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The Spirit of Liberal Arts Education and Its Manifestation at Boston College

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Abstract

As a student at one of the nation's leading universities, Boston College, it seems imperative to look at the university's aims and accomplishments with a critical eye. The conceptual goals of higher education, particularly liberal arts education, have been the object of philosophical and political conversations for centuries, and it is important that universities continually assess their status through deliberative discussions. This paper seeks to analyze the liberal arts education provided at Boston College in relation to historic conceptions of higher education, current understandings on methods of this education, and the possibility of disparities between what Boston College claims to provide and what students, in reality, receive. Further, this report seeks to make comparisons between the liberal arts education provided by the honors program at Boston College and that which is delivered in the regular CORE program.

What are the aims of a Liberal Arts Education?

To begin, a working definition of the aims of a liberal arts education based on common understanding as it is bound in historical scholasticism must be explored. In this discussion, information will be compiled from a variety of sources including: descriptions from universities that are identified as “liberal arts colleges” today, the works of scholars that have explored and written on the subject of higher education, and several influential philosophical texts. In its most basic sense, the term “liberal arts” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the studies (as language, philosophy, history, literature, abstract science) in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the general intellectual capacities as opposed to professional or vocational skills” (“Liberal Arts,” n.d.). Historically, the term “liberal arts” is derived from the Medieval Latin words *artes liberales* meaning “subjects of study” and *liberals* meaning “proper to free persons”. The definition evolved during the Renaissance to apply more broadly to “studies aimed at imparting a general rather than a vocational education” and still maintains this spirit today.

Judging by common perceptions of the meaning behind the words “liberal arts” and recent definitions put forth by those colleges advertised as delivering this type of education, the phrase seems to have taken on even greater meaning. Preparing individuals as intellectuals and citizens has become a task involving students engaging with material on a deep level. President of Amherst College from 1924-1932, George Daniel Olds, described an understanding of the tradition of the liberal arts college to encourage its students to interact with their education, claiming ““The wise teacher will place the tiller

in the hands of his pupil and let him feel its touch, learn by experiment, how shrewdly the helm directs an unruly craft" ("Amherst Philosophy," n.d.). Addressing this philosophical side of liberal arts, Martha Nussbaum (1997) writes in her book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense in Liberal Education*, "...the only kind of education that really deserves the name "liberalis", or, as we might literally render it, "freelike," is one that makes pupils free, able to take charge of their own thought and to conduct a critical examination of their society's norms and traditions" (p. 30).

According to the U.S. News and World Report online, the top Liberal Arts colleges of 2009 include Amherst College, Williams College, Swarthmore College, Wellesley College, and Middlebury College. The President of Amherst College, ranked first among these liberal arts colleges contends that the school's philosophy involves recognizing the responsibility "to fire in [the students] a lifelong desire for learning and moral reasoning and action" ("Amherst Philosophy," n.d.). Prior President of Amherst College, Tom Gerety eloquently wrote, "We in the liberal arts colleges believe that teacher and student must stand face to face in the many conversations that are the work of both; we believe in teaching as conversation because the best teaching is conversation; except by dialogue we cannot do our work." Ranked second best liberal arts college in 2009 by the same source, William's College describes the format of their classes in their intimation of how they provide a liberal arts education, describing that "As a liberal arts college, we differ greatly from a university in that our classes are nearly uniformly small (the median class size being 14), our professors teach every class offered, and we don't have graduate schools. Our students study in a variety of formats, most frequently in

small, discussion-based seminars, but also often in student-led workshops or tutorials, all designed to maximize student contact with faculty” (“Mission and Purpose”, n.d.).

To reiterate, while the type of intellectuals one such school seeks to produce typically defines a college as a “liberal arts college”, this product is dependent on the process. The importance of interaction with material and the ability to engage students with their peers and professors emerges as an essential component of the liberal arts college today. While the character of a liberal arts college is supported at Boston College, it is necessary to evaluate how well the process is designed to ensure the format of the classes lend to discussions. Dissection and analysis of Boston College as a liberal arts college will seek to identify how well the curriculum supports this spirit of conversation and recognizes the importance of fostering dialogue. This analysis will look at existing programs and the type of intellectuality they foster in attempts to ensure that the highest quality of liberal arts education is being provided. It will highlight strengths and suggest improvements in those areas that are not performing in a fashion consistent with conceptions of successful liberal arts education. Primarily, this analysis will attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between the general expectation for a liberal arts education, the education Boston College specifically claims to provide to all students, and the extent to which this is achieved.

Philosophical Foundations for the Modern Higher Education System

A careful scrutiny of the foundations on which the modern education system is built is vital in evaluating the methods by which Boston College approaches the education of what are presumably some of the nation's most intelligent individuals. In reviewing the theories of such prominent philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, several dominant themes emerge. Each of these works examines particular theories on what education should accomplish and how these accomplishments can be obtained. The contentions of these works have contributed to the development of modern universities and the goals that these institutions strive for. For the purposes of this analysis, the critical components of these theories on education are first, explanations of what education *is* and perhaps more importantly, how education is best provided.

In Plato's *Republic*, perhaps the earliest text to address methods and theory of education, the concept of the Socratic Method emerges. His allegory of the cave sheds light on a concept of education that focuses around being lead into true understanding of the good. By using convoluted examples, complicated questions, and seemingly irrelevant images, Plato's main character Socrates is clearly and persistently guiding his pupils to be able to gain understanding of what truly is. In his dialogue with the guardians, Socrates allows them to explore their ideas without attacking them as incorrect. In the work, Socrates goes on to suggest outlandishly offensive and incorrect descriptions, evidently to help his pupils come to understand the opposite as true. He conjures up allegorical images to help the men elucidate the truth for themselves. By calling ideals into question, the guardians learn to critically analyze situations and to

avoid assumptions about what is natural and good. Through the example set by the work itself, and the explanation that comes from the dialogues between characters, it becomes clear that Plato's Socrates leaves obtaining the truth up to the pupil himself.

Aristotle's theory of education differs slightly from Plato's in its explication of three aspects of education, the practical, the theoretical, and the technical. The theoretical involves contemplative thinking about knowledge that is already possessed by the thinker, knowledge for its own sake (Smith, M., n.d.). Aristotle identifies this as the highest form of human activity, related to carefully reasoned actions and reflection. The role of education towards the theoretical is to aide pupils in gaining knowledge so that they can reflect on it and help develop a person's character so that they are more likely to use the knowledge they have. Knowledge that is associated with the productive, usually involves creativity, dependent upon the use of a skill, and beginning with an idea or plan. Finally, "the practical" is a type of education involving the cultivation of wisdom and ability to make judgments. This involves the application of theory in practice. The practical is impossible without the theoretical, and it is also very uncommon that the theoretical exists only for the sake of contemplation. Aristotle (1999) described in his "Nicomachean Ethics" that we acquire the virtues "by first having put them into action...we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage" (p. 34). In terms of the role of teaching, Aristotle maintained that "intellectual virtue or excellence owes its origin and development chiefly to teaching, and for that reason requires experience and time". This is described as distinct from learning a thing through habit, as is the case with moral virtues, in which a person acquires moral virtue not from birth but from habit or practice.

However, it seems that Aristotle's use of the word habit does not suggest repetition but learning through action. Aristotle also writes of the importance of learning different disciplines as one develops and matures, and to address a man's body, soul, and reason. Further, Aristotle's pedagogy is a type of teaching that starts with examples, and then leads to the understanding of causes and the universality of an issue.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work *Emile* describes a system of education that recognizes each individual's nature and focuses on the learner as a person needing guidance and development. In his view, many theorists have proposed ways in which the conventional education system is inadequate without looking at ways in which it should be improved. Not only does Rousseau (2003) challenge this mode of analysis, but he looks at the pupil in an entirely innovative way, viewing the child as he is before he has learned rather than, as he says, "looking for the man in the child". According to Rousseau (2003), education comes to us from nature, from men, or from things, and "the inner growth of our organs and faculties is the education of nature; the use we learn to make of this growth is the education of men, and what we gain by our experience of our surroundings is the education of things".

Rousseau recognizes the teachers' role as one of facilitation for learning and indicates the necessity for this guidance regarding natural desires. The student learns through experimentation and trial and error using concrete materials and situations designed by the teacher for learning to take place (Mays, E. 2009). The teacher is involved in helping the pupil develop a healthy sense of morality that will be maintained across contexts by setting up scenarios to practice and watching over the pupils actions and reactions. According to Rousseau, "good social institutions are those that know best

how to denature man, to take away his absolute existence in order to give him a relative one, and to transport the "me" into a common unity so that each individual no longer regards himself as one but as a part of the unity and is sensitive only to the whole" (Rousseau, J., 2003). In terms of method, it seems that Rousseau supports a type of guidance that takes into account that which each individual has learned from things around him and that which he has by nature.

John Locke's essay on education takes a similar perspective that recognizes some talents as belonging to the man organically (though they may be inherent and not "learned" as in Rousseau's pupil) and emphasizes the importance of "training" the man to use his knowledge. He emphasizes that the best way to educate a person is to motivate them and invoke desire so that they can eventually rely on their own desires to learn. He recognizes, similar to those who came before him, the importance of practice led by example and activity (Mays, E. 2009).

Michel de Montaigne's *Essay* also includes his belief that the pupil learns through experience and develops the strength to choose virtue over any other possibility (Montaigne, M., 1993). Montaigne's words indicate that he is against dualism, believing that the student must be engaged physically to incorporate information into his intelligence. He suggests, "let him conceal all that has helped him, and show only what he has made of it" (Montaigne, M., 1993). In discussing his own education, Rene Descartes, describes that he too was able to learn more through studying people's reactions and consequences in the world than by reading scholars speculations in books. Descartes (1998) stressed the value of consulting ones own beliefs and constructing a path that one should follow rather than following those set forth by others.

