



Human Fundamentals

The case for great-books programs

Zena Hitz

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has reading “great books” shaped your intellectual or personal life? Has a book ever changed your mind in a way you didn’t expect?

2. If you were asked to craft a great-books curriculum for college freshmen, which texts would you include? Which texts would you leave out? What constitutes a great book, and is there any distinction between these and the classics?

3. Hitz argues that great books are based on our shared humanity, fundamentally enriching and egalitarian. But some academic circles insist that the classics are “racist and sexist, instruments of patriarchy and white supremacy.” How might proponents of this view respond to Hitz’s argument that universities should retain great-books seminars for the sake of the poor and marginalized?

4. When we reserve the study of great books for humanities students, Hitz writes, we “reserve such study for the few and the rich.” Do you agree? Should all students be required to take a common core? If so, why?

5. “Education through books is essential for self-determination and liberty,” Hitz writes. Is it possible that education by other means—through music, film, community service, lab research, or computer code—could perform the same function, encouraging students toward the “pursuit of human questions”? Why or why not?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING & LISTENING:

- “Minds Stocked Only With Opinions,” Charles McNamara, September 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/minds-stocked-only-opinions>
- “Ancient, But Ever New,” Cathleen Kaveny, July/August 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/ancient-ever-new>
- “Disrupting the College Experience,” Santiago Ramos, July/August 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/disrupting-college-experience>
- “Cicero Will Outlive Your Tweets,” Charles McNamara, January 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/cicero-will-outlive-your-tweets>
- “Tolstoy Together,” The Commonweal Podcast, December 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/tolstoy-together>
- “Bracing for Impact,” Cassandra Nelson, February 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bracing-impact>