Arts & Humanities

# What Columbia College is Known For

In 1920 John Erskine developed a daring new Columbia College course called General Honors. The Humanities program that grew out of it set a standard of excellence that is a hallmark of a Columbia education.

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**Every undergraduate college** has its own identity produced by a combination of location, physical plant, curriculum, and the styles of instruction and administration. For a good many colleges it is hard to say what is most important in the mix, but for Columbia College the answer is clear: The required courses largely create its basic nature. It is not only that at Columbia there are courses that students must take, for many colleges have distribution requirements; students must take so many credits in science, in literature, and so on, but the choice of particular courses is up to them. Columbia students make two choices of this kind—they can (and must) choose from a limited number of sciences, and by the time they graduate, they must have taken two terms from a list of courses intended to give them some experience beyond the dominant cultures of the West.

With the exception of these electives, the Columbia requirements are designed to be a set of courses taught in small sections where students are for the most part studying the same things at the same time as all the other classes in each course. They take composition, a year each in two courses that concentrate on literature, and on public policy and governance respectively, and finally one term each of music and the visual arts.

The oldest of these courses, called Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, developed from a requirement introduced in 1919, the faculty having decided that the origins and implications of World War I were issues that all students should

ponder. Requirements in music and art were added to literature and social sciences courses in 1947. These six courses, particularly the last four, are called the Core program.

#### Literature Humanities

The yearlong Humanities course, now called Literature Humanities, does two things. It introduces students to some major literary, historical, and philosophical works in the Western tradition, and it does so in small classes through discussion intended to make students think actively from moment to moment rather than listen to lectures. Though the course was introduced in 1937, coming out of the background described by John Van Doren, it and other courses in the Great Books movement have a history going back to major changes in the college curriculum that began to develop a hundred years earlier.

Well into the nineteenth century, a college education in the liberal arts at Columbia and similar schools was still shaped toward an elite male population and was still based on a classical curriculum. Columbia had entrance requirements in both Greek and Latin; students continued these studies in college, and the texts studied were sometimes looked at more for their historical settings and philological character than for their artistic natures and the issues they embodied. With the increasing importance of the sciences and technology, however, together with the rise of the social sciences, the curriculum began to get crowded. Modern studies and the modern languages in which they had in part developed began to diminish the emphasis on the classics, except for those students who wanted to concentrate there.

As the new learning continued to develop into the twentieth century, some at Columbia began to look on undergraduate work primarily as initial training for further professional study, something that could be done in less than the traditional four years. The “pre-professional option” became more available, allowing many students into specialized training after two or three years. For the faculty members and administrators who encouraged this, the traditional college experience had become something of an obstacle, and they looked on the College as tangential to the central task of the University.

The defenders of the College prevailed in the long run, however, asserting that the traditional four years were important to the development of a well-educated person who had interests nourishing both private and public life. Most though not all of the teachers on this side of the argument were understandably from the language departments and the other humanistic disciplines. They sometimes spoke of the "whole man," and if that rhetoric now sounds old-fashioned, what they meant has not changed: the desire to provide students with humanistic experience that will long resonate, the better to make the mind more interesting because more resourceful in knowledge and imagination.

As the older curriculum came under greater pressure, the College faculty began to think about how to preserve for the students an exposure to the humanistic past while making room for the studies indispensable to the modern world.

As John Van Doren's essay points out, John Erskine '03GSAS was a central figure in what developed. A graduate of both Columbia College and the graduate school, he joined the faculty in 1909 after teaching at Amherst. He was a graceful and urbane man well versed in music as well as literature. After teaching at Columbia for many years, he served as president of the Juilliard School and was much involved in the city's music scene.

Erskine became an educational reformer, and part of his impulse came from his mixed experience as an undergraduate in the College. He loved the Latin classics, but felt that except for one or two teachers they were badly served. In a memoir, he recalled a young, un-tenured teacher with whom he took two fine courses in Horace and Catullus, saying that this young man had all the virtues that a particular (unnamed) professor lacked, observing, "Perhaps that is why the Latin department did not make a stronger effort to keep him." He went on to say that "Latin and Greek are not dead languages unless we assassinate them. But many professors of the classics are conservatives of the worst kind; they conserve the wrong thing. Aware that they have a precious thing in their keeping, they hate to admit that the precious thing is merely life."