In online scholarly journals and databases there are a multitude of studies related to the subject of effective higher education and liberal arts education that support the theories of these philosophers, including studies from the *Journal of Higher Education* and the *Journal of Philosophies of Education*. In a study entitled “Course Design in Higher Education: A Study of Teaching Methods and Educational Objectives” conducted by Susan Liow and Martin Betts of the National University of Singapore, it was determined that project work and tutorials are more likely to meet the important objectives than lectures. The study evaluates the assumption that there is a relationship between teaching methods and educational objectives. It was conducted using surveys of staff and students about the success of varied teaching methods in accomplishing the educational objectives they had indicated. The study separates design and delivery, describing the second as the format through which the material is implemented and presented. The study also makes an important distinction between effective teaching and entertaining teaching, professors may be rated high even if they do not communicate content effectively. In the results section of the article, Liow and Betts (1993) conclude, “There is clear evidence from this study that lectures and tutorials, while suiting some objectives on some courses, are not the best teaching method” (p. 9). They also conclude that “If changes can be made, it may be important to introduce more active and participatory methods of learning by gradually replacing didactic methods across years” (Liow, S.R. & Betts, M., 1993, p. 9).

In his article “Bureaucracy, Standardization and Liberal Arts” printed in *The Journal of Higher Education* nearly 30 years ago, George Simpson presents his view on the modern higher education system. He analyzes the way that the liberal arts college’s

organizational structure defeats the educational goals that it seeks. He notes that liberal arts should be “an intellectual adventure which goes on between a younger, less-trained person and an older, better-trained person” and that, “it should not be a cut-and-dried presentation of accumulated knowledge purveyed by individuals tired of saying the same things and anxious to get on with their own research” (Simpson, G., 1979, p. 505).

Simpson emphasizes the importance of the relationship in a liberal arts education, writing that the liberal arts college has now made college highly impersonal. Simpson also notes that respect for personality is lost in course requirements, exams, lectures, and crowded dorms. He compares higher education to an assembly line, without respect for the individual. According to Simpson (1979), “the elective system actually results in a distortion of individuality by permitting individual choice without regard to the kind of problems which the individual is supposed to be trained to solve” (p. 511). As seems to be the belief of his contemporaries, those who wrote before him, and still those scholars today “one small part of the solution is a reduction in the size of classes to discussion-group level, never more than thirty students, and preferably twenty” (Simpson, G., 1979, p. 513).

It is clear that while the specifics these theorists offer differ from one another, all are concerned with learning through action or experience in one way or another. Whether looking at Aristotle’s more specific indication that one learns the virtues by practicing them, or at the inferences made by Plato’s description of how one comes to know what *is*, the central component of these theories is their attention to the learner as an active participant in his education. Similarly, Augustine (1991) writes in his “Confessions”, “...this experience sufficiently illuminates the truth that free curiosity has greater power

to stimulate learning than rigorous coercion” after describing his organic experience with learning Latin by being immersed in it through games and conversation. It is this component of education that this paper seeks to scrutinize in evaluating Boston College’s development of a liberal arts education. The questions are posed: first, does Boston College claim to provide the type of education described? Does Boston College succeed in creating an environment where active learning is supported in its standard core program? Does it do so in its Honors Program?

Richard Light

Author, Richard Light, put together a collection of anecdotes and survey results from Harvard College students in his book “Making the Most of College”. In the chapter entitled *The Most Effective Classes*, Light (2001) posits that, “the correlation between the number of small classes any student takes and his or her self-reported personal satisfaction with the overall academic experience is about .52. That indicates a very strong relationship” (p. 45). In several anecdotal accounts students expressed that small classes tend to engage students more, open up the opportunity to build relationships with professors, and generally support more organic learning. After reevaluating the historical works that contributed to modern higher education systems and looking critically at those institutions, Light is able to reiterate that small classes evidently create an opportunity for the greatest degree of learning.

Martha Nussbaum

Author and professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, Martha C. Nussbaum, has written several books on the topic of liberal arts education and current trends in higher education. In her work “Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of

Reform in Liberal Education” Nussbaum provides an in-depth analysis of what a liberal arts education is and provides many examples of universities where components of this education are successfully implemented. This work by Nussbaum serves as a concise summary of classical impressions of higher education and a specific set of conditions, which can be used to evaluate the liberal arts education at Boston College. Nussbaum traces liberal arts to its roots in the Socratic method, but describes that while Socrates developed many of the notions we have about education, it was the Stoics that first implemented these ideals into a formal education setting. Nussbaum summarizes the principles of a Socratic education into four claims and then goes on to describe the ways these ideals can be realized at a university.

Nussbaum (1997) first remarks that “Socratic Education is for every human being,” while she recognizes that up until recently this has not been the case at all universities (p. 31). Nussbaum (1997) writes, “there is an intimate connection between the conception of what liberal education involves and the conclusion that it must be extended to all citizens alike” (p. 31) and proposes that today’s liberal arts colleges should seek to uphold this ideal. Secondly, Nussbaum contends that a “Socratic education should be suited to the pupil’s circumstances and context”. The importance of personalized education is central to the Socratic method. While Socrates questioned his pupils one-by-one and the Stoics extended their education to a broader population of people, they still “insist that individualized instruction is always, in principle, the goal” (Nussbaum, M., 1997, p. 32). A Socratic education should also be pluralistic as there is “no more effective way to wake up pupils than to confront them with difference in an area where they had previously thought their own ways neutral, necessary, and natural”

(Nussbaum, M., 1997, p. 32). This is not to create a cultural relativism that supposes that all ways are equally good, but to lead students to question their assumptions and believe instead in ideals that appeal most to what they are able to rationally defend. Finally, Nussbaum (1997) notes, “Socratic education requires ensuring that books do not become authorities” (p. 33). She illustrates that so often books are given such a great deal of authority that they “lull pupils into forgetfulness of the activity of mind that is education’s real goal, teaching them to be passively reliant on the written word” (Nussbaum, M., 1997, p. 34).

These claims truly become relevant when Nussbaum examines how they fit into the modern curriculum of liberal arts universities. At the forefront, she explains that the teacher is the most important component of this education, responsible for providing “provocative and perceptive teaching that arouses the mind” (Nussbaum, M., 1997, p. 41). Focus on critical argument is also central to providing a Socratic education, particularly through requiring all students to take a philosophy course that allows them to analyze issues central to human interests. This requirement can be provided as a choice from given introductory courses or as a single course. At Harvard for instance, there is one required course with a common mission of examining “moral reasoning” taught by professors from different disciplines. Nussbaum sites Notre Dame as an example of a school that has a successful philosophy requirement because they draw on their knowledge of the student body to design their requirements. Notre Dame’s requirements are aligned with the Catholic tradition’s emphasis on being able to rationally defend one’s moral and religious beliefs.

Further, the method by which this is accomplished is universally focused on class discussion and writing analytic papers. Nussbaum notes that class size at Notre Dame for philosophy is rarely more than twenty students. Similarly, Randolph-Macon College has a two-semester philosophy requirement, which consists of classes taught in small sections using the Socratic method. The program creates a “common learning experience for the students and puts them in contact with some of the best young instructors in the nation” (Nussbaum, M., 1997, p. 43). In order to ensure that these critical argument skills will be obtained not only in philosophy courses but in a broader set of humanities requirements, Nussbaum claims that it is extremely important to have philosophers involved in designing the other courses. Through all the examples provided by Nussbaum, it is clear that providing a forum for developing critical argument skills and rational defense of beliefs is central to a modern liberal arts curriculum.

How Does B.C. Define Liberal Arts?

As the definition of liberal arts and philosophies on higher education are explored, it becomes clear that success is generally associated with small classes and the ability to interact in dialogue with professors and other students. In looking at Boston College, the question becomes how well we have adapted the spirit of liberal arts education into a setting with many more students to accommodate. The definition of Boston College as a liberal arts college can be found in several places. On the Boston College website from the office of the provost and dean of faculties, the purpose is clearly stated: “Ultimately the role of a liberal arts education, which is a Boston College education, is to ask the questions that lead to learning, and so, to excellence, and to challenge students to discover who they are, what they are capable of knowing and doing, and how they want

to live” (“Academics: Office of the Provost,” n.d.). The Report from the Task Force of the Core Curriculum in 1991, the last time at which the core requirements at Boston College were revised, described, “From schools of biblical commentary and the Athenian academies, through the medieval universities, to our modern institutions of higher education, one conviction has been constant: that we can elucidate the central questions in our lives through study and investigation and that we can equip ourselves with the knowledge needed to live responsibly as human beings” (Boston College Core Curriculum Task Force, 1991). The Task Force also described their discovery of the principle, “that human fulfillment is found neither solely in knowledge nor solely in action, but in the reflective interplay of what one understands and believes with how one acts, especially in the service of others.”

The Liberal Arts education is provided through the required core classes, and it is in through analysis of these classes that one can understand the ways in which Boston College is ensuring and maintaining this education. The following analysis will focus on specific ways that Boston College “asks the questions that lead to learning”, “challenges students to discover who they are” and creates a forum for “reflective interplay of what one understands and believes with how one acts”. In addition, despite the many criticisms and suggestions provided by the report of the Task Force, there is only brief mention of the format of classes, a theme central to most other colleges’ discussions of liberal arts education. While content and aim of the classes is made generally clear, the need for interaction with material in a way that engages students and involves them in discussion, open questions, and debates regarding the material is not specified. The Report suggests “for example, class discussion might pursue the course’s implications for significant

personal issues that students confront...” but provides no further requirements or depth regarding the format of the classes.

