

**Presidential Address**  
**Association for Core Texts and Courses Conference**  
**April 23, 2003**  
**Dallas, Texas**  
**“Core Programs and the Research University: Revisiting an Old Tension”**  
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Assuming the mantle of this office from Steven Zelnick comes with a note of envy and a disclaimer. Those of us who attended the New Orleans meeting may recall one evening sitting in the lounge hearing some fine jazz piano, only to look more closely and see that the artist at the piano was none other than our President Steve. This began an interesting conversation between Steve and myself, since it turns out that I too am interested in jazz piano. Steve even led me to sources by which I could improve my skills. But I must warn you, if the difference in skill level between us in any way a preview of my role in this office, things have declined drastically! I can promise you I will not be playing in the lounge here. But Steve is here with us. And of course I wish to thank Steve for much more than his piano playing as he served ACTC in this position from its first days.

The ambitious topic of my talk this morning grows out of a long series of experiences and reflections that are part of my own autobiography, and that are closely tied to my teaching for twenty-nine years in one of the traditional “great books” programs, the Program of Liberal Studies, originally named the General Program of Liberal Education, that is now in its fifty-third year of existence at Notre Dame. Because of our unusual history, my program comprises a full major in the Arts and Letters college

at Notre Dame. Students received a B.A. in the Program of Liberal Studies. It functions on one level simply as a department among other departments with its own budget, appointments and tenure. On another level, it is a small liberal arts college of around 150 students that exists within a university that increasingly is emphasizing the issues of research and intense disciplinary and graduate-level scholarship. Hence in my own academic existence I must somehow balance two education forms, one that resembles the smallest entities here represented--the small liberal arts colleges, often with denominational affiliations, that may only consist of a few hundred students, and second, the world of a department within a research university with graduate programs, externally funded research, and disciplinary scholarship. Within our Arts and Letters college, but separate from my own department, is our full year "core course" that is taken by all Arts and Letters majors except those in my own program. This resembles more closely the kind of core courses that many of you here represent, and the Director of that Program, George Howard, is attending ACTC for the first time. Both my own program and our Core Course were co-sponsors of the ACTC meeting at Notre Dame two years ago.

From this academic location I have been able to gain a complex view of several issues surrounding core text education. My particular focus this morning is on some of the tensions in the relation of such education and the goals of the research university.

I begin with some broad theoretical questions: First, what are the goals of a general liberal education as distinct from those of the graduate school? Second, who exactly are we educating, and for what end? Finally,

what is the contribution that core liberal education makes to the lifelong learning of our students? Last evening, Donald Verene delivered a challenging set of reflections on eloquence, history and the classical notion of *humanitas*, drawing deeply upon Vico. Today I wish to approach the questions I have posed in a more practical way, and speak of immediate issue in the academy. To do this, my focus will be on the Ernest L. Boyer Commission Report “Educating Undergraduates in the Research University,” commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation in 1995. This is available on the Web for any interested.<sup>1</sup> This report was issued in the same year as the first national meeting of ACTC, and some contrast between the ideals of the Boyer report and those of ACTC, as I see these, will be evident as I proceed.

This report, widely cited at my own university, calls for a new model for undergraduate education, especially at universities that consider themselves in the research university category. Some important points can be highlighted: First, undergraduate education up to now is characterized in research institutions as having proceeded on a passive model in which students to attend lectures, take notes, and receive certification by

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the version at <http://notes.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf>

examinations. To replace this is a model of education based on “dynamic inquiry.” To quote the report directly:

The ideal embodied in the report would turn the prevailing undergraduate culture of receivers into a culture of inquirers, a culture in which faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates share an adventure of discovery.<sup>2</sup>

As we read in more detail, this new “culture of inquirers” at the undergraduate level has a very specific definition. It means that undergraduates are to be introduced into the educational model of the graduate school. I quote the report again:

The basic idea of learning as inquiry is the same as the idea of research; even though advanced research occurs at advanced levels, undergraduates beginning in the freshman year can learn through research. . . .In the humanities, undergraduates should have the opportunity to work in primary materials, perhaps linked to their professor’s research projects. As undergraduates advance through a program, their learning experiences should become closer and closer to the activity of a graduate student. By the senior year, the able

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. “overview” p. 2

undergraduate should be ready for research of the same character and approximately the same complexity as the first-year graduate student.<sup>3</sup>

