The Freshmen Seminar: A History of the Western University

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I would like to discuss a new approach to the freshman year curriculum which would feature a course in the history of the Western university, a course which could also be combined with a Great Books program for our most academically prepared students. I would also like to demonstrate how Maritain's ideas about education have helped me to conceptualize such a course.

The Freshman Year Experience is a popular term today for programs of advisement, orientation and academic support directed at the incoming freshman. Such programs have developed rapidly over the last ten or fifteen years as enrollments have declined and statistics show that the highest drop-out rate occurs during and immediately after the freshman year. Nationally about one in every four students who enters a college or university will not return to that institution the next Fall. As a result, the Freshman Year Experience has become an important field of research and academic innovation as our colleges and universities strive to retain the students they have admitted. Although academic preparedness certainly plays a role in a freshman student's success or failure, many other factors are involved, including financial concerns, clarity about personal and career goals, alienation from the new and unfamiliar environment of the world of higher education, etc. Gone are the days when at orientation an administrator could proudly direct each student to look at the persons sitting to his right and left and then announce that one of them would not be back next year. Now we are trying to support each student as he or she comes to our campuses for his or her first and probably most difficult year of higher education.

One of the most recent developments in first-year programming is the University 101 course, a freshman seminar that assists students in making

the difficult transition from high school to college. Topics covered in such a course include study skills, test taking skills, time management skills, stress management skills, as well as issues such as diversity, interpersonal relationships, and major and career choice. Such courses—which usually run for one semester, which in some schools are required but which in others are optional, and which often, but not always, carry academic credit—have successfully increased both the freshman-sophomore retention rate as well as enhanced the academic performance of students at many colleges and universities. Advisement is thus provided to these students through the organized, efficient method of a course.

Many University 101 courses are unified by certain themes, such as identity formation and goals clarification. The theme that has always appealed to me the most is the history of the university concept. Some colleges do use it as one of the components of the University 101 course. For example, California State University begins its University 101 reader with an essay by Robert O. Bucholz entitled "Be True to Your Medieval University Tradition" which is a breezy but informative look at student life and the typical curriculum of the medieval university and which makes comparisons to its modern counterpart. Here is a sampling of the essay's approach:

> Aristotle presented medieval European scholars with a new way of looking at the world, one which emphasized reason and observation over faith. This methodology—and all of the new information which it was to bring—would have to be reconciled with the old Biblical world-view. The medieval response to this challenge was to invent the university. In our own day, the computer revolution promises a similar knowledge explosion. We, too, will have to get used to new ways of acquiring, storing, and retrieving unprecedented amounts of information—if we are to reconcile it with what we already know.[1]

The reader also contains essays on the history of academic freedom and tenure, free speech in the university, stress management, etc.

The course I have in mind would begin with a study of the rise of the medieval universities in Europe in order to investigate the meaning and history of higher education as well as more specific topics such as the origin of the various degrees and rituals (wearing of gowns, commencement, etc.) and the relationship of the university to society (town/gown issues). Then

[1] Robert O. Burcholz. "Be True to your Medieval University Tradition," in Sharon L. Olson, ed., *The University in Your Future*, Long Beach, California: California State University Press, 1994), p. 12.

the history of the university in the United States would be studied: the original religion-affiliated institutions, Jefferson's innovations at the University of Virginia, the land-grant and other state universities, and the modern college and university. The student will then be able to locate his/her particular college or university in its historical and cultural context and clarify how the goals and values of his/her school relate to the tradition of the Western university. Once this identification is accomplished—or while it is being accomplished—students will be introduced to the usual University 101 type information and advisement. but now from a richer perspective. Such an approach also insures academic validity for the course.

For example, students would be able to see the pedagogical relationship between the core curriculum that they are beginning to follow in their freshman year and the medieval trivium and quadrivium that prepared students for advanced study in medicine, law, or theology. They would also learn the origin and meaning of the various degrees—bachelor's, master's, doctorate—and thus understand how they as students relate to their medieval counterparts. For first generation college students in particular such an awareness can be particularly beneficial and inspiring. And depending on whether their institution is private or public, religious or secular, a study of the history of the university will demonstrate to freshmen the essential similarities and differences between the mission of their institution and that of the surrounding colleges and universities in any part of the country. Hopefully a real comprehension of the school's mission will help each student to clarify his/her own mission as a student and as an adult.

To be sure, a course such as this one is susceptible to attack for a Western and patriarchal bias. I will suggest that in the history of the university course that I have in mind the entrance of women into higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should be a strong focus of the latter part of the course, as well as the developments in our own century that have caused women to become the majority of today's undergraduate population.

All high school graduates, even if their SAT scores and high school averages are impressive, usually find the freshman year to be the most challenging on personal, social and academic levels. Learning better test-taking and note-taking skills, as well as managing time more effectively, can be a tremendous advantage for many honors students who needed to do little work in high school to succeed but are having difficulty navigating the collegiate waters with the same facility. And such students, as much as any others, need to develop interpersonal skills and clarify personal goals. Certainly all University 101 courses try to integrate students into the university

community in all its social and cultural dimensions. However, as a former University 101 administrator and teacher, I have come to understand that the more academically-prepared students need to attain these transitional skills in a theoretical context that complements the "case study" and "active learner" approach of most freshman seminars. Otherwise they tend to reject the course or treat it as an unnecessary burden, thereby losing its potentially vital effects.