Liberal Arts in the Honors Program

It seems, however, that the spirit of a liberal arts education as described in by current top ranking liberal arts colleges can be found in totality in the Honors Program at Boston College. The honors program is described as taking on

the necessary but often neglected task of integration at a time when increasing complexity of thought impels scholars to know more and more about less and less. Our seminar conversations respond to the challenge of this fragmentation by asking students the basic questions that put all specialization into a humane context: What is the good? What should we value? What is truth? Is there such a thing as truth at all?

If a student takes all the seminars in the Honors Program through Junior year, the core requirements for writing, philosophy, theology, literature, and social sciences will be fulfilled. All of these requirements are integrated into the discussions of Western Cultural Traditions, providing an understanding of the overlaps in each of these subjects and allowing students the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of the culture they are a part of. The Honors program aims to:

challenge superior students to work to the best of their potential, to provide a more integrated approach to the core subjects which all Boston College students are required to take, and to organize these studies historically, in the belief that students should have a solid foundation for the more specialized studies they subsequently do in their majors.

but is only offered to the top nine percent of incoming students (“A&S Honors Program!,” n.d.). By definition, these Honors classes are run as seminars that involve discussion and intensive exploration of the subjects included. This serves to connect BC’s desire to challenge students and ask them important questions with the small seminar

style that makes this type of reflection possible. This suggests that while BC knows how to provide the highest quality of education, they are only providing it to a small percentage of its students. This seem to reflect Nussbaum's description of the conception of higher education supported by Plato that would necessitate we "search for an elite with special powers of mind, and only these should be admitted to the higher curriculum" (1997, p. 31). If this is the most effective way to teach, why are more classes not taught as seminars? Why isn't this education being provided universally to all students at Boston College? Is Boston College in agreement that only the elite should have access to this high level of education?

Boston College in Light of Nussbaum's Analysis

In summary of Nussbaum's analysis, a successful program for developing critical argument skills relies on professors, the development of a philosophy requirement that involves discussion and analysis, and is supported by a coordination of faculty from different departments and intimately involves philosophers in its development and maintenance. To begin the initial examination of the Boston College curriculum, the existing programs should be looked at in relation to Nussbaum's four claims regarding Socratic education and then as they relate to Nussbaum's examples regarding how to require that pupil's acquire critical argument skills.

It is important to keep in mind throughout the following discussion that in analyzing whether or not Boston College provides a certain experience one must consider not how various types of learning have emerged organically within the Core but more importantly, what policies are in place to *ensure* that they emerge. While there are plenty

of courses within which professors regard discussion as a vital component, it is important to look at whether there is an overarching requirement that these discussions will be facilitated and students actively engaged with material. With class sizes anywhere between 12 and 200, it is increasingly important to determine how larger classes will provide the liberal arts education described by philosophers and modern theorists alike.

In turning to Nussbaum's summary of Socrates the first requirement is to provide a high level education for all citizens. As is the central topic for discussion in this paper, it can be argued that Boston College provides a very different education to those students who fulfill their core requirements in the Honors Program courses and those who register for standard introductory core classes. Because the Honors seminars are on average 10-15 students, and standard core classes are hardly ever that small, the seminars are already that much more likely to allow students the forum in which to develop critical analysis skills. This issue will be further discussed in the section entitled "Liberal Arts in the Honors Program". Further, as higher education has evolved into institutions to which individuals must apply and be accepted to attend, the equality of this education for all citizens has already been altered. While this is not an issue to be taken up in this analysis, it is vital to keep in mind that the students at Boston College have already been selected from a larger pool of eager individuals.

Evaluating how well Boston College caters its program to the specific needs of its student population is difficult. Nussbaum's description of students at St. Lawrence as "bright but relatively unmotivated" could, in some circumstances, be applied to the students at Boston College as well. However, she describes that this student characterization simply makes it so crucial that Socratic inquiry must be used more

explicitly to encourage student interest in their studies. While the core program at Boston College takes into account the religious majority at Boston College, not all classes that fulfill the theology core will require individuals to critically engage their own faith and articulate their rationale simply due to class size. While paper assignments do allow for this type of reflection, this negates the interplay and debate that can be evoked in verbal reflections.

There is also relatively little evidence that Boston College's core requirements provide a pluralistic experience for its students. There is such a great deal of choice among core courses, it is possible that students could choose such narrow courses that they would be exposed to very few perspectives. Without common themes across core class or a single class designed to develop moral reasoning and questioning beliefs, a student could potentially get through all the requirements without ever being exposed to the many cultures and experiences of the world. More importantly, students can choose courses that would make it possible for them to learn about an issue they are already familiar with, as opposed to choosing courses that would lead them to hear new perspectives and defend their beliefs against contradicting views.

For instance, a "cultural diversity core" can be fulfilled by taking "Indian Fiction and Film: At Home and Abroad", which would give a pupil a complex understanding of this one particular experience but less information about analyzing cultural norms in general. While some students fulfill the theology core by taking "religious quest", a course that compares different religions, students can also take "Biblical Heritage" and focus much more specifically on Judaism and Christianity than on other religions of the world. Dean of Arts and Sciences, David Quigley, aptly identified this issue in his

recognition of the inadequacy of the program in place. He expressed desire to move towards integration of the cultural diversity core into all classes (D. Quigley, personal communication, December 11, 2008). While this seems to be a step in the right direction, it might put discussions of culture at risk of being lost. Without proper indications of exactly *how* cultural diversity issues will be included in all core classes, this move would not necessarily benefit the curriculum. However, he also made it very clear that it would be years before these changes would actually be made. Even with the recognition of a deficiency in a core requirement, steps have not yet been made to correct it. Within the “Goals and Characteristics of the Core Curriculum” provided by the Task Force Report, one goal is described as such:

The core curriculum should address issues of cultural diversity and consider topics that have not customarily been incorporated into the traditional debate about the perennial issues, topics that gain importance when the Western tradition is viewed from the perspectives of non-European people and of minorities within European and American societies....

While this concept seems to be directly in line with philosophies of education and studies about integration of ideas about the self and identity with questioning cultural norms, the manner in which this will be incorporated is still opaque. In addition, Boston College currently has a particular “cultural diversity” core requirement (as previously described). Whether this core was meant to replace the need for integration or to supplement it is unclear. However, it is obvious that there is not a common understanding of how these issues are addressed. Dean Quigley feels we need to move towards integration, the Task Force Report of 1991 says we need to do the same, though we still have one singular requirement entitled “cultural diversity”.

Finally, regarding the importance of ensuring that books don't become authorities, there does not seem to be an emphasis on this issue. Because the description of the core that is used to evaluate whether a course can be considered to fulfill a requirement does not indicate anything about the process or the design of a course it is difficult to ensure that these classes are not simply incorporating the perspective of books, or professors for that matter, into one's mind as truth. The same aforementioned "Goals and Characteristics for the Core Curriculum" describe that the classroom should "include reflection on the values and commitments that give spiritual significance and practical direction to a student's life" though there is no indication of how this can be done in larger classes. Again, the ideas are solid but details of their implementation and means of enforcing them are lacking and even contradictory.

In evaluating how well Boston College has designed its requirements in terms of integrating experiences to develop critical argument skills and designing a program that is supported by cooperation of faculty from different disciplines, there are several additional considerations. At Boston College all students are required to take two semesters of philosophy and are able to choose these classes from a wide variety of options. Chairman of the Philosophy Department, Dr. Patrick Byrne recognizes some of benefits of this system, in his claim that the "...two semester sequence of classes also helps and makes a big difference because the students know each other and feel more willing to express their opinions..." (personal communication, December 2, 2008).

However, rather than having one required course for moral reasoning or critical argument BC makes the assumption that these ideals, associated with the Socratic method, will inevitably occur within the core curriculum. This relies heavily on the

choice of one's own curriculum as an exercise of the Stoic ideal of self-command but requires an extremely well organized system of advising. It does not seem as though there is any system in place for ensuring that all students develop their critical argument skills, in the same way there is a risk that students will not be given the opportunity to explore cultural differences. It would be possible to get through the Core requirements without challenging one's assumptions critically; instead BC seems to rely on the texts assigned and the lectures given in front of a class of 30 students that may or may challenge one's original beliefs.

There is danger that students will choose courses not based on their interests but on the time the course is offered, the relative difficulty of the class, or the schedules of their friends. As described previously, there is the risk that students will be exposed only to a very narrow set of relevant situations in any given department because there are so many specific options that can count as a core class. In the 1991 Task Force Report on the status of the Core curriculum at Boston College, there was initial discussion of how Boston College could make the core program a more unified experience for all students. According to this document the "Goals for the Nineties", the core curriculum was criticized for "lacking coherence in its rationale and in its implementation, as having an ineffective governance structure, and as being no more than a series of disconnected distribution requirements administered by departments that did not communicate with one another". The "Goals for the Nineties" also recognized the common conception of the core as a series of hurdles to get over as quickly as possible rather than as a component central to a liberal arts education.

In November of this year, Dean of Arts and Sciences David Quigley recognized that this problem has not changed in the past twenty years saying, "...the core, I think, for so many students, its something to get out of the way. Or it's something that is at the periphery, if it's the core it should be the heart of the experience. There should be expectations that you take some of these courses as freshman but the rest over the next three years, that its not something to scramble through for the first two or three semesters" (personal communication, December 11, 2008). The Task Force's response to these comments concluded that these goals should be addressed in the core as a whole rather than in each and every core class to ensure a coherent experience. The Task Force offered the broad aspiration that these goals will be achieved "over time as the University Core Development Committee works with departments and faculty to improve the core's coherence and effectiveness" (Boston College Core Curriculum, 1991).