It is a sign of how much literary instruction was done in the early twentieth century, and of Erskine's motivations, that he caused a fuss when in a 1908 essay he maintained that "the teachers of literature should say as little as possible about the background of a poem or about the biography of the poet, these matters belonging rather to history than to literature; he should rather point out the admirable things in

the poem. . . .” This opinion brought him a few letters of praise, but a lot more denouncing him as “an idiot on the way to be a nuisance.” Forty years later his view would be a basic assumption in the high tide of the literary attitudes called the New Criticism, but near the turn of the century it was by no means taken for granted.

In the years before World War I, Erskine began to think about a course that might answer these concerns, and after the interruption of the war years and Erskine’s own educational service abroad for the military, he returned to Columbia. After playing an important role in the founding of what came to be called Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, he developed the course to which the faculty gave the name General Honors; it began in 1920, and was the first of the “great books” courses in this country. Four assumptions were important in the design. First, the works read should be major ones as a means to continue the humanistic curriculum of an earlier time. Second, most of them would have to be read in translation, given the diminished attention to the ancient languages. Third, students should approach the works directly, not through secondary articles and books about them. And fourth, the classes should be conducted as discussions, not lectures, to ensure that students would be thinking for themselves.

As Erskine looked back on his efforts to establish this course, he remembered feeling rather embattled. “Most of my colleagues were still hostile to the idea,” he reported, “and they tried to protect the students—and themselves—from it by decreeing that my course should be open only to the specially qualified, who would take it as an extra, or as they liked to say, as ‘honors.’ The registration the first year was not large. We divided the class into small sections so that discussion might be easier. All the sections met at the same time, on Wednesday evenings, and over each section two of my younger colleagues presided. From the beginning it was the young teachers who made the class possible.”

Judged against the later history of the General Honors course, the enrollment that first year was not so small. There were six semester sections over the year, and the “younger colleagues” who joined him make in hindsight an impressive list: Mortimer J. Adler ’23C ’28GSAS, J. Bartlett Brebner, Irwin Edman ’16GSAS, Clifton Fadiman ’25c, C.W. Keyes, Emery E. Neff, Henry Morton Robinson, H.W. Schneider ’15C, Rexford Tugwell, Mark Van Doren ’21C ’60HON, Raymond M. Weaver, and Arnold Whitridge ’25GSAS.

In 1929 the course was suspended for three years as the College concentrated on staffing the new second-year requirement, Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, but was reborn in 1932 with the title Colloquium in Important Books. The course has been in the Curriculum ever since, though in recent years it has not been offered every term because of staffing problems. Also, fewer students take it than in earlier years because they can now choose among more varied cultural courses in the junior and senior years than were then available.

The success of Erskine's General Honors was the background for the 1937 expansion of that idea into the required course now called Literature Humanities. It is so named to distinguish it from the courses Music Humanities and Art Humanities, but the title is rather misleading since a number of religious, philosophical, and historical works are on the reading list in addition to the more numerous works in epic, drama, and fiction.

Though Erskine himself was not much involved in the discussions that established the 1937 humanities requirement for all students, the faculty's reaction showed that most teachers had been won over to his view that students should approach rich and often difficult texts directly, not through some advanced explanation, whether in an article, textbook, or lecture. Erskine had earlier heard many objections from colleagues that one could not expect much from the weekly interaction of a young student and a major work, and when one hears reservations about the course in our own day, eighty years later, it is still the same view that one hears—that the treatment of these major works is so brief and sketchy that it is better to read nothing than to do so in this way.

