The (Un)Common Core
"The (Un)Common Core"

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Presented with:
Smart to the Core: Embodying the Self

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Smart Museum of Art
The famed Common Core, the foundation of the modern undergraduate curriculum at the University of Chicago, has been controversial since its inception, passionately lauded and decried by both faculty and students alike. This hotly debated program originated in the 1920s with Dean Chauncey Boucher, a historian who set about devising a thoroughly new curricular system to advance and enrich both the quality of the student body and their education. Although the University of Chicago rivaled Harvard as a preeminent research institution at the time, it was less recognized for the quality of its undergraduate program.

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The inaugural class of freshman students under the "New Plan" studying alongside their professor. In this new system class attendance is optional and, drawing exclusively from the texts, exams will be administered at the end of the year.
What was to become Chicago’s famed Core curriculum was launched in 1931 under the banner of the “New Plan.” This radical revision of the undergraduate curriculum was met with both steadfast support and fierce opposition, even before it had been implemented. National newspapers praised it, with the Literary Digest writing “those who go to college for a good time, social advantages, and for a meaningless diploma, will not select Chicago University, when the proposed reorganization takes place.” The New York Times highlighted the program’s fundamental principles of initiative and accountability, pointing out that the Plan “goes the whole way in throwing on the student responsibility for his own education.” Meanwhile, faculty were who were staunchly opposed to the curriculum’s interdisciplinarity were criticized internally for “greedily protecting their private diggings… doing [so] under the false banner of educational theory.”
Boucher imagined that under his “New Plan,” self-directed, highly motivated students would proceed through the readings (attending classes was optional) and sit for six-hour exams to test their assimilation of the material. In addition to producing more autonomous, intellectually curious students, Boucher believed that this scheme would create a more coherent curriculum. He was supported in this belief by a dynamic young president, Robert Hutchins, who also was a promoter of autonomy, believing that “the object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.”

As President of the University and creator of the new College, Hutchins was frequently credited with the implementation of the New Plan. Initially, he was committed to interdisciplinarity and the restructuring of undergraduate education. However he soon became ambivalent and then opposed to the program, fearing that the survey courses would promote a “disease that affects all college teaching in America, the information disease”—an education heavy on mere facts and a miscellaneous assemblage of courses rather than big ideas.
EDUCATIONAL ANNOUNCEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, AFTER YEARS OF STUDY, INAUGURATES NEW EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM. MOSS GROWN TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS DISCARDED. AN EFFORT TO JUSTIFY THE TIME AND MONEY SPENT IN COLLEGE WORK. MAKES LEARNING AN OPPORTUNITY RATHER THAN A COMPULSION.

COLLEGE ATHLETICS ANNOUNCEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO TEAM ENDS FOOTBALL SEASON AT BOTTOM OF BIG TEN.

RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS
An editorial cartoon published in 1930
Instead Hutchins proposed that the University consider a curriculum based on the “Great Books,” and in 1930 invited the Columbia-educated psychology professor Mortimer Adler to bring such a program to the University. The two envisioned a course of study that would prioritize the reading of books deemed the classics of Western European civilization—books that were “relevant to a large number of the great ideas and great issues that have occupied the minds of thinking individuals for the last twenty-five centuries.” These key works, they believed, were more likely to produce profound understanding, “even of the contemporary world, than a vast mass of current data.”

Hutchins began expressing his dissent publicly, criticizing the proponents of the New Plan as “…gadgeteers and the data-collectors, masquerading as scientists,” who “have threatened to become the supreme chieftains of the scholarly world.”
A CAMPUS REVOLUTION.

Soon after Robert Maynard Hutchins became president of the University of Chicago, rumors of a pending revolution in educational methods emanated from the gray towers on the Midway. Citizens, more or less remotely concerned about such matters, conjured up pictures of professors and deans arraying themselves in opposing lines to defend the old or advance the new, and locking minds in verbal conflict, while with mingled feelings of glee and foreboding the student body listened to the intellectual din.

As a matter of fact the revolutionary movement had begun in 1928, under President Max Mason. His resignation interrupted it at a critical juncture in its progress. But the preparations for change continued, and the advent of President Hutchins brought to the movement a vigorous leadership which hastened its culmination. It was in 1930 that the echoes of the battle reached the popular ear, and served for a time the good purpose of dramatizing into lively interest an institution many of us are much too wont to take for granted.

Just what happened and what it has meant in the life and work of the University of Chicago is now told by Prof. Chauncey Samuel Boucher, dean of the college, in his book “The Chicago College Plan.” It is an absorbing story, and of vital significance for the cause of education. Doubtless it was told primarily for educators, but the layman will find the dean an interesting narrator, abhorring prosiness and pedantry.