In interviews with members of the staff from the UCDC, it is clear that this aspiration has not been realized to the extent to which it was intended. Patrick Byrne compared the role of the UCDC to the Supreme Court in that they are not at liberty to make changes to the core, but only to fit courses into an existing framework (personal communication, December 2, 2009). From the explanations gathered from other members of this committee as well, it seems that departments submit a proposal for a class to be considered as part of the CORE and this committee's job is to determine the ways in which the class does or does not fulfill the requirements as specified by the Task Force Report for the given department. While they are controlling the development of the core in that they ensure that courses that do not adequately fulfill a requirement are not accepted as university core, they have little control over how the core evolves as a whole.

More importantly, the Task Force Report describing the core falls short in identifying much outside of content. As long as a core class intends to address the content measures identified as necessary components of that discipline a class can pass as core, with only brief mention of the importance of including reflection as a component of the core in its entirety. This brings the analysis to the central problem, that there is no indication that the ideals of a liberal arts education are necessarily being met by individual classes or by the core as a whole.

Particularly because the Task Force chose not to undertake the issue of how a centralized theme will be provided with the Core and assumed instead that it would happen naturally, there is no way to determine whether or not this is being accomplished. By allowing so much choice within the core there is little control over how a student's experience can be diversified. Further, by not mandating any single course for all students to address the specific issue of critical argument AND not ensuring that this aspect of liberal arts education is accomplished in the summation of courses, many students may get through Boston College's requirements without gaining the experience intended. The claim that the central theme or mission of the core will emerge naturally without indicating specifics of the method by which classes need to be taught or the class size may be considered irresponsible.

In addition, evidently the communication between departments is not as it should be, as Patrick Byrne, chair of the Philosophy Department, was hesitant to even suggest ways in which his department's successes could be applied to others in fear that he be quoted in this paper. One way to ensure that a central mission is being accomplished would be to encourage this communication and evaluate the unity of the core at Boston

College, but this is difficult to do when politics and competition for enrollment enter into the question. Relevantly, Nussbaum (1997) claims that one of the reasons for the success of the program at St. Lawrence is the “amount of common effort by the faculty group and the dedicated leadership of its two coordinators”. Within the philosophy department, one that may be considered one of the most successful departments, cooperation and communication are central to the mission. Dr. Byrne described “...the thing that hits me about our department is that we have a community of teachers that meet at regularly scheduled times to talk about what is happening in the classroom. This helps them build a common sense of purpose...” (personal communication, December 2, 2009). If the UCDC could extend their responsibility to evaluating how well the core program as a whole accomplishes the goals of a liberal arts education and could begin to pay attention not only to content but to specific ways in which critical argument skills can be developed some of these situations could be improved. Further, as will be discussed in more depth in section 4 of this paper, careful scrutiny of class format and consideration of implementing at least one required course with class size under 20 could prove tremendously beneficial.

**What does Boston College’s Core Program consist of?
What core classes are taken care of by the Honors Program?**

To analyze the liberal arts education presented at Boston College, a brief description of the core program must be examined. In the Task Force Report on the core in 1991 there is a description of the goals and characteristics of the core curriculum and the content of the core. Each of these will be described in the following section.

The goals and characteristics of the core as described by this report of the Task Force seem to encompass many of the values that Boston College claims to hold as a

liberal arts university. The Task Force Report describes that the core curriculum should “address perennial questions that have stood at the center of intellectual debate” (Boston College Core Curriculum Task Force, 1991). The report also indicates that integration of material studied “is greatly facilitated if faculty and students have a common understanding of the goals of the core, and if faculty design and teach core courses with explicit references to this understanding” (Boston College Core Curriculum Task Force, 1991). As a whole, the Task Force Report broadly touches on many aspects of a liberal arts education that are advertised on the Boston College website and that exist as a historical part of the definition of this education.

While the concepts presented in this document seem to be directly in line with the greater goals of a liberal arts education, the recommendations seem far too broad. There is no specific indication of how or where these characteristics of the core will actually be implemented. The idea that integration of the material that comprises the core will be facilitated by the explicit reference of the goals of this core curriculum in classes is sound, but this does not specify where exactly this will happen. There are no requirements about which courses will include this discussion and no system to check up on whether or not this is occurring in the courses. By ambiguously requiring that core classes include the perennial questions, the report negates to place the responsibility in any specific department’s hands. The following paragraph truly exemplifies the vagueness with which the report indicates how the core will accomplish its goals:

Courses in different disciplines will focus on particular questions to varying degrees. Theology and philosophy have traditionally explored the origin and destiny of existence. But art and literature also have had much to say about these issues. Contemporary expressions of the perennial issues about society are found most explicitly in the social sciences, but also in philosophy and theology. Systematic exploration

of the nature of the physical world is the primary object of the sciences and mathematics. (Task Force Report)

Essentially, the report posits that a particular department should discuss the perennial questions, but if they don't, someone else will. This imprecision continues in the description of how cultural diversity should be incorporated into the core. The report indicates, "as addressing a particular perennial question may occur more naturally in one discipline rather than another, so the introduction of nontraditional perspectives will occur more appropriately in some disciplines than others". Again, no one department is responsible. Though the task force identifies the goals and characteristics as an "appropriate and feasible way for Boston College to promote coherence in the core curriculum", the broad nature of the characteristics does not provide very much guidance.¹

A major danger of including goals for the core as a whole in this way, without indicating which particular departments will be charged with implementing and achieving the goals, is that *no* department will take on the task. While the Task Force Report indicated that these goals would be implemented gradually, though there is no description of *how* they will be implemented. This was explicitly confirmed by Vice Provost Dr. Donald Hafner when he stated, "I don't know if there has ever been a meeting of any real sort or a task force among those social sciences to ask the question about whether there are some things in common that we would really like to accomplish [in each course in our department] regardless of whether a student flows into psychology or economics [with

¹ Also note the use of the word "nontraditional" to identify the studies of other perspectives and cultures. This suggests that the Anglo Saxon perspective is universally "traditional" while alternate perspectives are not. A better way to describe the content of the cultural diversity core would be to simply reference "other" cultures.

their major]..those conversations haven't in the main taken place" (personal communication, April 16, 2009). A revision of the core should certainly include specific goals and guidance on how those goals are to be achieved within each departmental core. This will be further discussed in section 4 of this paper entitled "Possible Reform of the Core at BC to Improve the Liberal Arts Education".

The core curriculum is comprised of fifteen required courses for students in Arts and Sciences, and differs slightly for students in the professional schools. This includes one course in art, two in history, one in literature, one in writing, one in mathematics, two in philosophy, two in natural science and social science, two in theology, and one in cultural diversity. Throughout the remainder of the Task Force Report there are brief descriptions of what must be included in each course for it to fulfill the requirement in the given department. According to the claims of members of the University Core Development Committee, this Task Force Report is the document that is used to evaluate whether a course can be considered part of the core curriculum (P. Byrne, personal communication, December 2, 2009). The descriptions of each departmental core include one paragraph concerning why the course is important as a part of the core as a whole and one paragraph regarding content that must be included in the given courses if they are to be considered a part of the departmental core. Indication of the method that is to be used in the courses, the class size, or further mention of the need for reflection and discussion within the classes is not included in the description of each departmental core.

On the other hand, there are some aspects within different departmental core descriptions that, if applied to all departments, could potentially achieve some of the goals discussed in this paper as a whole. If the university could use the models set by

these particular aspects of the core, and those set by Cornerstone, Capstone, and Perspectives courses, the core might be able to better fulfill its commitment of being a liberal arts university.

To its credit, the description of the history core is one particular section of the Task Force Report that does include methodology, and necessitates that the classes should promote the “habit of critical assessment of the values, ideas, and practices of a historical era” (Boston College Core Curriculum Task Force, 1991). Perhaps as a means to this end, all courses in history that are part of the core curriculum break up into a smaller groups for discussion once a week. While the course is typically taught as a larger lecture, the students are broken into small groups to talk about the content of the course. This is valuable to the extent to which it is used effectively and regulated by the professor, and it may serve as a model for other departmental core.

The required writing course could also serve as a good model for other departments. Information about how well these core classes are accomplishing the goals of the core as a whole can be gathered from the explanation of these courses in the Task Force Report which requires they be taught in small sections taken during the freshman year. By including specific information about how exactly this core will fit into the greater goals of the university, this explanation necessitates that all courses that apply to be considered for qualification as a core course will need to be designed in this format. Unfortunately, students that have AP credit are able to place out of the First Year Writing Seminar and miss out on this valuable opportunity. While this idea of a common experience within the core starting freshman year is progressive, it does not work as intended if some students do not have to take the course. Further, while small seminars to

improve writing are also valuable, they are qualitatively different than small seminars for intellectual discussions challenging beliefs and cultural norms. To this end, there are ways in which the staff could teach these courses could be utilized to achieve the greater goals of the core.

This issue of AP credits is an enormous impediment to a successful liberal arts education. Dean David Quigley, Dr. Patricia DeLeeuw, and Dr. Patrick Byrne all agree that the system of AP credits at Boston College contradicts the spirit of a liberal arts education (personal communications). The “core” of the university curriculum is the heart of what makes up a Boston College education, and to allow students to place out of the required classes denies them the full experience. It is counterintuitive that while Boston College does not always accept credits from Universities across the United States, they do accept test scores of a 4 or a 5 from students graduating out of any high school. The idea that taking a course in Boston College’s history department is a comparable experience to taking AP History in *any high school* seems to disrespect the high level of education that Boston College students sign up for.

Dean Quigley explained that there is a great deal of politics related to the acceptance of AP credits, and therefore the policy will probably remain (personal communication, December 11, 2008). Apparently many prospective students make choices about what school they should attend based on how many credits they will be enrolled with Freshman year. This seems to disregard the liberal arts education provided at Boston College as well. In the first place, very few of those students will use the space that placing out of core classes frees up in their schedule to graduate early. While students will be able to take more electives, they will not be saving tuition money. It

seems that if the core curriculum at Boston College is truly at the heart of what the university stands for and is the central theme of the education it attempts to provide, it should be advertised as so.

