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Great Books Can Heal Our Divided Campuses

Colleges need more programs where students of different backgrounds can wrestle together with the big questions posed by the humanities.



By Andrew Delbanco
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Fifty years ago, Allan Bakke, a white military veteran with a solid academic record, was turned down for medical school at the University of California, Davis. Bakke filed suit, claiming that when the university set aside 16 seats for racial minorities, it violated his right to equal protection under the 14th Amendment. Eventually the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled the quota unconstitutional and ordered that he be admitted.

But Justice Lewis F. Powell, who wrote the decisive opinion, did not shut down consideration of race altogether. He allowed it not as a form of reparations for centuries of exclusion of Black Americans from educational opportunity, but on the grounds that racial diversity improves the college experience for all students. “Creating a diverse classroom environment,” he wrote, “is a compelling state interest,” and therefore colleges may lawfully take race into account as one factor in choosing whom to admit.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/great-books-can-heal-our-divided-campuses-9f9e549b>

Universities have done too little to make diversity an educational asset.

This idea that students have something to learn from each other has been the lifeline for affirmative action ever since. It's an old idea. In 1850, when Herman Melville wrote that "a whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard," he meant that he had been educated by the "miscellaneous metropolitan society" he found at sea—Blacks, whites, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders; believers and unbelievers; high-spirited adventurers and men laid low by poverty and squalor.

The Supreme Court will shortly hand down decisions in a pair of cases—Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard and SFFA v. the University of North Carolina—in which the plaintiffs charge that under the guise of "diversity" those institutions have been practicing reverse discrimination. It seems likely that the justices will lift the stay of execution granted to affirmative action by Justice Powell 45 years ago.

Repeal of the Bakke precedent will be greeted with satisfaction on the right and outrage on the left. But regardless of what one thinks about how racial diversity has been pursued through college admissions, people of all political views should acknowledge that, once students enroll, most universities have done too little to make diversity an educational asset.



Students at Johns Hopkins University, whose president recently said that many colleges have 'given students a pass to opt out of encounters with people dissimilar from themselves.' PHOTO: WILL KIRK/JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Back in 2004, in a book titled “Defending Diversity,” a group of scholars from the University of Michigan warned against “a policy of simply recruiting a diverse student body and then neglecting the intellectual environment in which students interact.” More recently, the president of Johns Hopkins University, Ronald Daniels, has had the candor to say that while universities are right to seek “diversity in admissions,” they have “neglected to foster pluralism once students arrive” and have “given students a pass to opt out of encounters with people dissimilar from themselves.”

Diversity means the most in a “classroom environment” where students from different backgrounds and with different experiences come together to think about moral and historical questions. Such questions include how rights, goods and privileges have been distributed in the past and how they should be distributed in the future. Who draws the line between norms and taboos? What is justice or merit? How has race been used to sort human beings into favored and disfavored groups?

These kinds of questions belong to the humanities (history, literature, philosophy, the arts) and to what are sometimes called the “soft” social sciences (political science, sociology). No reasonable person would dispute that responses will differ according to who is in the room and that race is an important differentiator—though certainly not the only one.

But since the Bakke decision the room has been emptying out. The last few decades have seen a mass migration from the humanities into the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines and other fields such as business and economics that promise a straight path to a career. Diversity matters in these fields too, because our society needs diverse leadership in the professions to which they lead. It’s a stretch, however, to say that diversity matters for students sitting in silent rows at a lecture on finance or computer science. As for the humanities, much of the intellectual energy has moved to identity-based fields focusing on gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. These disciplines pay overdue attention to dimensions of human experience that were once marginalized in academic life, but they also tend to bring students into affinity groups insulated from one another.

With the number of humanities majors plummeting, the most likely place for students to encounter perspectives different from their own is the ‘general education’ program.