The revolution, like all good revolutions, was a movement for liberation. It was designed to encourage in the student a stronger sense of individual responsibility; to emancipate him from the time-clock system of course credits; to put an end to the often frantic, sometimes devious, pursuit of an aggregate of grade points; to inspire in the student a conception of college as an opportunity to attain competence in fields in which he is interested. The major obstruction to realizing those aims was seen to be the long-entrenched method, common in American colleges, of measuring progress by what Prof. Boucher calls “the bookkeeping and adding machine requirement in terms of semester hours or course credits.”

The removal of that obstruction wrought many changes. It occasioned revision of the educational program. It substituted the comprehensive examination for the credit-scoring system. In the atmosphere of a larger liberty, it brought students and instructors together with a deeper sense of common interest in the development of educational values. Unheard-of things have happened, says Dean Boucher. Freshmen and sophomores have asked for more frequent examinations, for longer library hours, for extra laboratory work, for more discussion meetings with their professors. They have written long papers that were not required, converted luncheon tables and lounges into places for discussing fundamental questions, spent summer vacations in voluntary study. From none of these things could they score credit points, but from all they have developed self-discipline, growth in power, enlargement of mind, improvement in knowledge and skill.

That it has evoked in marked degree such a response is the best justification of the revolution. It is making education what it should be. Dean Boucher’s book marks the beginning of a new era in education. The example of the University of Chicago should have profound influence for the transformation of methods in other institutions.
Dear Mr. Swift:

I have admired so much, lately, the way the trustees of Chicago University are establishing a tradition of academic freedom in teaching and inquiry.

At some time, I hope to be able to contribute something substantial toward furthering the purposes of the University. In the meantime, if the trustees and faculty consider it advisable, I should like to establish a scholarship in the field of Sociology. I could provide $1500 per year for a period of four years for one scholar, at the end of which time I should like to consider making something permanent of it.

I do not believe the recipient should be precluded from augmenting this income if the opportunity arises. While I have no one in mind, if the scholarship became permanent, I should like to have the privilege of suggesting a particular individual for the consideration of the faculty.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) MARSHALL FIELD
Columbia University  
in the City of New York  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Saturday afternoon.

Dear Bob -

This place is still bubbling. The volcanic quality is still discernible in the many round table discussions at the club. On all sides you hear discussion of "the plan", or "a plan" or "our plan" or "their plan". The opposition has grown confident. They feel as if they had won the first battle, and are now marshalling their forces for the second, and perhaps, final victory. There is a nasty tone to many of the letters which have been sent in to Boucher. Gideonse and Works, and even Thurstone, are somewhat intimating and fearful of consequences unless we compromise. You can imagine Boucher's state of mind.

I paint this picture in order to give you some of the psychological background necessary for an understanding of the most recent move in this game, which I am now about to report. The Committee meets next Wednesday evening. Each member of the committee has received a copy of all letters sent into to Boucher. Last night I sat down and digested all of these suggestions, a copy of which digest is here enclosed. It will interest you merely as giving a picture of some of the objections and suggestions.

This morning Thurstone, Works, Gideonse and I held our council of war. I presented the digest for their consideration. Gideonse brought with him the plan Keniston has drawn up. This plan was not sent around; it will probably be kept as the bombshell to explode at the meeting next Wednesday night. It represents a compromise and pooling of interests of the humanities and science people, and hence will be offered as the strongest claimant to the throne.

I insisted at this morning's meeting that all of the plans or objections sent in, including the Keniston document, had failed to see what the fundamental objectives of this reorganization were, and that all we had to do to carry the night next Wednesday is to make perfectly clear what the absolute minimum of objectives were, which any scheme had to attain. The objectives are: (1) General education instead of specialization in the college; (2) a standard curriculum, required by the standards of an examination, instead of the Eliot elective scheme; (3) broader training in the field of a student's special interest than is given by departments. In addition, there are a number of minor objectives in your original plan; (1) the elimination of departmental courses; (2) the elimination of English composition; (3) the qualification of students for small class instruction and for tool courses.