While prospective students might be dissuaded from coming to Boston College at first glance if AP credits cannot be used to fulfill core requirements, a conscious support of the value of taking all core courses offered at Boston College might change their minds. Further, when considering that Boston College fears it will lose prospective students if it does not allow them to place out of core classes raises questions about the type of students that Boston College attracts and accepts. Although the general impression of incoming freshman is that it is a positive thing to place out of classes, the student that is able to recognize the benefit of taking college level courses at a liberal arts university might fit the profile of students that would improve the BC intellectual culture. Finally, as conceded by Dean Quigley, a new policy might allow students with AP credits to place out of the lower level core courses and move up to level two courses. While this would still recognize the work that goes into receiving a 4 or a 5 on an AP exam, it would better represent the value that Boston College places on its core requirements.

To look at another department, all philosophy core courses are capped at 30 students and can be fulfilled by Philosophy of the Person, Perspective, PULSE, and Western Cultural Tradition programs. While this is not indicated within the Task Force, Chairman of the Philosophy Department, Dr. Patrick Byrne, described that within his department this limit has been set. This is a step in the right direction, recognizing the importance of the individuals' ability to reflect and discuss the questions that are part of the philosophy curriculum. Dr. Byrne described that in Perspectives and Pulse classes,

“most will say that these are the classes in which discussions are alive”, a sentiment that should be extended to all classes at a liberal arts University. Dr. Byrne also explained that he would prefer to cap the classes at 20, and that he has worked out the exact number of faculty that he would need in order to do so. However, he elucidated that he has felt pressure from high-level administration that would prefer he allow core classes to occur in larger lecture format, without capping the classes at all. While Byrne refused to give on this matter, the lack of understanding from higher level administrators about the beauty of being able to maintain small classes and the importance of discussion in philosophy core is disconcerting.

In addition, although the Philosophy of the Person classes are capped at 30, the Western Cultural Traditions (honors) seminars are typically no larger than 12 students. This number creates a very different type of course. While the fact that students will not find themselves in a core class for philosophy with more than 30 students encouraging, the idea that the upper tier of students admitted to Boston College will have the opportunity to experience the course in a seminar of 12 people is inherently elitist. This is discussed in detail in the section entitled “Liberal Arts in the Honors Program”.

What Institutions are in Place to Evaluate the Status and Effectiveness of our core Program at Boston College in its Aims to Provide a Liberal Arts Education?

In my continued exploration of the constructs in place at Boston College to design and evaluate the core, I came across two different committees: The University Core Development Committee and the Institute for Liberal Arts. According to the Boston College website and the Task Force Report of 1991, the University Core Development

Committee (UCDC) is designed to help departments develop core programs and make recommendations for what courses should be included in the core curriculum. The committee is also in charge of presenting an annual report on the state of the core to the Provost. The grievances posited by this paper could partially be alleviated if the UCDC truly acted as the committee it was designed to be. Supposedly, the UCDC was designed to promote assistance to faculty members in incorporating the characteristics and goals into their courses. As stated in the Task Force Report, “the primary task of the University Core Development Committee will be to assist departments and core faculty in developing effective ways to achieve these goals”.

Despite this description, faculty involved with this committee, including Dr. Byrne and Dr. Cathy Read, recognized the committee’s role as limited to assessing whether or not syllabi submitted by departments fulfill the core as described in the Final Report of the Task Force on the Core Curriculum. Dr. Byrne described the UCDC as the “supreme court” in that they do not make the laws but simply decide which situations fit within the law, and which fall outside of it (personal communication, December 2, 2008). According to faculty involved, the committee is not involved in the design of the core itself, or the alteration of the specifications indicated in the report. They also do not seem to be involved with evaluating how well the core courses in place are accomplishing the goals that are prescribed by the Task Force. There is no set system of checks and balances regarding the functioning of these classes, and as long as they are found to fall within the extremely broad definitions offered by the task Force Report they are accepted as a part of the core.

In my meeting with Dr. Cathy Read, we discussed the final report from the Task Force on the core curriculum last revised in 1991. I was informed that the guidelines set up at these meetings, held 18 years ago, are those still used in designing the core today. In my investigation of this document presented previously, I found neither indication of the format to conduct classes, nor any specifics on class size. It seems that when the goals of a liberal arts education are evaluated, these details would be of central importance. The document described a general aim to provide students with a unified experience of the core rather than a random assortment of classes across disciplines with no concrete objectives towards this end. The goals that were suggested in this document are very similar to those that I have supported, but there is no indication of how to measure their progress and ensure that they are reached.

The aim of the Institute for Liberal Arts, the other committee involved in core development, is to “focus faculty attention, imagination, and energy on liberal education” (“Liberal Arts Education,” n.d.). Updated December 2007, the description of the ILA on the Boston College website conceives this “institute” as a way of reevaluating today’s liberal arts education in a modern context. Dr. Cutberto Garza, Provost of Boston College, claimed that this was going to be “as strong and as ambitious as the faculty can make it” (leaving quite a bit of flexibility). On the website, Vice Provost Patricia DeLeeuw recognized that the ILA could be used to create new core requirements that combined disciplines and integrated material (“Liberal Arts Education,” n.d.). In more recent personal communication, Vice Provost DeLeeuw expressed her hopes that the ILA would research liberal arts as it appears in other universities and to function as a sponsor for projects run by senior faculty (personal communication, November 26, 2008).

While this concept seems to be directly aligned with the proactive approach Boston College should take to ensure that its goals are achieved and it maintains the spirit of a liberal arts education, the ILA is yet to accomplish anything. While many of the goals of this committee are long term, they have not yet truly begun the project. Dr. DeLeeuw described that the ILA is still more than a set of ideas than a fact, partially because Dean Quigley was appointed director, but then he was appointed Dean of Arts and Sciences. It seems that ILA would be the committee most likely to take on the project of revising the core, and while its intentions are good they have made little progress. Dr. DeLeeuw explicated the goal for the ILA as being a “place where we think about liberal arts, not where liberal arts education is delivered, because that’s in Arts and Sciences, but it’s a place where people will think about, do research on, debate what the liberal arts are and that’s the big idea” (personal communication, November 26, 2008). This research on liberal arts will be aimed at helping Boston College compete at the forefront of liberal arts education. When asked whether or not the ILA has any communication with the UCDC, members were unaware of the responsibilities of the UCDC. It seems that a committee that is designed to evaluate and research liberal arts as an institution would necessarily be linked with the committee that is in place to evaluate what courses are to be considered to fulfill the requirements.

What do the Students Think?

As part of the preliminary research for the analysis of how well Boston College is delivering a liberal arts education that is rigorous and challenging, I developed and administered a survey to a sample of Boston College Seniors. The survey was designed to gather information about the impression that students have about the liberal arts

education at Boston College, and to learn some specifics about the particular aspects that they find challenging and valuable. The survey began with several demographic questions, and then went on to ask about courses that participants had enrolled in that were intellectually challenging.

I began the survey process by giving the sample out to a small group of individuals in order to test its validity and help me to anticipate potential questions and complications. Though the administration of the survey was not systematic, I was able to gather enough data to conclude that I needed to redirect my analysis. As the participants completed the surveys, I sat near-by and fielded any confusion that they had about the questions. I was able to clarify some aspects of the survey, and also asked that pilot participants informed me of anything they thought was missing from the survey.

The third question on the survey asked participants to list the three most *intellectually challenging* classes they had taken at Boston College thus far. The first observation that I made in administering these surveys was the reaction that many participants gave to this question. As I was present for the completion of the surveys, participants asked me such questions as, “do you mean my *hardest* classes?”, or “should I just put the ones with the most work?”, or “do you mean my favorite classes?”. This already represented an interesting trend. Students not only had difficulty identifying which of their classes was the most intellectually challenging, but they did not seem to know what this meant. I usually responded by telling the participants to list the classes that were the most “thought-provoking or stimulating”, but this seemed to lead to continued confusion. This reaction encouraged me to look deeper into the issue of intellectuality at Boston College, and helped me redesign my survey to include an open-

ended question requiring participants to define the phrase *intellectually challenging* in their own words.

During the pilot survey, quite a few people also stumbled over the last 2 questions, “Did you consider yourself an intellectual in high school?”, “Do you consider yourself an intellectual now?”. Several individuals asked if it seemed presumptuous to mark “yes”, and still more asked what exactly I meant by “intellectual”. People appeared embarrassed by their answers to the questions, one way or another, and were uncomfortable with the implication of either. One individual asked me, “do you want to know if I have gotten smarter?”. This ambiguity suggests a great deal about the population at Boston College, and the type of environment that the university is supporting.

After the survey was redesigned, it was emailed to all members of the Lynch School Senior Class. While the survey was anonymous, I received all the completed questionnaires by email so the participants could have been identified by their email addresses. The completed surveys were, however, printed out without names immediately upon their submission. The total sample was 39 students, and some degree of self-selection must be accounted for in the results because responses were not required and participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey consisted of 15 brief questions about the students’ experience of Boston College, two of which required open-ended answers and the rest of which were multiple-choice. The two open-ended questions asked participants to define the phrase: “intellectually challenging” and then list which three courses they were able to identify as the most intellectually challenging.

Requiring the participants to define “intellectually challenging” proved interesting in several ways. The opportunity to understand each participant’s conception of this phrase was valuable, and helped me better understand the answers for the following question, regarding their most intellectually challenging course at Boston College. This also compelled the participants to think more critically about their answer for the question to follow. While during the pilot survey, individuals frequently asked what was meant by “intellectually challenging,” participants in the final survey were forced to come up with a definition and conception of the word on their own. As for specific answers to the question, there were several common themes. The majority of participants referenced that when something is intellectually challenging, the information, idea, or concept presented is “new”. Many described that the phrase refers to concepts that had either not previously been considered or been thought of in a different way prior. Similarly, quite a few students used the words “outside of your comfort zone” to describe the phrase.