But is this a serious argument? Erskine, remembering the old debates, wrote about the matter with energy:

"How often was I told by angry colleagues that a great book couldn't be read in a week, not intelligently! And how often have I retorted, with my own degree of heat, that when the great books were first published, they were popular, which was the first step toward their permanent fame, and the public who first liked them read them quickly, perhaps overnight, without waiting to hear scholarly lectures about them. I wanted the boys to read great books, the best sellers of ancient times, as spontaneously and humanly as they would read current best sellers, and having read the books, I wanted them to form their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion. It would take two years of Wednesday evenings to discuss all the books

on my list. Even by the end of the first year all the boys in the class would have in common a remarkable store of information, ideas about literature and life, and perhaps an equal wealth of aesthetic emotions, which they shared in common. Here would be, I believed, the true scholarly and cultural basis for human understanding and communication. Compared with this result, what a waste of time it seemed to spend a term on mastering one book or one author in detail, and acquiring the mastery by yourself as it were, in solitude."

If one were to take that last sentence literally, most of us would disagree, since one of the purposes of college is to make one at least aware of what mastery might mean, even though the young student is not likely to achieve it. In context, however, it is clear what Erskine intended to say—that a narrow focus of study to the exclusion of all else is not an adequate experience.

One can't really argue with Erskine's answer to the charge of superficiality—that though all of the works on the Humanities list are worthy of study in great depth (and have received it), everyone who studies a work in great detail has at some time read it for the first time. Except for the professional student of literature, one is more likely after college to read *The Iliad* if one is reading it again, and the student's encounter with the works on the Humanities list has a benefit going beyond those particular titles.

One of the intentions of the course is to destroy the aura of difficulty often attached to the titles of famous works, to make a person comfortable picking up a book no matter how formidable its reputation. If one has spent some time with Homer and Virgil, one is more likely to read, say, Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* later on one's own. It is good to remember that *Paradise Lost* is after all just a poem that can be read, and that *War and Peace* is a good story, however intermittently charged with meditations on military psychology and the fate of nations. The Humanities course tries to make the famous look like the familiar, to make the classics thought of as works that one can simply pick up and read or reread at any stage of life. Is it useful to read a good book of criticism about Dante? Of course, but it is not worth doing unless one has read some Dante first. Only a small number of college graduates become full-time literary people, and it is likely that if a college student is asked to think about a few essays of Montaigne, the probability is greater that the student who has read him will come back to him later in life.

The desire to provide modern students with something of the older humanistic culture explains why the first term's readings are so heavily Greek and Roman, along with the Bible, recently given more time on the syllabus; they are the foundation works of Western civilization. The second term's readings are less coherent, since they range from Hellenistic times to the nineteenth or even the twentieth centuries—but these too are Western works.

One of the lively issues in recent years at Columbia and elsewhere concerns the wisdom of concentrating on the Western tradition in a course of this kind. In our age of multiculturalism and the praise of diversity, the comment is sometimes made that in doing so the Humanities course enshrines a fixed canon, and hence a set of harmonious assumptions and "hegemonic beliefs" reflecting a narrow and now provincial complacency. But while it is true that the reading list is made up of Western works, this is done because our country developed in the Western tradition, and if students are to understand other world cultures in some measure, they cannot sensibly do so without initial grounding in their own. It is of course true that students should be asked to study cultures outside of the dominant Western ones (and at Columbia they are required to do so), but if Humanities were to become a sampling of the world's diverse traditions, it would be a cafeteria of confusion.

More to the point, it is nonsense to think that there is some kind of selfsatisfied harmony within the Western tradition. The works on the Humanities list contradict and struggle with one another more often than not, and are typically more efficient in unsettling unexamined beliefs with which the students approach them rather than imposing a set of new ones. The aim of the course, as with all good education, is to equip and encourage students to think for themselves, not to indoctrinate them with a set of convictions derived from some imagined and fictitious harmony of minds. This is not to say, of course, that diverse national or ethnic cultures don't warrant the serious attention of our students: The days are long gone when one could assume the universal superiority of western European culture and hence ignore other traditions with a quiet conscience. The issue is not if such studies should be in the undergraduate curriculum, but how and when they should be undertaken.

Does such work belong in the first-year Humanities course? The faculty doesn't think so, but not because they hold such work to be unimportant. The point is that one cannot learn everything at once, and that up to a point there is a sensible sequence

in which things are to be done. A student who has no initial grounding in the major traditions of the West is ill equipped to understand un–familiar cultures because there are no foundations from which to draw contrasts and comparisons. Just as a Chinese student should have some familiarity with China before turning attention to the West, so the American student should have at least an introductory knowledge of where the country comes from before studying other traditions. First things first.

