Constructing the Past

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 3

2010

"Dead White Male" in the Cornfields: The Great Books Ideal and the Illinois Wesleyan Humanities Program

Chao Ren
Illinois Wesleyan University, cren@iwu.edu

Recommended Citation
Ren, Chao (2010) "“Dead White Male” in the Cornfields: The Great Books Ideal and the Illinois Wesleyan Humanities Program," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol11/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ IWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Constructing the Past by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ IWU. For more information, please contact sdaviska@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

"Dead White Male" in the Cornfields:
The Great Books Ideal and the Illinois Wesleyan Humanities Program

Chao Ren

> "We can never get a university without general education. Unless students and professors (and particularly professors) have a common intellectual training, a university must remain a series of disparate schools and departments, united by nothing except the fact that they have the same president and board of trustees."[1]
>
> ——Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*

> "The overwhelming task ahead for any realistic humanist is to find a human way to defeat the predictions."[2]
>
> ——Doris C. Meyers, "A Hope for Humanness"

When the young legal scholar Robert Maynard Hutchins first stepped into the office in 1929 as the fifth president of the University of Chicago at the age of thirty, he could never have thought that his ideas of education would change the lives of a huge number people and have a significant influence on the college curricula all over the country. He was the one who spread the ideal of general education throughout the country with his continuous enthusiasm and support for nearly five decades. Only three years after Hutchins took the office of presidency, Illinois Wesleyan University introduced its first General Education program in 1932. One of the required courses, the Humanities sequence, dominated the curricular requirement of Illinois Wesleyan University for more than half a century and influenced tens of thousands of alumni until it finally declined in the 1980s and faded in the 1990s. In this paper I would like to explore the connection between the theory and practice of the general education ideal in its most extreme form, the great books ideal, led by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, and the rise and fall of the Humanities program in Illinois Wesleyan University throughout the 20th century.

The first experiment of general education in higher institutions started in Columbia University in New York City around 1917.[3] A course named "War

---

[1] Robert Maynard Hutchins, "General Education," *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 59.

[2] Doris C. Meyers, "A Hope for Humanness," University Colloquium, Illinois Wesleyan University, 20 March 1974, 9.

[3] Gan Yang, "Da xue zhi dao yu wen ming zi jue" (The Way of university and the self-consciousness of civilizations), *Tong san tong* (Beijing:

and Peace Studies" was offered in response to the catastrophic World War I in Europe with the intention to examine and reflect upon the heritage of western civilization.[4] In 1920, Columbia Professor of English John Erskine developed an optional two-year course of General Honors, focusing on the reading and group discussion of western classics.[5] However, this experiment was limited and optional, and did not evolve into a university-wide phenomenon until the 1930s.[6] It was Hutchins who really popularized the idea by implementing an extended four-year "Common Core" in the University of Chicago modeled on the General Honors experiment of Erskine. As early as the school year of 1931-1932, the University of Chicago already had a well designed Common Core program, with introductory general courses in each of the four divisions: the Biological Sciences, the Humanities, the Physical Sciences, and the Social Sciences.[7] However, it is hard for me to decide when the Common Core program really started in the University of Chicago, since the earliest catalog owned by the Ames Library Tate Archive is the one of school year 1931-1932. But we can still be sure that this Common Core program was implemented soon after Robert Maynard Hutchins became the president of the university.

Not long after, if not at the same time of, the establishment of the Chicago Common Core program, a similar program appeared in the catalog of Illinois Wesleyan University. For the first time in the history of the university, five "survey courses" were introduced in the opening pages of the course catalog, which covered exactly the same four divisions as the Chicago Common Core program did.[8] It should be pointed out that among the four courses, only the Humanities course was a two-semester year-long course (the other three were all semester-long courses) and had a strong workload of four lectures and one discussion session per week (the others were mostly designed for first-year

---

San lian shu dian, 2007), 113. The author of this collection of essays studied at the Committee on Social Thought in the University of Chicago.

[4] "The History of Columbia College," http://www.college.columbia.edu/about/history.

[5] "An Inner Life of Sufficient Richness – From General Honors to Literature Humanities," http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct_archive/may04/columbia250_2.php.

[6] Gan Yang, *Tong san tong*, 108.

[7] *Announcement of Courses*, *1931-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1932), 50-59.