The definition provided by some students closely echoed the historical impressions of what a liberal arts education is. One student wrote, “A course that is intellectually challenging is one that requires the students to think about, discuss, and form opinions about specific topics and themes. The professor does not simply tell students information, but instead allows students to play an active role in their learning” (Survey Participant 13). It seems that, for some, in defining the term “intellectually challenging”, methodology is critical. To this end, another student described, “this generally does not include rote memorization or simply spitting material back on a test; it must be stimulating, meaningful, and authentic” (Survey Participant 11). In addition, one

student recognized that the phrase is related to “analyzing and synthesizing material in multiple and removed contexts” (Survey Participant 7). This integration of material and faithfulness to the Socratic method of active learning is central to what comprises a liberal arts education, and can be found right in the words of the students defining this phrase. If this is the case, it would seem that Boston College should try to represent this quality of intellectual challenge in each and every one of its courses.

An analysis of the particular courses that participants identified as the most *intellectually challenging* is a necessary component of the evaluation of the value of various classes at Boston College. When all responses to the questions were compiled, approximately 36% of participants listed a Perspectives, PULSE, or Western Cultural Traditions class as their most “intellectually challenging”, and another 23% identified a different philosophy class. Combined, these results say that of all those courses identified as the most intellectually challenging, 59% were based in the philosophy department or honor’s seminars. Each participant indicated three courses that they remembered as the most intellectually challenging during their time at Boston College, and if one of these three was Perspectives, PULSE, or Western Cultural Traditions they were included in the 36% percent, though some of the participants listed more than one of these courses within their three.

The idea that these classes are identified as the most “intellectually challenging” can be interpreted in several different ways. For one, the results represent the strength of the philosophy department and the honors courses offered at Boston College. These results could be related to the fact that Dr. Byrne has made the decision to cap all of the philosophy core classes at 30 students, affording many more opportunities for discussion

and reflection on complex questions. Potentially the challenge presented by these classes is related to the communication among faculty about the common goal of the core courses, and the manner in which this goal will be accomplished. A community of faculty may help make each and every professor aware of their course's place within a larger departmental core.

While the classes are smaller than many other core classes, the subject of philosophy might also lend itself to intellectual discussions more so than other disciplines. However, not only is this debatable, but it does not offer enough explanation for the results. Though it is positive that classes from this department have proved intellectually challenging, it would seem that courses in other disciplines should give students the same opportunity to challenge previously held assumptions and discuss new concepts. Understanding intellectuality primarily as a function of philosophy is not the aim of a liberal arts education. In its development of free thinking citizens and its desire to create a well-rounded educational experience, liberal arts should be a place where students are intellectually challenged by each and every course. Given the descriptions offered by most students, such as "something that makes you think about a concept in a different way or introduces a new and difficult concept to you", it would seem that Boston College would strive to make all of its courses do just that.

Although it is positive that such a high percentage of students chose Perspectives, PULSE, and Western Cultural Traditions as one of their three most intellectually challenging courses at Boston College, not all students have the opportunity to take these classes. As noted previously in this paper, there are phenomenal models for successful seminars and intellectually challenging courses, but the opportunity to engage in these

courses is limited, and in some cases, students are *restricted* from participating in them. For Perspectives and PULSE, the occasion of enrolling is for the most part up to chance. Students with an early registration time, and an advisor that gives them the necessary information, may be able to enroll in one of them. For Western Cultural Traditions seminars on the other hand, students must *qualify* to be afforded the opportunity to enroll. Essentially, though 36% of students identify these courses as the most intellectually challenging, there are many students who will graduate from Boston College never having taken one of them.

Towards the end of the survey, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt challenged at Boston College. It should be kept in mind that all participants in the survey were seniors, having already completed most of their core and major requirements. Of all participants, 25% indicated that they were “very challenged” by their time at Boston College, 61% indicated that they were “somewhat challenged”, and 5% indicated that they were “not challenged” (the remainder of participants omitted this question). While the idea that 61% of students reported feeling “somewhat challenged” by Boston College seems to be a positive result, the fact that less than half that percentage of students felt very challenged is disconcerting. Identifying itself as one of the top universities in the country with an incredible number of applicants each year, it would seem that Boston College should prove very challenging for its students. In retrospect, it would have been interesting to include “challenging” as an option between “somewhat challenging” and “very challenging” to see if results would have been more favorable.

In another section, the survey asked participants to choose one course out of the three listed that they felt was the *most* intellectually challenging and answer a series of questions about that particular class. When asked about format of the course that they chose, 44% indicated that the course they identified was taught in seminar style, 41% were taught primarily as a lecture with some opportunity for discussions, and 15% were conducted in lecture style.² This small sample aptly demonstrates the historical tradition of liberal arts education that mandates small seminar style classes for active learning.

These results, as well as those reported regarding the definition of intellectually challenging and the identification of course that fit the description are even more interesting in light of the results from the final two questions on the survey. Participants were first asked to indicate whether or not they considered themselves intellectuals in high school, and then whether or not they considered themselves intellectuals now. In regard to high school, 64% of participants indicated that they consider themselves to be intellectuals. Interestingly, 64% of participants also indicated that they consider themselves to be intellectuals currently. However, 28% of those individuals who identified themselves as intellectuals in high school did not identify themselves as intellectuals in the second question. While there were an equal number of students who indicated that they now consider themselves intellectuals when they previously didn't, these results are disconcerting. Again, while 64% of students that participated do consider themselves to be intellectuals, that leaves quite a few who do not!

In contemplating a reason that participants would answer yes to the question regarding high school but no to the question regarding their current intellectuality, several

² 33% of which were referring to Richard Kearney's Intro to Existentialism

possibilities arise. For some students, this might represent a greater understanding of the depth and definition of the term “intellectual” since they have been in high school. Though this is promising in its reflection of greater insight into the meaning of an intellectual, it would seem that students should also associate themselves with this term after four years of being educated at a top liberal arts university. Despite the description and familiarity with the phrase, and the descriptions provided of courses that were more intellectually challenging than others, a large percentage of students still did not indicate that they consider themselves to be intellectuals. In addition, intellectuality extends outside the classroom and might speak to a larger culture of intellectuality missing from the BC campus.

A limitation of my survey design was, while it asked individuals to list their most intellectually challenging classes, it didn’t ask whether or not students had the opportunity to take those classes more typically associated with intellectuality (such as PULSE and Perspectives). The answers provided on the survey did not necessary mean that the courses listed were actually the most intellectually challenging of those courses offered at Boston College, but only referred to those courses the given participant had been enrolled in. Initially, I was surprised that many participants had indicated that their most intellectually challenging class was a lecture. However, I recognized upon further reflection that this may be due to the fact that they have only been exposed to lecture classes.

It is fortunate, however, that many of the classes that were listed as answers to this question were core courses. While this may suggest that the introductory classes that fulfill the core requirements contain enough depth to intellectually challenge students, it

seems more likely that these classes were indicated as the most intellectually challenging because they were outside the student's interests. While this does accomplish some part of the goals of a liberal arts education by exposing individuals to a range of disciplines, it does not suggest that these core classes required critical thinking, analysis, or provoked a higher level of intellectuality.

An additional interpretation of these results might be related to the general lack of pride associated with intellectuality on Boston College campus. As acceptance to Boston College becomes increasingly competitive, statistics on GPA's, extracurricular activities, and SAT scores for those enrolled get higher and higher. This necessitates that students on campus have previously worked hard in school, and probably have some degree of natural intelligence. Many of these students were in the top ten percent of their respective classes, and had rigorous schedules of Advanced Placement and Honors courses. Despite the facts, there seems to be a general lack of conversation about schoolwork among peers. Dean Cawthorne of the School of Education and several other Boston College professors will attest to hearing the common claims in the hallways and in classrooms "I didn't read, did you?", or "Nah, I didn't really study". Students can be heard comparing statistics of who stayed up the latest to cram for an exam because they haven't read all semester or whose work was completed more carelessly. This idea was confirmed by discussions with other faculty that advise students or teach classes. Vice Provost Donald Hafner acknowledged, "freshman have a substantial portion of their core courses, if they don't feel challenged after freshman year, essentially, what you're saying is that our core courses aren't challenging". Dr. Patricia Deleeuw stated frankly, "...another thing we know is that many freshman finish their year thinking 'that wasn't so bad', 'that wasn't as

bad as I thought it would be’, ‘that was way easier than I thought it would be’...and that is not something that we should be proud of. Freshman year needs to be do-able, but challenging. And maybe in the honors program it is doable and challenging” (personal communication, November 25, 2008).

The same sentiments gathered from the analysis of the results of this survey were echoed in this year’s annual meeting regarding students’ reactions to the core requirements. The meeting was hosted by Dr. Cobb-Stevens and was comprised of 18 randomly selected students. During the meeting, each student was asked to describe his or her specific experiences with the core. While the responses were mixed, many students claimed to be generally in favor of the core. The favorable responses cited such benefits as being able to try new things or figure out what major to select. One student illustrated the vital role the core played in her decision of what major to pursue, as she came to college with no idea of what she might be interested in. She explained, “I didn’t necessarily get as much out of my core classes as I expected but it definitely helped me narrow down my interests” (anonymous student, personal communication, April 15, 2009). Another student described, “I love talking about different areas and I think its kind of boring to just focus on one thing” (anonymous student, personal communication, April 15, 2009). Despite interesting comments about the general benefits, one thing seems evident by their comments; students are generally missing the point of a liberal arts education. While being able to experience a wide array of courses is a nice feature of Boston College, it does not necessarily accomplish the goals that are described as central to the definition of liberal arts.