Humanities concentrates on major Western works because that is the history out of which the country developed. After initial experience of this kind, Columbia College students are asked to study cultures other than those dominant in the West. In this major cultures requirement, they are invited to take Asian Humanities and Asian Civilization, which are parallel to the Western-oriented basic courses. The requirement also allows for the study of African and Latin American cultures, as well as a minority culture within the United States. The point is that students must broaden their knowledge beyond the major traditions that shaped western Europe and in large measure formed the United States as well.

Those who are critical of the Humanities reading list sometimes speak of a “canon” of enshrined works beyond which nothing may be read, but when thinking about the course it is well to avoid the term, with its possible implication of a fixed list beyond which nothing is acceptable. The works are chosen by the teachers every two years; a small committee makes the initial recommendation, which is then vetted by the full staff. Over the life of the course (now 62 years old), well over one hundred titles have been taught. The hardest thing for the staff to resist is to add a new title without making room for it by dropping a work already on the list. These discussions are always intense; teachers have their favorite books, but there are limits to what the students can be asked to read in a course that already makes large demands .

The only criterion for a work to be admitted is that it be rich enough to provoke the interest of undergraduates. It is that much better if it has issues that relate it to other books on the list, but there is a good chance of that if the work is a substantial one. Every teacher has personal interests and develops ideas that are to be followed through in the class discussions; the appropriate work is one diverse enough to answer to both individual interests and to the large, general issues that every attentive reader must find in it.

If one examines the reading lists over the life of the course with an eye to how often works are taught, there are four groups. First, there are a few that have remained on the syllabus from the beginning: *The Iliad* and Dante's *Inferno*, for example. Then there are authors, Herodotus and Ovid among them, who are often though not always present. Third, there are a number who come in less often, as Apuleius or Jonathan Swift. Finally, there are works that are tried for a time, but that seem not to lend themselves as well as others to this kind of course. *Paradise Lost* seemed to require too much external knowledge to work well in a short time, and Madame de La Fayette's *The Princess of Clèves* appeared not to have enough resonance with other works on the list. From time to time, of course, a work is unsuccessful with a given class because the teacher has not yet found a way to make it interesting: For this reason the Humanities teachers like to talk with one another about what they do in their classrooms.

It sometimes happens, of course, that works are added to the list in response to fresh cultural issues represented in the staff. For many years there was no work by a woman on the Humanities list, and this changed as one of the benefits of feminism. That did not mean, of course, that women's issues had not been talked about in the course before Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf entered the reading list. No one could read or teach *The Odyssey* or the Greek dramatists, let alone Boccaccio, without treating the role of women in a central way. But it was high time that works not only about women, but by them, were adopted; and by no means only because the College became coeducational in 1984. However a text comes to be on the reading list, there is a firm rule for the teachers: When the list has been approved by the majority of the teachers, all of them must teach the books agreed upon. Anyone unwilling to do this should not be in a Humanities classroom since this commonality is at the heart of the enterprise.

The fact that all students are talking about the same works at the same time encourages serious conversation outside of the classrooms. Students from different sections often talk about the works they have all read and are thinking about, comparing different angles of interpretation that naturally occur in the different groups led by independent instructors. This common experience is even more important at Columbia than it might be at some other schools, because it provides a unifying experience on an urban campus where the pressures of space and of New York City itself make it harder to create a sense of college community. That comes

more easily at some schools that have much larger campuses with more diverse facilities and a traditional house system where a relatively small number of students come to know one another well by virtue of separate residence halls and dining rooms. Too, it is an obvious benefit that this common experience at Columbia is an intellectual one: Students educate one another outside of class as well as in it.

