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ESSAY

Finding Dignity and Excellence in the Great Books

Far from being elitist, a college curriculum focused on the Western classics can open a new world for students of all backgrounds

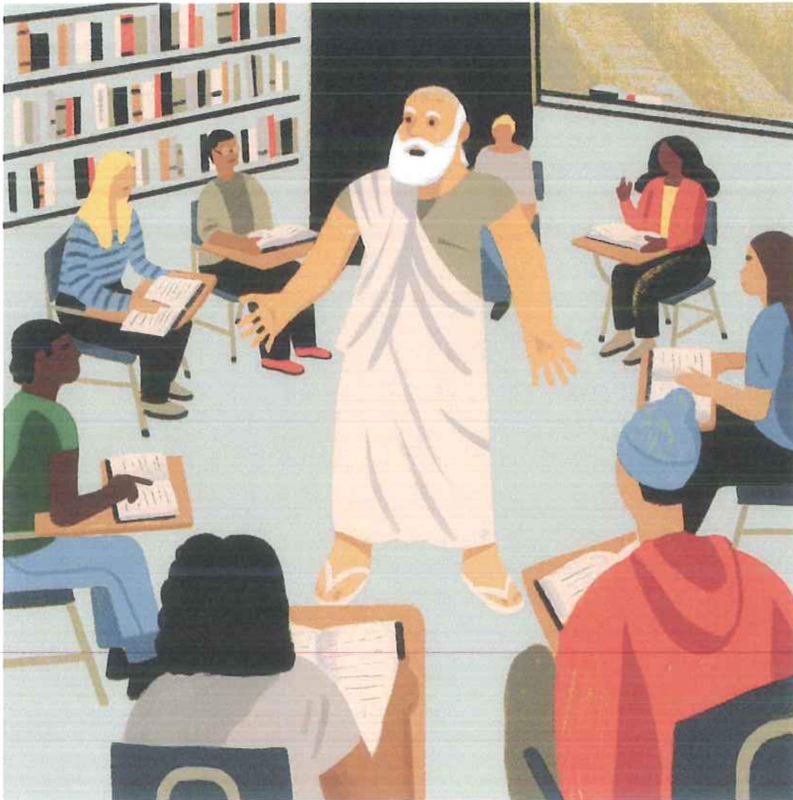

ILLUSTRATION: RYAN JOHNSON

By Roosevelt Montás
Nov. 4, 2021 1:27 pm ET

In 1985, a few days before my 12th birthday, I left the Dominican Republic for New York City. The flight was only three and half hours, but the distance I traveled that day was in many ways incalculable. I didn't speak English and had never even been close to an airplane. The city that greeted me and my older brother was the menacing New York of the 1980s, and like many other Dominican immigrants, we arrived poor, disoriented and with little notion of what would happen next.

I also traveled a great distance from learning English as a second language in the overcrowded classrooms of Intermediate School 61 in Corona, Queens, to enrolling as a

freshman at Columbia University in 1991. Besides a fervent immersion in biblical exegesis, and what I had picked up as a child from my father's self-education in Marxism, I was probably as ignorant of the world of letters as any student in Columbia's nearly 250-year history.

> **Legendary for its rigor, Columbia's Core Curriculum is a kind of intellectual baptism that goes back more than a century.**

What helped me make sense of the world and my place in it was the social and intellectual initiation provided by the university's famed Core Curriculum. At the time, I couldn't have suspected that I would go on to become a professor at Columbia and direct the Core from 2008 to 2018.

Sometimes described as a Great Books program, the Core Curriculum is a required set of courses in literary and philosophical classics—as well as art, music and science—in which all students study and discuss a prescribed list of works that begins in antiquity and moves chronologically to the present. Authors like Plato, Dante, Shakespeare and Woolf are semi-permanent fixtures. Legendary for its rigor, the Core is a kind of intellectual baptism that goes back more than a century, to a time when an introduction to the Western tradition of learning was recognized as a self-evident good.

Today, Columbia's Core Curriculum stands as a kind of relic, with no other major university requiring a common course of study in what used to be called "the classics." Liberal education has always been a hard sell, and with higher education increasingly seen in transactional terms—with students paying exorbitant amounts of money to gain a leg up in a fiercely competitive job environment—it is easy to see how liberal education might be regarded as a waste of time.

In particular, many people today, even academics, take the study of the classics to be elitist and exclusive. Of course, a curriculum weighted toward the past and therefore toward "dead white males" invites questions about diversity and inclusion. Such questions are integral to liberal education, not a distraction from it; they are, as computer programmers say, a feature, not a bug.

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What have you learned from reading great books? Join the conversation below.

While students can be self-righteous and off-target in their diagnoses and demands, I have also found them to be hungry for, and appreciative of, honest debate that doesn't condescend to them. The fact that I am myself a person of color was always helpful in these conversations. It helped some students to be more open to what I had to say and more willing to engage in good faith dialogue.

The most important thing I tell students is that while a liberal arts education doesn't have to center on Western civilization, Western texts and debates underpin today's global culture. Contemporary notions like human rights, democracy, gender equality, scientific objectivity, the free market, equality before the law, and many others cannot be adequately accounted for without studying the Western tradition. That tradition does not contain the only important contributions to these notions, but it does contain decisive ones.

And the Western tradition is by no means monolithic. In fact, one of its hallmarks is its internal contentiousness. It is rife with fissures, where overturning the past is preferred to venerating it. The tradition matters not because it is Western, but because of its contribution to human questions of the highest order. And it matters not just for elites, but for every student, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Every summer for more than a decade I have taught a series of Plato's dialogues to low-income high school students, introducing them to a world that for many had been inaccessible and inconceivable until then. These short dialogues are set in the days leading up to Socrates's execution, and he emerges in them vividly and heroically.

Throughout his ordeal, he insists that "the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same," and that no matter what the city of Athens might threaten to do to him, he cannot give up the practice of philosophy.

Every year, I watch as Socrates brings young people to serious contemplation of the issues that his philosophy demands we grapple with. Students from low-income households do not take this sort of thinking to be the exclusive privilege of a social elite. In fact, they find in it a vision of dignity and excellence that is not constrained by material limitations.

Some of these students, as was the case with me, will go on to elite colleges and find themselves surrounded by far wealthier and far better educated peers. But Socrates whispers to them not to mistake these marks of privilege for true expressions of merit and to find in their own intellectual integrity a source of self-worth and self-respect. It surpasses any material advantage that their peers might have over them.

In my own experience, classic texts were the vehicle for a transformative kind of education. That inward education came slowly, almost unconsciously. It was not like flipping a switch but like the dawning of a day. Many of the conversations we had about the books and ideas rushing upon us went over my head. But like a recurring tide that leaves behind a thin layer of sediment each time it comes, they eventually coalesced into an altogether new sense of who I was and of the possibilities of my life.

—Mr. Montás is director of the Freedom and Citizenship Program at Columbia University's Center for American Studies. This essay is adapted from his new book, "Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation," published Nov. 16 by Princeton University Press.

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