I have several comments to make on these proposals. One of these grows from my own autobiographical experience. I was first educated as a scientist exclusively in the research and technical model: my undergraduate degree was in zoology with a minor in chemistry. I spent several years in training for a career as a biological oceanographer. Looking back from this perspective, much of what is said in the Boyer report is true of my own education in the sciences, and some of the changes it advises in undergraduate education would be a welcome reform. Three of the eleven members of the Boyer commission were from engineering and science, and their input seems in evidence in several places in the Report, particularly in the recommendations for a research model for undergraduate education. For a dedicated science undergraduate, attending lectures and mastering information by examination was simply a painful preliminary step to get into the world of creative research. Truly exciting education began when a mentoring relation was developed with some faculty member who introduced a cadre of students into their on-going research project. Modern scientific research is team research, with much of education taking place in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Section "Make Research-Based Learning the Standard", p. 2.

an apprenticeship situation. This inculcates the theories and practices of current scientific consensus into student learning, developing the perspectives of what Thomas Kuhn termed “normal” science. Such education prepares one for the precise “cutting edge” “puzzle-solving” research that flows from applying the paradigms of normal science. The sooner one masters the basics, the quicker one enters the exciting world of research. But the Boyer Report does *not* try to discriminate between the sciences and the humanities. Instead it advocates that this model of education should be transferred to the education in the humanities. Let me reflect on this in some detail.

I will speak again from my own autobiography, for I was an individual profoundly affected by a core text experience. If it had not been for the fact that I was urged by my advisor in my senior year to take my one elective in a general humanities course in classic texts rather than-- and I mean this seriously--advanced cat anatomy-- I would most likely not be addressing you here today. This course allowed me to read for the first time dialogues of Plato, writings of Aristotle, Dante, Goethe, Hume, Joyce, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and many others. I still have the books in my library from that course, complete with my first naive markings in the margins. The course was taught jointly by a philosopher and English professor, neither of

whom could claim to have been expert on most of these books. But that was not the point. This course made me read these works for the first time and struggle with the great issues they raised. It planted seeds that came to fruition only later when I switched from a career in science to take a degree in philosophy with a specialization in the history and philosophy of science, and it is one of the reasons why I have defined at least half my professional career as a teacher in a general liberal education program.

Now I am sure we do not as a group see our task to be that of making oceanographers into philosophers, and I am sure the teachers of that course I took as an undergraduate would be amazed to have learned of the long-term effect of their course on one science student. The point I wish to draw from this is that the reading and discussion of great texts can and does make a difference in people's lives in ways we cannot always foresee.

This suggests that we have two quite different aims in education in the humanities, one oriented to the discipline and the graduate school, but another to a very different end. One is a professional aim: writing books and scholarly articles in a variety of disciplines that are classed under this heading. In the research university like my own, there is constant pressure to produce this kind of research.

But to let this interest distort or even obscure a second aim, that of general liberal humanities, is an academic tragedy, in my view, and we must find ways to resist this in the face of the intensifying pressure to become specialists.

To address this, I wish to speak briefly to two questions: First, what exactly are the goals of general liberal education in distinction from those of specialized scholarship? Second, who are the people we teaching in these courses and curricula?

To the first point, in much of the literature of justification for liberal education that appears in brochures and on webpages, one sees much emphasis on the notion of “skills” acquisition. Liberal education develops better writing skills, it sharpens analytic abilities, it supplies tools for clarifying arguments. This point may be true, but I think it is often overstated. I can comment from my own education that my analytic abilities were much better developed by my studies in physics and mathematics than in anything I encountered in my humanistic education.

A second rationale that one often hears for core programs is that such education “breaks down prejudices” and develops critical perspectives, and this becomes a kind of goal of liberal education. Here I think we have to think more about what we mean by “prejudices.” Particularly in the era of

the canon wars, one was led to believe that the “prejudice” to be destroyed was that perpetuated by a received body of Western learning and assumptions, drawn from the classics, generally the product of a privileged class of “DWEMS”--dead white European males. Yet unless your experience is markedly different from my own, such an inherited foundation is precisely what we *cannot* presume, whether we are teaching students from public or private institutions. Even with the somewhat privileged students I teach, I cannot presume there is any one book or work they all would have read, let alone a classic text. Even in my own education in the 50s, where one might have been able to presume on an American high school graduate that they had all read the *Odyssey*, *Macbeth* and something of Dickens, one could certainly not have presumed that this also included exposure to the world of Kant, Plato, Goethe and Mann. Nor today could we even presume a reading of Ralph Ellison, Chinwa Achebe or Tony Morrison. The situation I feel I face is one in which the “prejudice” to be confronted is the comprehensive world view defined by electronic media. Perhaps this does imply that a course in “film criticism” is a necessary part of a liberal education today if the goal is to undermine prejudice.

But surely there is more to general humanities liberal education than skills acquisition, small group experience, and prejudice deconstruction,

however we define these. The events since 9/11 have shaken us all, teachers as well as students. The question “what does this all mean?” has forced itself to the surface with a new urgency and I think there is no likelihood it is going to go away quickly. My students and yours will be those who have to deal with the consequences of these events that have so altered the optimism that opened this new century. How are they to be prepared for these challenges?