As one thinks about the particular texts used in the course over the years, it is clear that in one way the course is better than it used to be because we have been living in an age of great translations. Fifty years ago there were a fair number of translations so inadequate that one had to accept much of a work's reputation on faith because the artistic character of the original had almost entirely disappeared. While it is true that "poetry is what is lost in translation," it is now much less true because a good many excellent scholar-poets in our day have both an expert knowledge of the original text and the fine linguistic taste in English that allows a good deal of the tone and temper of the original to come through. Only a few of the translations used fifty years ago are still in use. A teacher can now point to more of the artistic qualities in *The Iliad* even in English translation, qualities that were simply not on the page some decades ago.

This happy change is not only because each age makes its own translations, though this is substantially true—Alexander Pope's eighteenth-century version of *The Iliad* is a great one, though clearly not appropriate for use in Humanities now. It has come about in the last few decades that translation has come to be valued and studied as an art in itself. There are seminars and workshops that hone the skills of people who would not earlier have found such help, and while no instruction can repair a tin ear, there are more competent translators now than there were earlier.

That better translations give students closer access to the original languages reinforces another obvious reason for the course's impact—the books are powerful quite apart from what happens in the classroom. This is not to undervalue the teacher's role, of course, for that is of the greatest importance. Students will better understand what they are reading—and themselves—as a good teacher shapes the content and style of the discussions. But even in the rare case of a weak instructor, the students read works of such interest that poor teaching can't do as much damage as it otherwise might. While Humanities is not "instructor-proof," the teacher builds upon complex and resonant works that have become well known because of these very qualities. When good teaching makes the most of such books,

the experience is unforgettable.

#### The Staff

Though there is an occasional problem with the instruction in a particular class, something inevitable in a course that now has 55 independent sections, those in charge of Humanities take pains to field the best staff possible. The instructors are made up of three groups: senior faculty, non-tenured but full-time junior faculty, and graduate students who have had earlier experience in the classroom, most often in teaching the required composition course given in the freshman year. The academic departments that provide teachers for the course must supply a certain number depending on their size and history, and the proportions between the three groups will vary from one year to another depending on the need for departmental courses and the pattern of faculty leaves.

Those who teach meet every week during the academic year in sessions organized by the senior faculty member directing the course—a position normally held for three years. The sessions are informal, designed to help teachers prepare the work that the students have read. There is typically a faculty speaker expert or at least one comfortable with the work at hand, and after a talk lasting half an hour or so, staff members weigh in with questions or comments about the substance of the work or about how best to approach it with students. Attendance at these meetings is not required, but it is usually good because even the senior faculty, who may have taught the course repeatedly, find the discussion helpful as they begin to think about the work again.

For the graduate students teaching the course for the first time, there is an additional weekly session normally conducted by the director of the course. Here the new teachers learn more about the work to be taught the following week, and there is more emphasis on effective presentation of the material than is true of the sessions for the full staff. The graduate students who teach Humanities are selected by recommendation and interviews from a large group of applicants, and the special guidance for them continues through the year and includes reports and class visits that often produce helpful advice.

In the sessions for the full staff, it sometimes happens that a faculty member not currently teaching the course will attend for the pleasures offered by what is a rather rare occasion—an interdisciplinary faculty seminar in which there are no distinctions of rank. Senior faculty, junior faculty, and graduate students are in this context simply colleagues with the same problems and opportunities, and they are all there to get what help they can in preparing to teach a work in which only a few of them may be specially trained. Those who have taught the course before often make comments based on their own experience, and these are often helpful to others near the beginning of their careers.

Given this interaction, the meetings provide a useful apprenticeship for those starting out; the atmosphere is collegial since the younger teachers are in full charge of their classes just as the old hands are—no one serves as a “discussion leader” for a senior lecturer. This gives everyone a large responsibility, and many younger teachers have pointed to service in Humanities or Introduction to Contemporary Civilization as shaping experiences in their careers. It would be good for the course if funding could be found to allow a larger number of graduate students to teach these courses for a third year in addition to the two now usual, and also to allow some graduate students to continue teaching them for a time after they complete their doctorates. Many young teachers do very well even in their first year, but whether a teacher is young or old, the course makes very large demands, and one is better at it after some seasoning.

