Liberal Education in the College

For more than a century the College of the University of Chicago has been an innovative leader in liberal education in the United States. Since the 1930s the curriculum of the College has varied in its details, but its intellectual foundations have been constant.

Undergraduate education at Chicago begins with a common core curriculum, conducted from the standpoint of multiple disciplines but beholden to none, which provides opportunities for critical inquiry and the discovery of knowledge. Chicago's long-standing commitment to a rigorous core of general education for first- and second-year students emphasizes the unique value of studying original texts and of formulating original problems based on the study of those texts. The objective of our faculty-taught general education courses—which constitute the major component of the first two years in the College—is not to transfer information, but to raise fundamental questions and to encourage those habits of mind and those critical, analytical, and writing skills that are most urgent to a well-informed member of civil society.

Just as general education provides a foundation for addressing key intellectual questions, the major program of study insists upon depth of knowledge and sophistication in a defined field. Majors afford students invaluable opportunities to develop and defend complex arguments through extended scholarly research.

The curriculum, however, extends beyond the general education requirements and the major. The faculty have always believed that maturity and independence of mind are enhanced by exploration in intellectual universes outside or transcending required programs of study. Electives—courses drawn from other majors, independent research projects, programs of overseas study, and advanced training in a second language—provide a breadth and a balance that is critical to a true liberal education. Hence the Chicago curriculum allows up to one-third of a student's academic work to consist of electives that will build upon the work of our general education courses, but do so on more advanced and more focused levels.

Many national figures in higher education have been identified with Chicago's undergraduate curriculum—including William Rainey Harper, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and Edward Levi—but learning at Chicago has never been the province of one person or one vision. Rather, the curriculum devoted to "the knowledge most worth having," and the critical cast of mind that it develops, has been the product of generations of collegial debate and constant re-examination, processes which are themselves a part of the intellectual adventure to which the curriculum is devoted.