The negative reactions were far more prevalent and poignant, getting to the heart of some of the most evident failings of the core curriculum. Many students expressed their opinion that the core was simply something they wanted to get out of the way, certainly not approaching these required courses as though they were the heart of their experience at Boston College. Articulating just this sentiment in this meeting, a junior in the Lynch School of Education, Bryan Ramos stated, “My first impression of the core is that it was something I wanted to get over with” (B. Ramos, personal communication, April 15, 2009). One student explained the type of knowledge that he gained from his core classes as affording him the ability to talk at the water cooler in future jobs, but said that it did not help him gain any more than a superficial understanding of the material. Another student said core courses were “...just classes that I’ve went to, memorized material, studied for the exam and then left, and they have had very little impact on me” (anonymous student, personal communication, April 15, 2009). Several students described their frustration with the basic and superficial nature of the courses in the core, and noted that if they were not headed towards a career in science, an introductory course in biology, for instance, would have very little use for them. The same group of students suggested that the experience might have been more valuable if they could have been able to learn about how each particular subject fit into the larger frame of society and history. Overall, this meeting was a unique opportunity for faculty and staff to hear students’ impressions of the core, and the results were not generally complimentary.

Possible Reform of the Core at BC to Improve the Liberal Arts Education

Some time ago, Jean Jacques Rousseau (2003) wrote of education, “I will merely state that since the beginning of time there has been a continual outcry against the

established practice without anyone suggesting how to propose a better one” and this paper does not want to be accused of the same error. There are several clear ways in which the core can be reformed to address some of the aforementioned issues. It seems that much of the foundation for revision of the core is already in place at Boston College in both the rhetoric about liberal arts and the models that are established as part of the curriculum. Vice Provost Patricia Deleeuw expressed her grievances, explaining, “We say that we have had the core since the 16th century and its part of the Jesuit tradition and that’s sort of true but it has changed” (personal communication, November 26, 2008). She posited that every core revision is as much a political revision as a pedagogical or philosophical because “where the core goes, so does enrollment, lots of departments want to be in the core so that their enrollment goes up, that’s inevitable, but, we should resist the political influences and go back to your question, which is, what IS a liberal arts education? What do we mean by that?” (P. Deleeuw, personal communication, November 26, 2008).

In reviewing the liberal arts education at BC the issues become a lack of intellectuality on campus, a minimal challenge in the Freshman year, a general lack of concern or understanding of the liberal arts tradition among students, and an unrealized goal of creating a common thread of conversation that weaves through each required course. One potential way in which all of these issues might be addressed would be to create a required seminar course freshman year that discusses the key questions identified in the Task Force report. This freshman seminar would address two major issues with the current liberal arts education at Boston College, first, it would require that each student has at least one experience in a small class that necessitates that they interact with the

material and learn actively, and secondly, a required seminar would help establish at least a cursory understanding of what it means to go to a liberal arts school. In initial discussions about this possibility, Vice Provost Donald Hafner expressed concern that incoming freshman would rebel against the idea that one of their classes was already chosen for them. Although, when it comes down to it, as Dr. Hafner ultimately conceded, “most students end up here thinking, ‘ok I’m paying you because you are supposed to know how I should do this’” (personal communication, April 16, 2009). However, it seems that requiring particular worthwhile courses would serve as a commitment from Boston College to implementing its ideals. This would provide an opportunity for the administration and faculty to demonstrate the importance of the liberal arts education at Boston College. Further, because assuming that someone in some department within the core will address the issues that are central to delivering a liberal arts education has not seemed to produce success, designing explicit ways in which this will be accomplished will most likely prove more effective.

The seminar would provoke questions of intellectuality and begin to set up a cultural expectation of hard work and careful discussion of complex issues. Associate Dean of Nursing, Catherine Read, as well as Vice Provost Patricia DeLeeuw indicated that many students emerge from freshman year saying “that wasn’t so bad” (P. Deleeuw, personal communication, April 16, 2009; C. Reed, personal communication, November 21, 2008). While there is no reason to set up courses that intimidate freshman and create a challenge that they don’t feel they can meet, this is a competitive university. Because students accepted to Boston College typically have high SAT scores, a high GPA, and many extracurricular activities, and it is increasingly difficult to gain

acceptance to the university, admitted students should expect to be challenged.

Expectations about how hard a student must work in order to succeed (or receive “good” grades) are established in this first year, and if these expectations are higher the entire intellectual and academic culture of Boston College might be improved.

The seminar would also provide a forum for all students to engage personally with the material. A major component of intellectually challenging courses is their ability to force students to interact with the material rather than listen and memorize. As previously discussed, active learning is the most effective in helping students grasp material and incorporate it into their thinking. Research shows that small classes with discussions are the most effective means of educating students. Further, the Socratic method of questioning is central to the liberal arts tradition, and should be perpetuated by course design. In discussions with Dr. Deleeuw about the subject, she accurately portrayed this seminar as extending the honors program to all students, and noted the benefits of creating a common academic experience that all Freshman share (personal communication, November 26, 2008). Requiring a universal seminar experience where all students are exposed to the same material also creates a situation where students might be inspired to discuss material outside of class. Beginning intellectually stimulating discussions within a classroom might help alter the intellectual climate in the dining halls and dorm rooms. Introducing students to Boston College as a place where engaging discussions are supported could greatly alter their impressions and respect for the school.

The small number of students in each seminar would create incentives to complete the required readings to prepare for focused discussions. Some degree of challenge in a given course is based on the necessity of doing required readings and

preparation. If all students were required to participate in a course freshman year in which they absolutely had to complete the assigned work, their expectations of what needs to be done for other courses might also be influenced. Students quickly learn after freshman year courses that they do not need to read all material assigned, because they are typically not expected to demonstrate their understanding of material until a test. Oftentimes teachers spend the entire class period reviewing the assigned reading and describing its meaning to the class, a redundant exercise for those students that did read. At a school where all students are highly qualified, it seems that it would be more economical if professors used their time to do a quick review of the reading followed by interpretations of the reading and extensions that go beyond the basic text. When a student goes to class they should always feel as though they are gaining greater understanding of reading that they completely independently.

Importantly, this seminar would be able to directly address the concepts of liberal arts that the Task Force Report promises students will “inevitably” get in their other required courses. The Task Force Report expresses the goal that the certain perennial questions be asked in courses throughout the core, but does not indicate exactly where and how this will occur. The report also recognizes the need for establishing coherence in the core curriculum as well as explicit reference to each core course’s place within the curriculum. Because there is no indication of where, if at all, these discussions are being had, it seems the alternative is to create a single course in which these considerations are the aim. Students would be given a chance to learn the historic representations of a liberal arts education as well as ways in which Boston College interprets these representations and seeks to apply them on the university level. The seminar would also serve to describe

the ways in which each required course is related to the larger liberal arts education. By giving students the explicit background behind Boston College's philosophy of education, they will be able to make more informed decisions about how to approach their required courses. Students might be more likely to choose a core course based on its subject or its relation to the liberal arts tradition, rather than the time it meets or the difficulty of the professor.

Finally, these courses could also offer the opportunity for each student to get involved with a faculty member within their first year. Students could be assigned to a seminar based on their major, and the professor would be the students' advisor. This way, students would feel a connection to their advisor, and their advisor would have a better understanding of the type of student that they are working with. These small seminar classes could not only greatly improve the liberal arts education at Boston College, but might affect the success of advising as well.

Using the model that Dr. Byrne described of the philosophy department, the professors of these seminars would necessarily have to meet several times a semester to compare notes. Creating a community of professors discussing the challenges and successes within their courses would not only build a sense of pride, but would serve as a resource to the professors. This community would help ensure that the professors are conducting their seminars in a similar fashion, and that all students would get the most out of the seminar. As mentioned, these seminars would not need to be designed out of thin air; Boston College has working models in place currently. Vice Provost Patricia Deleeuw described one particular model that is currently in place, the Cornerstone classes. She articulated:

One of the cornerstone models now is topic seminars, and out of those could grow a freshman seminar. Senior faculty members are encouraged to propose a seminar in their area of research that they would offer to, certainly, a limited number of freshmen. So if you're a chemist and you're interested in describing how you do what you do and why you do what you do to students who may be chemistry majors, and the kind of ideas in chemistry, and the impact of chemistry...and you don't have to be a major to be interested in these kinds of issues. There are a number of these now, I don't know how many there are, but there are probably about ten. But if we encourage more senior faculty to do this that to could be a kind of freshman seminar and we could then wrap this model into revisions on the core. So there are all sorts of models, experiments, going on even now...you don't have to search far and wide for models, we have one right here on campus. (personal communication, November 26, 2008).

While there are certainly some opportunities to have courses that touch upon some semblance of these issues or is conducted in this seminar style, there is no guarantee that each student will encounter these courses. As the amount of choices offered within each discipline increases, there is less and less control over whether each student will participate in courses that truly give them an understanding of the liberal arts tradition. Those courses at Boston College that do require discussion and contemplation of intellectually challenging questions are often limited in number so that regardless of interest in these courses, not all students are able to participate. Not only does this threaten each student's ability to receive a liberal arts education, but also the idea that many of these courses, particularly the honors seminars, are limited to the "top" of the incoming class is completely contrary to the definition of this education. It is in Western Cultural Traditions seminars, Cornerstone courses, Capstone courses, Perspectives, and PULSE that a model can be found for developing this required freshman seminar, but the opportunity must be extended to each and every student.