It seems to me that students who are highly qualified when they enter college would benefit the most from a course that combines the history of the university component with the traditional Great Books course that has long been established at Columbia, St. John's College, the University of Chicago, and other institutions. As Maritain says, studying the classic texts "feeds the mind with the sense and knowledge of natural virtues, of honor and pity, of the dignity of man and of the spirit, the greatness of human destiny, the entanglements of good and evil, the *caritas humani generis* Such reading, more than any course in natural ethics, conveys to the youth the moral experience of mankind."[2] In combining these two approaches to the freshman seminar, we can connect the great thinkers of the Western world to the rise and development of the university itself. For example, studying Plato and Aristotle in the context of the Academy and the Lyceum would reveal to our students the social and historical background of Greek philosophy without relativizing the truths contained in the texts themselves. Plotinus can be better appreciated as a teacher and thinker when he is seen against the background of the intellectual ferment at the schools in Alexandria. Studying the great Scholastics such as Aquinas and Bonaventure will be even more rewarding when a student understands the positions of these thinkers at the University of Paris, and the way the University of Paris related to the other new European universities and to the church and the state. Students will be able to see not only how they developed out of monastic schools, but how a center of learning such as the University of Paris, in Josef Pieper's words, "touted itself as a new Athens." Pieper's feeling is that this continuity—from Plato to Thomas Aquinas, let us say—is not an unhistorical construction, and that the notion of the *translatio studii*, the transplantation of the Platonic Academy to the city of the paradigmatic university, is not a mere fiction."[3]

[2] Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 69.

[3] Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 63.

In other words, the development of Western thought will be taught in the context of how that thought was transmitted from one generation to the next, and of the institutions of learning that were created to facilitate that transition, just as our students are learning about their own institution and are being introduced to the great ideas through the faculty of that institution. A year-long course such as this one is an excellent way to help our students begin a true education, the kind that Maritain defines as "[guiding] man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person—armed with knowledge, strength of judgment, and moral virtues—while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations."[4]

Moral virtues, of course, are controversial in the contemporary atmosphere of relativism. However, even in our secular colleges and universities, the usual list of the objectives of the core course experience or the institution's mission statement includes an ethical dimension, even though our course catalogues are usually rather vague in explaining precisely how such an ethical education will take place. This vagueness has contributed to the "Can Ethics Be Taught?" debate. The lack of interdisciplinary and/or cross-disciplinary approaches is an obstacle here: how can moral development take place when the ideas and information learned in introductory psychology and sociology courses, for example, are presented by faculty who are jealously guarding the primacy of their disciplines? I have always believed that the freshman seminar is an excellent site for such ethical discussion and for revealing the connections among the disciplines.

Maritain has been particularly helpful to me in thinking about the ethical dimensions of such a course. He insists that direct education of the will should occur in other educational spheres (i.e., the Church) or in extra-educational spheres. What the college and university can do is exert indirect action on the will by "keeping sight, above all, of the development and uprightness of speculative and practical reason. School and college education has indeed its own world, which essentially consists of the dignity and achievements of knowledge and intellect, that is, of the human being's root faculty. And of this world itself that knowledge which is wisdom is the ultimate goal."[5]

[4] Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 10.
[5] Ibid., p. 28.

Thus the knowledge of the great books, seen as storehouses of speculative and practical wisdom, will produce the intellectual basis for the development of character. And indeed, despite the typical obsession with political correctness of many University 101 courses—ethical development sometimes seems to be equated with appreciation of ethnic and racial diversity—it remains true that most University 101 programs are concerned with practical problems of moral choice faced by most college freshmen, choices involving sex, academic integrity, drugs and alcohol, etc. By studying Plato and Shakespeare, and then discussing moral choice in the context of these great writers, students will gain the intellectual grounding they need to inform their own wills as they move from late adolescence into young adulthood. The goal of such a University 101 course would thus be to introduce freshmen to the world of the college or university in such a way that the practical problems of the transition from high school to college can be addressed from the perspective of "the best that has ben known and thought" as Matthew Arnold put it, and in the context of the great tradition of the Western university.

What would such a course look like? In the first semester students would read about Socrates, Plato, and the establishment of the Academy, as well as study an early dialogue such as the *Crito* and a later one such as the *Republic*. This would be followed by an examination of the Lyceum and a reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Students would thus learn about the Socratic method, exactly who were the followers of Socrates and who were the followers of the Sophists, and which class of young men actually studied at the schools in Athens, at the same time that the major ideas of Plato and Aristotle would be compared and contrasted. Then the Socratic method can be looked at as a method of teaching in the twentieth century classroom; the role of the philosopher in Plato's ideal republic can be discussed in its relation to the meaning of the word "philosopher" in our own culture and institutions of higher learning; and Aristotle's discussion of the moral and intellectual virtues can be applied to both the content of the student's college curriculum and his or her own decisions that will have to be made regarding social relationships, responsible sexual decisions, and the dangers of substance abuse. This pattern of studying the institution and the ideas promulgated there that were directly related to classic texts would continue through the medieval and modern universities. For American students a particularly interesting topic would be the intellectual connection between Jefferson's republican idealism as reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the mission of the University of Virginia.

Ultimately, I hope that this interdisciplinary freshman course will open

up the world of knowledge and virtue to our incoming students in a way that is both traditional and innovative, demanding and inspiring. My highest expectations would be that either of the two courses I have described here—the freshman seminar based on the history of the University and a more advanced version that is combined with the Great Books—will fulfill Maritain's prescription that education should provide a student with "the foundations of real wisdom, and with a universal and articulate comprehension of human achievements in science and culture, before he enters upon the definite and limited tasks of adult life in the civil community, and even while he is preparing himself for these tasks through a specialized, technical, or vocational training."[6] For much of Western history the foundations of real wisdom, the direct training of the intellect with an indirect influence on the will, have been laid in the universities, and these Freshman seminars will show our students how this process has continued into our own time, and, hopefully, how he or she can become an active part of the process.

[6] Ibid., p. 48.