What, then, can be done to ensure that diversity remains a real force, in the sense that Justice Powell believed it could be? In today’s university, with the number of humanities majors plummeting, the most likely place for students to encounter perspectives different from their own is the “general education” program. The concept of general education first arose about a hundred years ago, following the abandonment of the old compulsory curriculum, heavy on theology and the classics, that had stipulated pretty much the same course of study for all students. As the old lockstep

approach gave way to proliferating electives and specialized majors, and student bodies changed with the influx of Jews and other immigrants, colleges began looking for ways, in the words of one Columbia dean, to maintain some “common, if not always uniform, intellectual experience for all students for at least a portion of their undergraduate years.”

In the wake of World War I, Columbia introduced a required “core curriculum” that still survives today, anchored by courses in literature and political thought taught in groups small enough to allow discussion, with common reading lists across all sections.

Immediately after World War II, Harvard designed a looser core, which has not survived, consisting of introductory lecture courses on such subjects as world religions, major ideas in politics and science, and drama from the ancient Greek playwrights to the modern theater



Figure 1 First-year students in one of Ursinus College's 'Common Intellectual Experience' classes. PHOTO: JIM ROESE/URSINUS COLLEGE

Variations took hold at many institutions, notably the University of Chicago, but by the 1960s, general education was disintegrating almost everywhere into what the sociologist Daniel Bell called “a mishmash of courses that are only superficially connected”—a cafeteria menu from which students picked a few courses that checked off the humanities, social science and natural science boxes. Nowadays there’s also likely to be a box labeled “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI).

Bell condemned this piecemeal approach, typically known as “distribution requirements,” as an “admission of intellectual defeat,” by which he meant that colleges had given up trying to agree on any subjects, texts, methods or ideas with which all students should engage before dispersing into this or that specialty. By the mid-1970s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching described general education as a “disaster area,” and so it has largely remained ever since.

What’s needed now is a fresh commitment to general education that assigns or attracts students to classes explicitly focused on broad human themes, with common reading lists and with peers whose origins, interests and ambitions differ from their own.

People who think of themselves as progressive tend to dismiss the idea of a common or “core” curriculum as retrograde or even reactionary—a throwback to the era when colleges were run by thundering clergymen who told students what to believe and how to behave. But in fact, such a curriculum—or at least one with some common elements—is the likeliest way to make diversity a real force for learning among students of different races, religions, origins, sexual identities and other forms of difference.

Why does Socrates refuse the opportunity to break out of prison on the eve of his execution? Is it true, as Jane Austen says, that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance?” What about James Baldwin’s claim that “the ostentatious parading” of emotion at the suffering of others is actually a “mark of cruelty?”

Students with different sorts of life experience will respond to such questions differently, and by listening to one another they may grow out of the naive supposition that there are uncontested answers. In short, a common curriculum helps them to feel that they belong to a community of inquiry, despite powerful forces that may drive them apart.

Colleges secretly know this. That’s why so many assign a common reading—typically on an issue of current interest such as race relations or climate change—to incoming students over the summer before they arrive on campus and then organize a few follow-up lectures and discussions. That’s fine as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go nearly far enough.

To go farther—even to a single semester-long course of common readings—isn’t easy. Getting faculty to agree on a shared reading list is akin to the proverbial project of herding cats. Especially at prestigious universities, rewards and incentives push faculty members into specialized research and teaching, where their performance determines their chances for retention and promotion. Reading novels, plays or essays that one hasn’t read since one’s own college days, or perhaps ever, can feel like a waste of time. So can expending time with fledgling students anxious to figure out what college—indeed life itself—wants of them. For these reasons and more, a serious general education program is a heavy lift, and most institutions have given up.



