

## Western Civilization and Culture

Along with a decline in ideological diversity at colleges and universities has come a decline in the importance of teaching Western Civilization and Culture. Indeed, there is almost an animosity toward Western Civilization in some academic quarters, where it is viewed as inherently racist, homophobic, sexist, etc. Courses in Western Civilization which were once required are now optional or, in some cases, not offered at all. The Benson Center at the University of Colorado views this as a tragic mistake, which threatens to eliminate our common heritage. They state that "one can celebrate the achievements of Western Civilization without denigrating the world's other cultures. One can say with confidence that Western Civilization has had a massive influence across the globe, in all domains of life, not just in the United States but across the Americas, and indeed on every continent. . . To understand our planet's civilization . . . requires an appreciation of this thing we call Western Civilization. In promoting that, we promote human civilization." The Benson Center does not shy from presenting both the positive and negative aspects of Western Civilization, but holds that we must understand our own civilization and culture first before we can understand others. To encourage the study of Western Civilization, they promote events such as symposia, panel discussions, lectures, etc. throughout the school year which will lead to a better understanding and appreciation of Western Civilization. The Benson Center is also totally supported by private funds. Here again, many alums and friends of the university might be interested in supporting such a program.

Another possible model is the Alexander Hamilton Institute at Hamilton College, New York, which "was created to help cultivate a genuinely free marketplace of ideas and promote excellence in scholarship through the study of freedom, democracy, and capitalism." These are, incidentally, all ideas which derived from the Western cultural tradition. On their website, the leaders of the institute further state that "In furthering the conversation among individuals, campuses, and organizations across the country, the AHI continues to build a legacy where evidence and argument prevail over ideology and cant." AHI, like the programs at Colorado, is totally self-funded.

The General Redoubt has never held that other cultural traditions should not be studied but merely that the study of Western Civilization should constitute the "core" of the curriculum. The idea of a "core curriculum" based on the study of Western culture is not a new idea or an exotic one; but it has come under increasing attack from liberal quarters over the last 25 years or so. The decline in the teaching of Western Civilization is paralleled by a decline in student enrollment in liberal arts. Over the past decade, the number of History majors has fallen by 25 percent, English majors by more than 20 percent, and Philosophy majors by 15 percent. Certain universities are eliminating entire humanities departments, while an increasing number of small liberal arts colleges are folding up. Perhaps a reinvigoration of the study of Western Civilization might lead to a renewal of interest in the liberal arts more generally, particularly if this were to be combined with the elimination of some courses which appear to be questionable, trivial, and/or focused on identity politics.

The idea of a series of "Great Books" centering on the intellectual tradition of the West began in the early 20th century and was popularized from the late 1920's forward by Mortimer J. Adler of the University of Chicago and other members of the faculty at Chicago like Mark Van Doren and Harold Bloom. It is still the basis for the "Common Core" at the University of Chicago, the "Core Curriculum" at Boston University, and Columbia University's "Core Curriculum." Providence College has a program

entitled "The Development of Western Civilization" which is a required part of the Liberal Arts curriculum. This consists of three semesters of seminar programs and a fourth semester colloquium, and has been a foundational program at Providence for over 40 years. The entire curriculum at St. John's College (Annapolis and Santa Fe), both undergraduate and graduate, is based on the Great Books/Western Civilization model. The University of Notre Dame's "Program of Liberal Studies", established in 1950, is a highly regarded Great Books/Western Civilization program which operates as a separate institution within the College of Liberal Arts.

As might be expected, students and professors at some of the more liberal schools have protested against courses in Western Civilization and the humanities. At Reed College, Oregon, a group of students vigorously protested against the school's required introductory course in the humanities. They led boycotts and disruptions of the class, decrying the faculty's approach to history as "too white" and painting the course as "an element of white supremacy still pervading a campus that complacently saw itself as very progressive." Unfortunately, in the end, Reed gave in to the student demands and replaced the foundational course. Even last spring, when The General's Redoubt listed as one of its goals the centrality of Western Civilization in the "core" curriculum, several Washington and Lee students and others accused us of being "racist", "sexist", and "homophobic".

It will be noted that in some cases courses in Western Civilization are required while in other cases they are optional or even constitute an entirely separate program. Curricular decisions should be made by the faculty and administration of the university and not by the alumni or any other group. However, a consideration of the ideas presented in this paper or similar ones from other college and universities would surely be helpful as Washington and Lee moves into the future. The General's Redoubt has suggested a series of public, on campus forums to discuss curricular and other matters such as ideological diversity within the faculty, the full meaning of the University of Chicago Standards of Free Speech and Expression, and the Legacy of Robert E. Lee. We have also mentioned the idea of a committee to be formed to examine what a quality liberal arts education should look like in the 21st century. So far, we have received little response, but we continue to hope for the best.

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