These questions transcend the world of technical research in the humanities, and in some important respects they are at odds with this research model. We are dealing with the issues of organizing value in Max Weber’s sense. How is one to find value orientation in such a society as our own? How are its complex questions to be answered? Can the needed perspective be gained by our students only from the media or the most recent *New York Times* reviewed books, or the latest cutting-edge work in a specific discipline?

To deal with some immediate issues, the one book my senior students and I have read together this year that is probably most important for them has been Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. We read all of it--yes all, including both epilogues--in an intense series of five seminars. This epic work, dealing with events two centuries old, certainly cannot answer specific questions

about what one ought to do at this moment in history. But it is precisely because this is a work that transcends our own historically limited autobiographies that it is able to have such a deep impact. For as we are ourselves relearning, and Tolstoy seemed to grasp deeply, war involves the complexities of human psychology, the unforeseeable nature of the future, the possible illusions of rational military strategy. I read this work with the students without knowing Russian. I do not claim to have a mastery of the vast secondary literature on the work. Mainly I participate with them in a discussion of the book. I also recognize the possibility that some of my students may someday themselves be in positions to make decisions about important matters of practical politics, law, and military strategy. It may be the only time in their lives they have the leisure to read such a book and discuss the significance of the issues it raises.

This raises for reflection a consideration of those we are educating in core humanities courses. They may be like I once was--a science grind who was only in such a course because of a wise advisor. I think it is safe to say that most of us do not see ourselves educating in such courses future college or university professors. Even in my own context where I am teaching a fairly privileged class of students who have chosen the College of Arts and Letters as their major college, and the our great books program as their

specific major, I would judge that about 50% or more of my students will go into law, 25% into business, 10 % into service work or ministry, and the rest into other disciplines. Two or three students in each of our graduating classes will enter medical school. Between 5-10% of these actually enter academic life through the graduate school-Ph.D route. In other words, even at an expensive private university teaching students who have not immediately elected a “practical” college like engineering or business, there are very few that will likely follow me or my colleagues into academia.

Yet to judge from the Boyer report, the ideal of undergraduate education should be to turn our undergraduates into proto-graduate students, even in the humanities. Not only is this to misread the population we are likely teaching, even those majoring in specific arts and letters disciplines, it is also, in my view, to miss the very point of humanistic education as it should be related to the lives our students will probably lead.

One generalization I can make about my students is that they are likely to assume decision-making roles in their professions, whatever these happen to be. They are future CEO’s, leaders of law firms, political leaders, newspaper columnists, judges, and religious leaders. You may have different breakdowns of your student populations, but again with a similar predominance of students intent on some kind of practical life outside

academia. What is the education in the humanities that might make a difference in the kind of citizens of the world in which they will eventually live?

This leads me to raise another issue that faces general humanities education, especially in the context of a research university. This is the opposition of “amateurism” and “expertise.” Any of us teaching in “core” text programs are at some point teaching outside their discipline of specific training and research expertise. On any of the books we teach, there can be whole scholarly subdisciplines around them. Does this mean that only experts should teach these texts? I often hear this as a critique of my own program. As a personal comment on this charge, I know no text that is harder to teach in the context of our great books seminars than one on which I feel I am an expert, and I do claim technical expertise on some of these texts. In such a case I am not willing enough to allow myself to be taught afresh by the text or by the student comments on it. I feel too ready to dominate the discussion. I cease to be a fellow learner with the students in a discussion of great issues about which none of us can claim to have immediate answers or technical expertise.

Certainly we are not, as academics with Ph.D’s in specific disciplines, mere amateurs when we read the texts in our core text programs, even those

far outside our training. As trained professionals, we do know how to read such texts in ways our students do not. We can see more quickly the structure of the text. We can formulate questions better than our students typically can do. We can help develop and guide discussions in ways they cannot do themselves. If necessary, we know how to select authoritative commentaries and secondary literature to assist us.

Again, I come back to the question: who are we educating in our humanities courses and for what end? I am not teaching graduate students in my undergraduate courses, nor likely will most of these students ever be my graduate students. They will most likely be practical citizens of the world. Within the limited time we have with such students, our studies of significant texts in common may help them gain some of the necessary perspective and humane insight that is needed for the world they will have to manage.

Perhaps this gives us some reason to seek to develop as teachers in core programs a virtue that is sometimes too little in evidence in academia. This is a sense of humility before the text and before inquiry into the significant questions of life. From my own complex education, the place I found such humility most clearly exemplified was by a few great research scientists with whom I came into contact. It was not something I personally

encountered generally in the humanities. I have often asked why this is the case, when the reverse seems to be what we might expect.