While the Freshman Writing course is a seminar designed partially for the purpose of introducing students to Boston College with at least one small, individualized

course, many students fulfill their requirement for this class with AP credit and miss out on the valuable experience. It is also debatable that a writing seminar accomplishes the same goals as a seminar in one of the other departmental core classes would. Though it might require planning and many changes in the curriculum of the freshman writing core, this seminar could also be used as a forum to entertain and write about the questions that are central to a liberal arts education, and therefore explore its meaning. Most importantly, however, the existence of the freshman writing course is evidence that there is enough faculty to accommodate each student in a seminar class. While the professors teaching the freshman writing courses may not be as prepared to teach the new required seminar about liberal arts, it is feasible that there are enough resources to make this seminar a reality.

A second, less promising option for improving the core would be necessitating that at least one specific required core course is taught in seminar style. While this would not automatically create a forum for discussing the meaning of “liberal arts” because it might still tend to focus on a singular subject without addressing the integration of different disciplines or the greater goal of liberal arts education, it would at least require each student to have one class that propagates active learning and engages students with material. Perhaps this could be most easily done in the philosophy department, as its material lends itself most freely to intellectuality, and it would require the least amount of change. Because Dr. Byrne has already capped the classes at 30, there would be less difficulty in bringing these classes down to 10 or 12. By allowing and requiring each student to take at least one small seminar style class, they would undoubtedly experience the challenge and responsibility of this forum.

Despite being feasible, the major impediment to these changes remains the limit in resources that Boston College has in terms of staff and classroom space. It seems, however, that Boston College could require that all senior faculty be contractually bound to teach undergraduates. Otherwise, the University could make efforts to prepare doctoral students for more effective teaching in all departments as part of a doctoral program. Further, while BC advertises that it will be hiring 100-120 more faculty in the ten year plan it is not clear what departments this new faculty will be working in, and perhaps this seminar should be a consideration. When asked about the possibility of creating this seminar, while in support of the concept, Vice Provost of Boston College Donald Hafner responded by describing the idea as having a “real logistics challenge”. Dr. Hafner recognized that the classes would have to be smaller than 20-25 students, which would mean 100 new courses being offered in fall. According to Dr. Hafner, compared to the total number of courses that are offered this is not a big number, but compared to the current perspectives courses offered it is a pretty substantial addition. Despite these challenges, he acknowledged “...other places have done it and maybe we should as well” (D. Hafner, personal communication, April 16, 2009).

Another potential consideration in aims to improve the liberal arts education at Boston College, if these aforementioned suggestions prove impossible, would be to reestablish the University Core Development Committee as an institution to help integrate specific perennial questions and indicate required format for each departmental core rather than just assuming that specific aspects will occur naturally. There must be some mention of structure for the core classes within the description of requirements, similar to that which is described in the section of the Task Force Report for the history

department. The UCDC needs to be a driving force in ensuring that the core is representative of the liberal arts education Boston College claims to provide as well as keep track of exactly how well this is being maintained once a system is in place. In conversations on the subject, Dr. Deleeuw accurately stated that core development involve politics and pedagogy but should focus more on pedagogy if we want to be a competitive top university (personal communication, November 26, 2008).

Another possibility would be to include discussion seminars as a component of all core classes if their enrollment is greater than 20 students. In order to establish a smaller community of students in a forum where they can actively engage in the material, a separate discussion seminar might be necessary. TA's or graduate students could feasibly lead these sections, as the primary role would be to facilitate intellectual discussions. Perhaps as part of a syllabi submitted for review by the UCDC, professors would include guideline for the teaching assistants to use in conducting these seminars.

While there are many courses within the current Boston College core that might serve as models in developing a common seminar for all students, it is equally valuable to look at the programs that other schools have designed to accomplish a liberal arts education. The College of the Holy Cross is the college ranked just below Boston College by the U.S. News and World Report, and is also a liberal arts Jesuit university ("Best Colleges," 2009). On their website, Holy Cross describes that their curriculum is designed so that students are able to gain experience in the four major academic areas (the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and arts) and importantly, see them as a larger whole. The website posits, "This is the essence of being liberally educated, and it makes you more open and flexible, more interested in the world around you – and more

interesting to be around” (“About Holy Cross,” n.d). This declaration does not starkly contrast the rhetoric put forth by Boston College regarding their goals as a liberal arts education, though Holy Cross goes about accomplishing this in a different way. The common requirements at Holy Cross include one course each in arts, literature, studies in religion, philosophical studies, historical studies, and cross-cultural studies; and two courses in language studies, social science, and natural and mathematical sciences. This equates to 12 required courses where Boston College has 15. The true difference comes in the delivery of these core courses, and the requirements set by the school as to how they are designed to ensure that students engage with material and have a common integrated experience. What is most evident in reading the descriptions of the different departmental requirements is that the specific questions to be asked in each course are explicitly described. In describing the studies in religion, it is said that these courses “provide an invitation to dialogue about fundamental religious and philosophical questions...studies in religion address the search for ultimate meaning by exploring such themes as the nature of the sacred, the relationship between the human and the divine...etc. etc.” (“About Holy Cross,” n.d.). Also note, this information is found directly on the Holy Cross website, details about the specific responsibilities of this departmental core and mention of the format that are not even present in the official description of the core in Boston College’s 1991 Task Force Report on the State of the Core.

In terms of format, the average class size at Holy Cross is 18-20, with a student-faculty ratio of 11:1 (“About Holy Cross,” n.d.). While there is little indication of the format in which these classes are taught outside of the descriptions of the requirements, at

least there is an explicit reference of the need for dialogue and what specific questions a department is responsible for addressing. Because Holy Cross only has approximately 2,700 students it might appear more feasible for them to design smaller courses than it is for Boston College to do so. However, the cost of putting professors in each classrooms when working with tuition from fewer students, presents a comparable logistical challenge. Further, the faculty to student ratio at Boston College is 1:13, not drastically different from Holy Cross's 1:11. These ratios are also difficult measures to rely on given the variability in class size that contributes to lower numbers. For instance, a professor might work one-on-one with a doctoral student at Boston College and teach a course of 40 students. The student to professor ratio for the given professor will be drastically lower due to their work with the doctoral student, despite the large class size of their other course. In addition, there is no average class size identified on the fact sheet on Boston College's website. However, rather than letting Boston College off the hook, this seems to suggest perhaps that Boston College simply shouldn't advertise a level of education that they are essentially not capable of delivering to all students.

Holy Cross also has a seminar based Honors Program, which, like Boston College, is only offered to "highly qualified students". While this system that provides specialized education for the top students is seemingly as elitist as that which is offered at Boston College, the process for invitation to the Honors program is slightly different. Rather than choosing students based on their high school credentials, highly qualified students are invited to apply for the Honors program in their second year at Holy Cross.

Another liberal arts college that provides an interesting comparison to Boston College is Amherst College, ranked first among liberal arts colleges by the U.S. News

report (“Best Colleges,” 2009). As previously quoted, President of Amherst College from 1994-2003, Thomas Gerety, explains on the Amherst College website, “We in the liberal arts colleges believe that teacher and student must stand face to face in the conversations that are the work of both; we believe in teaching as conversation because the best teaching is conversation; except by dialogue we cannot do our work” (“Amherst Philosophy,” n.d.). This direct recognition of the historical interpretations of liberal arts and the scientifically proven modes of successful higher education by Gerety is truly represented in the presentation of a core program that seems to exist as the heart of the Amherst College education. Amherst College has a first year seminar that closely echoes the suggestion made in this paper as a necessary addition to the Boston College core requirements.

The seminars were added in 1996, and are “planned and taught by one or more members of the faculty as a way to introduce students to liberal arts studies through a range of innovative and often disciplinary approaches” (“Amherst Philosophy,” n.d.). While the seminars often seek to develop different intellectual capabilities and may focus on various subject matters, they all aim to help students develop an analytic approach to course material. The seminars are primarily comprised of informed discussions and involve small groups of students working to immerse themselves in the course material. The curriculum following this initial seminar is comprised of a broad structure without any particular courses or subjects as requirements, encouraging the concept of education as a process. The student works with his/her advisor to decide if the courses chosen by the student:

- *provide knowledge of culture and a language other than one’s own and of human experience in a period before one’s lifetime;*

- *analyze one's own polity, economic order, and culture;*
 - *employ abstract reasoning;*
 - *work within the scientific method;*
 - *engage in creative action—doing, making and performing;*
 - *interpret, evaluate, and explore the life of the imagination.*
- (“Amherst Philosophy,” n.d.)

This curriculum design prioritizes these goals as the most important aim of a liberal arts education, and accomplishes it without required courses. While removing the required courses at Boston College would seem a step back from the semblance of liberal arts that is currently offered at Boston College, this model recognizes that required courses do not necessarily lead to liberal arts education. Students at Amherst have the freedom to choose their own classes but their selections are carefully guided in a manner that ensures that they are accomplishing the broader goals of a liberal arts education. While Boston College has many different course offerings within each required discipline, there is no system in place to monitor whether or not students are getting anything out of these classes. Further, without the introduction of a first year seminar, students cannot be expected to have an understanding of what courses would truly contribute to their own education in a way that will make them better citizens and individuals.

Conclusions

Martha Nussbaum's recognition that there is “no more effective way to wake up pupils than to confront them with difference in an area where they had previously thought their own ways neutral, necessary, and natural”, is the sentiment that Boston College must return to. If it hopes to maintain its reputation as a leading university in the nation, Boston College must seek a return to the core values that it claims to hold, and ensure that it is providing the education it's rhetoric promotes. There must be a serious commitment to guaranteeing better incorporation of these ideals into the curriculum and

culture of the campus. The university must be sure to establish a long-term committee to evaluate and maintain the state of the core in coming years. Attention must be given to the lack of intellectuality and challenge on campus, and efforts must be directed towards invoking this intellectuality and promoting it within and outside of the classroom.

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