Now, as we examined all of the objections we found that they centered around another of points: (1) the length of the lecture courses; (2) the elimination of departmental courses; and (3) the amount of work in other divisions than the one in which the student was supposed to be specializing. And as we examined all of the suggested schemes, we found one cardinal point, namely, that under the name of "conference courses" departmental courses would again be reintroduced, even though we demanded divisional syllabi.
Telegram response from Hutchins to Adler

1931 JAN 31 PM 11:51

Received at
PSA451 74 NL=TUCSON ARIZ 31

MORTIMER J ADLER=
5400 HARPER AVE CHICAGO ILL=

REPORT WELCOME BUT DISGUSTING RECOMMEND SITTING TIGHT
SHOULD PREFER DEPARTMENTAL LECTURES WITH DEPARTMENTAL
SEMINARS BEGINNING IN FRESHMAN YEAR TO WHAT OPPOSITION
PROPOSES YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER THIS IT WOULD RETAIN
PRINCIPAL OF QUALIFICATION FOR SMALL CLASSES AND TOOL
COURSES AND ELIMINATE ENGLISH COMPOSITION BUT IT IS A LIFE
DITCH ALTERNATIVE DIFFICULTY WITH OPPOSITION PLAN IS
FACULTY WOULD THINK IT HAD DONE SOMETHING WHEN REALLY IT
HAD MADE THINGS WORSE THUS PREVENTING LATER PROGRESS=

BOB.
COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION FOR THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Summer, 1938

EXAMINATION ON SET BOOKS, I

(Three hours)

1. (a) State clearly the different reasons Dr. Faustus gives for signing his pact with Mephistophilis. (b) What is the relation of the episodes after the pact is signed to (1) the pact itself and (2) the reasons Dr. Faustus gives for signing it? Give specific details from the play in support of your conclusions.

2. (a) How do you account for the fact that Hobbes, in The Leviathan, classifies ethics under natural philosophy, along with astronomy, mechanics, geography, etc., and excludes politics from this class of sciences? (b) What is the place of poetry (i.e., poetics) in Hobbes' classification of the sciences? Why is it placed where it is?

3. (a) With the reign of what ruler does Gibbon's narrative proper begin? (b) State the qualities of this ruler as described by Gibbon, and show why, in terms of these qualities, the narrative proper begins with him. (c) State Gibbon's general thesis about the causes of the downfall of Rome as set forth in the opening chapters, and show why, in terms of this thesis, he spends so much time in characterizing particular rulers.

4. (a) Discuss the appropriateness of the title of Pride and Prejudice to the major change in the feelings and relationships of the characters which unifies the action of the novel. (b) In the light of your definition of the major change in the novel, what is the specific utility to the plot of each of the following characters: (1) Mrs. Bennet, (2) Mr. Gardiner, (3) Miss Darcy, (4) Lady Catherine, (5) Mary?

5. (a) Show, with specific references to details of the story, whether the unity of Poe's Fall of the House of Usher is best understood in terms of (1) plot, (2) character, or (3) some other principle. (b) Discuss the appropriateness of the opening of the story to the unity as you define it.
The central theme of the Odyssey may best be stated as: (check one)

___ The return of Odysseus.
___ The wanderings and return of Odysseus.
___ The falseness of Penelope.
___ The wrath of Odysseus.

The incident really initiating the action of this theme was: (check one)

___ Odysseus' return after long absence.
___ Odysseus' adventures with Polyphemus the Cyclops.
___ Odysseus' killing of the suitors.
___ Penelope's refusal to accept anyone of the suitors.
___ Penelope's reward in the return of her son and husband.
___ The recognition of Odysseus by Telemachus.
___ The term of the Odyssey.
His comments ultimately kicked off a series of revisions that unfolded over several decades. Key moments include the curricular expansions of the 1950s and 60s, when the College developed course sequences in Islamic, Chinese, and South Asian civilizations. The 1960s also saw the creation of area studies focused on Latin America and Africa. This desire for multiplicity was echoed in the sentiments of the Dean of the College Alan Simpson, who in 1962 complained about “the rigidity of the general education requirements,” “the inadequacy of some upper class offerings,” and a “lack of inventiveness in a college which prides itself on being experimental.” He argued that it was important to “face the future on the basis of diversity—in the proportions of general and specialized education required of different students and in the ways in which general education is offered… We can surely safeguard our traditions of general education without insisting any longer that there is only one right plan.”
Curricular reforms of the 1980s finally saw these non-Western courses accepted as part of the Core, on par with the European and American offerings. Subsequent restructurings have continued this capacious approach to the array of perspectives in the Core curriculum, to include more manifold international and contemporary voices. At the same time, the University’s widely respected undergraduate Core curriculum continues to introduce students to foundational texts that raise fundamental questions about human experience. The Smart Museum’s initiatives further extend this distinctive educational experience through direct engagement with the visual arts, continuing this tradition of innovation.

*Smart to the Core: Embodying the Self* is the first in a series of exhibitions designed by the Feitler Center for Academic Inquiry to expand object-centered teaching across all fields and disciplines across the Core curriculum. Overall, this new collaborative exhibition program showcases the ways in which the Smart Museum engages with and shares the intellectual life of the University with the broader public.
Students studying at the Smart Museum today
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