The reading list for Ursinus College's required first-year course ranges from Plato and the Confucian Analects to Ta-Nehisi Coates. PHOTO: JIM ROESE/URSINUS COLLEGE

Amazingly enough, some are defying the odds. For more than 20 years, Ursinus College, a small school outside Philadelphia, has prescribed a two-semester sequence of seminars for all incoming students called the “Common Intellectual Experience,” organized around four basic questions: What should matter to me? How should we live together? How can we understand the world? What will I do? Readings range from Plato and the Confucian Analects to contemporary works by Lynn Nottage and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Five years ago, Purdue University, a giant STEM-centric institution where the percentage of students taking history or literature courses had been dropping toward single digits, launched the “Cornerstone” program, which includes a sequence of first-year seminars for which faculty select half the readings from a collaboratively developed and continually revised list of “transformative texts.” The idea is to give students a shared vocabulary for talking about perennial problems—the joys and risks of freedom, the competing claims of rights and responsibilities, the distinction between love and desire, the inevitability of loss and mourning—that feel fiercely present in their lives regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or any other limiting ascription. Thousands of Purdue students now sign up for Cornerstone courses every fall, and a new campus publication, *The Cornerstone Review*, includes stories, poems and essays of their own.



A Great Questions Seminar at Austin Community College. In the program, 'everyone's voice contributes to a collaborative pursuit of truth,' says government professor Ted Hadzi-Antich. PHOTO: AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Similar experiments are under way at Stanford, Vanderbilt, Texas A&M and Penn State, to name just a few. It's happening not only at universities with stringent admissions policies but at open-access community colleges. At Austin Community College in Texas, each class in the "Great Questions Seminars" is "a small community," in the words of government professor Ted Hadzi-Antich, "in which everyone's voice contributes to a collaborative pursuit of truth." At Onondaga Community College in upstate New York, the "Enduring Questions" initiative, organized around texts ranging from Gilgamesh and the Upanishads to works by George Orwell, Nelson Mandela and Leslie Marmon Silko, now serves some 500 students each year. Not incidentally, at such schools, where financial challenges deflect many students from completing the degree, those who enroll in courses organized around common readings persist at significantly higher rates than the student body at large.

Last January, I went to Stanford to observe in action that university's new "Civic, Liberal and Global Education" sequence of courses, required of all first-year students. It begins with a course called "Why College?"—a question aligned, as the faculty director Dan Edelstein points out, with W.E.B. DuBois's credo that "the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes."

The class I visited was part of another required course, “Citizenship in the 21st Century,” in which the text for the day was the Declaration of Independence. The students in the room appeared to be of Black, white, Hispanic and Asian parentage, but there was no predictable correlation between what they looked or sounded like and what they said.

The question at stake was what it means for a society to commit to the principle that “all men are created equal.” Should it mean, in Abraham Lincoln’s words, to “lift the weights...from the shoulders of all men” so that all have an equal chance to prosper? What about Lyndon Johnson’s claim a century later, in a speech at Howard University, that one cannot “take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all others’ and still justly believe you have been completely fair?” Late in the hour, the word socialism entered the discussion, which turned to the question of whether equality should mean equality of opportunity or equality of result. Students spoke with passion and sometimes pungency, advocating different points of view, but never rudely or dismissively. It was a demonstration of diversity at work.



At Stanford University, ‘More than 1,000 first-year students are grappling with the same ideas, reading the same texts,’ says professor Dan Edelstein. PHOTO: MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stanford’s most daring innovation is that all sections of the new courses share the same reading list, which includes works by authors ranging from Plato and Seneca to the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore and the Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Edelstein explains: “When more than 1,000 first-year students are grappling with the same ideas, reading the same texts, writing the same assignments and engaging in the same activities at once, the walls of the classroom start to dissolve. Debates about what it means to disagree in good faith carry on in the residences themselves; discussions of the good life continue over dinner.”

At our centrifugal moment, we have an opportunity—and an obligation—to rethink general education. Whatever the court says later this month, universities should not just give lip service to the worth of diversity but should commit themselves to making it a real educational value. Fortunately, some bold institutions are showing the way by proving that it can be done.

Andrew Delbanco is the author of “College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be.” He is Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies at Columbia University and president of the Teagle Foundation, which, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities, supports several of the programs mentioned in this article.