The difficulty seems to reach to the core of the Boyer Commission recommendations. As a model for the sciences, its vision of undergraduate education seems appropriate and meaningful, if incomplete in itself. But for the humanistic disciplines, introduction to research seems only to be a plausible goal for those very few of our students we realistically might wish to cultivate for an academic vocation. My own research is technical; it is of interest to a limited number of scholars in the world, and it is difficult to relate to my undergraduates except perhaps at the time they write their senior theses under my supervision. It certainly informs my teaching in indirect ways, but never as a direct goal of my undergraduate teaching in my Program. Those few students that are concerned to move toward research I will, of course, mentor and encourage. But the needs of that small group should not define the goal of general liberal education for a general population, many of whom may never again be in a university. This distortion, this tendency for the goals of the graduate school to define those of the baccalaureate world, presents many challenges to the notion of core humanities programs and core text education, especially in the research university. In this environment, many forces are working against general

education that the Boyer report manifests. The academic reward system favors specialized, disciplinary scholarship. Many core humanities programs must exist in the interstices between departmental structures, staffing themselves with irregular faculty or with faculty extracted as a begrudged “tax” from disciplinary departments. The prestige for participating in core programs may often be low. Why then is it so important that we have core general education in the research university?

The founder of my own Program, Otto Bird, once made a wise comment in response to the question: “why in an advanced technological society does one even need a general liberal education?” The Boyer report seems to be asking this question in another way. His response was very perceptive: it is exactly *because* we live in such a society that we need such an education. This is not a call to reject specialized learning. It only is to claim that there is a necessary place the two kinds of learning set for by Aristotle in the opening discourse of the *Parts of Animals*: the *Paideia* of the generally educated person, and the scientific knowlege or *episteme* of the expert.<sup>4</sup>

One way we might look at core education in relation to the interests of the disciplines and the graduate school is to put this in terms of Whitehead’s

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 1.1.639a 1-10.

distinction of the three ages of education set forth in an important essay, “The Rhythm of Education” he published in 1922, that is still worth reading.<sup>5</sup>

As both a major technical philosopher and also as an educator, Whitehead was concerned with more than specialized learning. He was also concerned with the timing of education, with the notion that there are stages in life when we are educated in different ways. Whitehead speaks of three important phases: the age of “romance,” the age of “precision,” and the age of “generalization.”

The notion that educational experience ideally passes through an age of “romance” seems particularly relevant to the education of undergraduates. Whitehead speaks of this as a phase where learning has the “vividness of novelty” surrounding it. It may mean the first exposure to philosophy, to great literature, to the arts, to the dynamic discussion of ideas. It is the place where one encounters the great thoughts and the wisdom of our own tradition and that of others. Whitehead speaks of the transition that takes place in this stage “from the bare facts to the first realizations of the import of their unexplored relationships.” (p. 29). I suggest that this

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<sup>5</sup>A. N. Whitehead, “The Rhythm of Education,” in: *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Mentor, 1963 ; first published 1922), 26-38 . I am also drawing on some valuable developments of this theme in his unpublished essay “The Rhythms of Learning,” delivered as a talk to the students and faculty of the Program of Liberal Studies by my late friend and colleague, Stephen Rogers, in 1983.

“romantic” phase of learning, however we characterize it, is fundamental to the undergraduate educational experience, and this is world of education in the classic texts. It is this phase of education ACTC as I see it considers fundamental.

Whitehead’s second age is one our students must later enter, the “age of precision.” The Boyer Report urges us to get our undergraduates as quickly as possible into this phase of learning. In Whitehead’s words, this phase subordinates “width of relationship” to “exactness of formulation.” Accuracy, exactitude and precision are demanded of the learner. It is education in which one must master the skills of languages, literary criticism, technical philosophy, computing, statistical analysis, differential equations, and cellular mechanics.

Learning in this phase may be stimulating, challenging and rewarding, but it is rarely what one would characterize as encouraging wonder, or encounter with the great questions. The skills acquired in this phase will be increasingly demanded of our students. Career, profession, and corporation will hone these skills to an ever sharper focus. It will require from them what Max Weber aptly characterized as the underlying ethos of advanced commercial society--a “worldly asceticism”-- that demands self-

discipline, long hours, delayed gratification, and intense application of intellectual powers.

But let us turn to a third stage that I hope will follow this “age of precision.” Whitehead defined this as an “age of generalization” when learning is brought together into some higher insights and synthesis. I do not discount his characterization, but I would like to speak of a different third phase: an age of something we might term wisdom--*sophia*. If the age of precision is not to be the be-all and end-all of education, we might hope that core education in classic works can prepare our students at some time in the future to be able to make the transition to this third phase. The seeds planted by general liberal education and core humanities—and they *are* just seeds when our students encounter these at the age of eighteen and nineteen—may be what is needed to make possible this transition. I hope our ideals of liberal education can nurture and help develop into this third stage of their education.