

Memorandum to the Task Force on Undergraduate Education:
The Future of Major Cultures

In 1919, Contemporary Civilization was created to discuss issues of war and peace in the aftermath of World War I. As our world becomes more interconnected, Columbia education should once again adapt to the changing nature of our world. Major Cultures is the ideal setting in which students have the opportunity to develop a global perspective required of this generation; however there is much room for improvement in this aspect of the core. As such, the Task Force should consider improving this requirement.

The Columbia “experience” is defined by the group discussions and intellectual lessons promoted in this environment. Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization are valuable examples of courses that encourage discussion-based learning. Alumni often cite the discussions they had in small, focused classes as one of their most memorable college experiences. Many courses currently offered in the Major Cultures requirement are large lectures where students do not have an opportunity to engage in vibrant discussions with their classmates and instructors.

This problem is further complicated by the scattered structure of the current Major Cultures requirement. As it stands students chose courses from a List A, List B, and List C “menu” that does not create a cohesive educational experience common to all students in the college. In Contemporary Civilization, students can see the development of thought in the western canon. The current structure of Major Cultures does not offer a sense of historical progression that unites the entire syllabus.

The colloquium model merits further consideration. For instance, the Colloquium on Nobility and Civility enlightens students about eastern cultures through discussions of major literary and philosophical works. A class based on this model would not only teach students about the cultures producing such works but would provide an alternative to the western philosophical thrust of other components of the core. By learning about the intellectual foundations of foreign cultures, students would be able to gain new perspectives and insights through which they can interpret international events. Expanding the number of available colloquia on different cultures would be a step in the right direction.

We believe that with some effort it is possible to reinvigorate the Major Cultures requirement such that it comes to build on the successes and vision of the Columbia Core Curriculum.

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