**The Teaching Challenge**

There are three reasons why teachers find Humanities arduous no matter what the instructor’s age or experience. It covers a wide range of material most or all of which is outside the expert knowledge of any one person. It moves with great speed, typically allowing only a week even for a work of much complexity. And most of all, it is conducted by discussion, not as a lecture course. Given this combination, if teachers are conscientious, they spend more time preparing Humanities than an offering in their own disciplines. Each week the teacher rereads (or occasionally reads for the first time) the next work on the schedule, and learns more about it both by private reading and attendance at the meetings. Finally, the teacher must work out a series of questions that will both interest the students and lead the discussion toward the major themes in the work at hand and its relation to others.

Any teacher who has taught a course through discussion knows that it is a process both interesting and unpredictable: The challenge is to see that coherent intellectual work gets done rather than a random scattering of thoughts that may be fun but doesn't go anywhere. One can never be sure what is going to happen in class. Sometimes the teacher's plan works out beautifully; on other days, the discussion doesn't seem to jell, and on still other occasions it may take a direction entirely unplanned but be effective nonetheless. To manage all this takes a degree of concentration and flexibility never involved in a lecture course, and these are qualities rarely called upon even in a seminar when one is treating material with which one is professionally at home. The discussion format is crucial to the purposes and success of both Humanities and CC; without it these courses would be entirely different, and for those who teach them as they are now taught, not worth carrying on.

In the history of Humanities, the teachers have always thought that each instructor should be in complete charge of a particular class, and have resisted suggestions that the students be required to attend lectures by experts on the various works. This stress on the teacher's independence is not a matter of the teacher's pride, or nervousness that the students might discover that their teacher is not an authority on every work on the reading list—the students soon become aware of this in any case. The teacher's proper autonomy rests on the basic assumption of the course—that intelligent people, no one of whom may be a specialist in the matter at hand, can read and talk about it to their mutual benefit. This common discussion is central to seeing the classics as works that any educated person can enjoy. The teachers want full control of their classes because if students were distanced from their instructor at this stage by an intervening expert, whether in print or in person, this would encourage the view that people shouldn't pick up these books at all without expert help.

During the 1960s, for example, the Humanities staff rejected a recommendation by a faculty committee that a mandatory series of lectures be established at which both students and teachers would hear an expert talk about the work to be read each week. Many of the faculty who supported this idea had either never taught the course, or had not done so for quite a long time, and they found it hard to understand why the Humanities staff was so strongly opposed. The teachers, on the other hand, felt that such a system would turn them into discussion leaders subordinate to the official authorities who would lay down the basic lines of inquiry,

and hence reduce the independence of the classroom teachers.

The teaching staff never objected, on the other hand, to the students' occasional and successful efforts to establish a series of weekly lectures by precisely the same experts. Why the difference? Because the student-run series was an additional and optional hour that did not officially establish a secondary status for the teacher. This might seem a trivial cavil on the part of the staff: Why should they object to their students' hearing an expert talk about the work? The answer is that they did not, but felt only that within the agreed-upon commonality of the reading list and the final examination, their own independence in the classroom was crucial to the course. When the students organized a series of well-attended lectures, many of the teachers were there as well, happy to learn something more about the work at hand, and to be aware of what the students might raise in the classroom discussion coming up. This was a very different matter from the use of a formal class hour, reducing the teacher's time from four hours a week to three, and the creation of an atmosphere in which the teacher would often be expected to take off from the specialist's explanation of the work.

The instruction in Humanities thus exists in a careful balance between the common character of the enterprise and the autonomy of the individual on the other. It would be an exaggeration to say that each of the 55 classrooms in Humanities offers a unique course on the same texts, but there is a measure of truth to this. The particular teacher's interests and knowledge will shape that section's discussion differently from all the others, but this independence operates within the context of common understanding that over time has been shown to work well.

Humanities has served the College's students well in a number of ways. For some it has been so alluring that they have pursued further studies in the humanities and have themselves become teachers in schools throughout the country. For the great majority of students, whatever they may do after graduation, it has provided an experience calculated to whet the appetite for further reading of a serious kind, making life more interesting. Humanities remains one of the most popular of the Core courses, and as long as the administration is solidly behind it and the teaching staff remains properly balanced and deeply engaged, the course should have a long future and a bright one.

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