the back row of freshman composition.

I have taught both kinds of students. And I've discovered that certain kinds of intelligence and ignorance are pretty well distributed throughout this diverse human sample.

One thing most students can't explain--regardless of their individual ability, tattoos, headgear or ethnic identity--is what this entity known as a *liberal arts education* amounts to. Sure, they can parrot the blather about being educationally "well-rounded."

During their undergraduate experience, they're likely to overhear talk about "core competencies" and "learning outcomes" if they listen at orientation or eavesdrop on their professors' intramural quarreling. But for most, getting on with the major is what matters, and in their view, the liberal arts stuff is synonymous with the dreaded general education core.

To talk to freshmen about the liberal arts as an education for freedom (the Latin *liber*, as in "free") will strike many as absurd. Liberal arts requirements are the stuff most students try to "get out of the way" as soon as possible, the grunt work one does prior to shopping for courses that hold real allure. Note: A certain segment of students will change majors once or twice, bushwhacked unexpectedly by courses they thought they would never enjoy.

Who can blame the students for not knowing any better? At many institutions of higher learning, the liberal arts have become a mere shadow, usually reduced to an ever more

attenuated batch of distribution requirements between the major divisions of arts, humanities, math, and sciences.

Usually--though not always--the general education core dominates one-quarter of the student's courses over a four-year span. For many students, this is the stuff thrown at the flypaper.

Academics organize themselves along the lines of disciplines, departments, schools and professions--accredited by appropriate agencies, each wielding a particular brand of expertise. We are a long, long way from the medieval ideal of asking what the well-educated person ought to know and then providing a pat answer: the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric; the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

And unlike our medieval predecessors, few of us believe there is one ideal model of a well-educated person. We are predominantly pluralists. Educators who dare to suggest that students integrate their knowledge into a coherent whole, or unified vision of the world, are likely to be perceived as megalomaniacs or ideologues.

Still, there are hardy souls who continue to try to define rigorously what a liberal arts education is, and how it ought to be delivered. Among these have been Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, who reformed the general education requirements at the University of Chicago along the lines of a strict "great books" model during the 1930s and 1940s.

Hutchins, who led the university for more than two decades, railed against the sort of vocational training that he saw infiltrating the best liberal arts institutions. He argued, and I think correctly, that the great books are those works that have stood the test of time because they engage the perennial questions of human existence. He famously declared: "The best education for the best is the best education for all."

His faculty, however, was not universally pleased with the list of books that his principal consiglieri Adler drew up for them to teach. After Hutchins retired as university chancellor in 1951, his two-year great books general education program unraveled, the victim of resurgent departmental fiefdoms.

A version of the Hutchins educational program goes on to this day--most notably at **St. John's College** (with campuses in Annapolis, Md., and Sante Fe, N.M.), and at **Shimer College** in Chicago. [Columbia University](#), the original birthplace of the great books idea, still requires that all its undergraduates go through two year-long seminars in great books, a list periodically revised by the faculty who teach sections of these courses.

This educational immersion in core texts is described brilliantly in David Denby's *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (1996).

I readily identify with parts of the great books teaching agenda, which is enjoying a resurgence around the country. Not too long after reading Denby, I helped design a great books honors program (four courses over two years) at a small liberal arts college in Ohio.

At the present time, many colleges are revisiting the question of their core curriculum, trying to figure out how to make it more than a random amalgam of courses plucked from the academic divisions. Some find that a focus on books that demand a response from each new generation of readers is a productive one. It can invigorate students and faculty alike.

I teach great books because they require seriousness and rigor. And I think it's unreflective poppycock to say that the great books simply reify dead white male conservative values. To read the great books is to recognize that liberals, conservatives, straight and gay, male and female, imperial and subaltern voices are all part of the mix, all part of the great conversation to which we are invited.

Yet there are problems with building an entire liberal arts curriculum around the notion of great books or even core texts. The first is one of authority. Few grown-up academicians willingly take it on someone else's authority what texts they are supposed to teach. Just as students want freedom to choose, so do faculty. To wish for a "grandmaster generalist" who can answer the question of what every undergraduate should know is to wish for some kind of secular papacy. That strikes me as un-American.

There are few generalists who have the intellectual authority to tell the rest of us what we absolutely ought to read--or teach. And if such a person existed, would I want to bow at his or her knee? I don't think so.

E. D. Hirsch Jr., author of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987) provided a valuable corrective to American educational theory when he advanced the startling and much-needed claim more than 20 years ago that education actually needs some factual content in order to matter--not just a bunch of soft, and usually mealy-mouthed pedagogical "objectives" lacking substance.

But even Hirsch--who has spoken in several of my classes as a guest lecturer--recognizes with appropriate humility his own disciplinary blinders. He doesn't lay claim to the same expertise in microbiology that he claims as a fairly rambunctious literary theorist. If he did, nobody would listen to him.

There is a second problem with a purely great books approach to higher education, and it is this: Many of the students making that initial plunge into the sea of higher learning need us to help them learn a few simple strokes. And that is usually not accomplished by hitting them over the head with Plato's *Republic* when they're just beginning to tread water. Hutchins could do it at the University of Chicago because his student population was exceptional; those of us in the higher education trenches don't always enjoy that luxury.

For a number of years, I tinkered with my English composition course, eventually highlighting the learning objective of getting my students into the habit of reading for pleasure. It was one mid-December day when one of the hulking athletes in the back row came up to me after the last class of the semester. We had concluded the course with five sessions of reading and discussing Orson Scott Card's science fiction classic *Ender's Game*.

This is an action-oriented pulp adventure novel. It rewrites in key ways Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and between the smoking-hot battle sequences it actually smuggles in some great books themes and ideas, cleverly alluding to Locke, Demosthenes, Machiavelli and others. Moreover, it is a book that raises profound questions about group loyalty, command and obedience, xenophobia and abuse of authority. It's not a great book, but it is a very good one.

The kid unfolded his tall frame from his desk and ambled toward me and stuck out his hand. I looked up as I was gathering my books and the pile of student essays to head back to my office.

He shook my hand. "Dr. Born," he said, with a big smile on his face, "thank you for this class. I wanted you to know this is the first book I've ever read from cover to cover."

He wasn't going to be an academic superstar, but he was on his way to making better, more articulate arguments and learning how to summon evidence, on his way to moving with less fear and more freedom through the world of the text. He had learned that he could speak up and make a contribution to the dialog. He was going to survive college. He was learning how to learn.

He would probably run into a few great books--not all of them, perhaps. But I knew that at least some of the stuff I had thrown at him was going to stick. And because of that, his thinking was clearer and his freedom a little more free.

Daniel Born was McCoy associate professor of English at Marietta College in Ohio before taking a position at the Great Books Foundation in Chicago. He edits the foundation's quarterly magazine, The Common Review, and is a lecturer in Northwestern University's School of Continuing Studies.