[8] Among the five survey courses, there were two separate courses named Survey of the Social Sciences I and Survey of the Social Sciences II, counted both towards the Social Science requirement and are both offered every semester, but did not form a sequence.

students and had up to three lectures per week at most).[9] The Humanities course at Illinois Wesleyan University was designed differently from the other required survey courses ever since their beginnings. These survey courses remained under the name of "Survey of" or "Introduction to" humanities until the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when a stronger emphasis was put on the intensity and seriousness of the Humanities course.[10]

However, it is arguable as to whether or not the Illinois Wesleyan survey course program was directly influenced by the Chicago model. It would be very helpful if the process of the decision-making could be preserved or discovered so that we can see the rationale underlying this program. Possible correspondences of key decision makers would be more helpful, since the origins of such influences are not usually mentioned in official documents. Therefore, I can only build up a connection between the Chicago model and the IWU program according to my understanding, or, if I were more skeptical, my imagination. David Hume argues that there is actually no perceivable connection between the "cause" and "effect" events, so the two events are themselves separate. The task here for me is to build up from sources a possible connection between the Chicago Common Core program and the IWU survey course program that is likely to be true and loyal to the past, which is hardly possible to achieve, given the limited amount of sources.

In 1936, Hutchins published his famous *The Higher Learning in America*, in which he explained in detail his philosophy of education and stated his rationale of the Common Core design. He severely criticized the trend of specialization of knowledge and the abolishment of liberal arts education in higher institutions. He also criticized the ideas of progress and scientism: "Our erroneous notion of progress has thrown the classics and the liberal arts out of the curriculum, overemphasized the empirical sciences, and made education the servant of any contemporary movements in society, no matter how superficial."[11] Hutchins's criticism of the notion of progress was based on his belief in an unchanging "common human nature": "One purpose of education is to draw out the elements of our common human nature. These elements are the same in any time or place. …Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same."[12] So Hutchins's philosophy of education was also referred to as "educational perennialism." In order to solve the problems of education and achieve real education, Hutchins proposed

---

[9] *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, *April 1932*, 37-39.
[10] *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, *1958-1959*, 54.
[11] Hutchins, *Higher Learning in America*, 65.
[12] Ibid., 66.

"permanent studies" as the heart of general education.[13] By "permanent studies", he meant the studies of the "great books," the classics and canons of western civilization. He said the studies of the great books was the most important part of an education "because these studies draw out the elements of our common human nature, because they connect man with man, because they connect us with the best that man has thought, because they are basic to any further study and to any understanding of the world."[14]

Hutchins developed his great books ideal into its most extreme forms after he stepped down from the presidency of the University of Chicago in 1945. In 1947, Hutchins established the Great Books Foundation in Chicago with his close friend and comrade Mortimer J. Adler. In 1952, the two of them co-edited the 54-volume *The Great Books of the Western World*, published by Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. Earlier in 1946, Scott Buchanan, another educational perennialist and member of the Advisory Board of *The Great Books*, tried to found a new liberal arts college based on the general education ideal he had implemented in St. John's College, Maryland. However, the attempt failed due to unclear financial circumstances.[15] The practice of the general education ideal flourished most prosperously in the 1950s all over the country.[16]

It was obvious that this flourishing ideal also reached Illinois Wesleyan University. The Humanities sequence was elevated into "Humanities 201-202" in 1958, which required a prerequisite of freshman English composition course and at least sophomore standing.[17] The sequence was required of all students by the end of their junior year, and was almost rendered the status of a mandatory requirement for graduation with a very harsh substitution policy.[18]

---

[13] Ibid., 74.

[14] Ibid., 77.

[15] "Scott Buchanan, Educator, Dies; Implemented 'Great Books' Plan; Philosopher and Author; Was Dean at St. John's, Md. Aide of Hutchins." (1968, March 29). New York Times (1857-Current file), 41. Retrieved April 26, 2009, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2005) database.

[16] Hutchins's philosophy of education concerning the great books ideal is developed in detail in *The Great Conversation*, the first volume of *The Great Books of the Western World*.

[17] *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, *1958-1959*, 54.

[18] For example, on page 51 of the *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin* in 1962, the following graduation requirements are stated: "4. The Humanities 201-202, 8 hours. [Necessary substitutes may be arranged, as follows: (a) six hours in British Literature or World Literature, plus (b) a three-hour historical course in Philosophy (choices: 301, 302, 308) *or* a three-hour historical course

In the school year of 1964-1965, the Humanities sequence was further and finally elevated up to its climactic height, "Humanities 301-302".[19] According to the university catalog, 300-level courses were "courses for advanced undergraduates," which normally indicated junior standing.[20] With such an elevation, the Humanities sequence was now expected to be more intellectually challenging, with more serious academic commitment from both the students and the instructors. The course featured a combination of team-taught lectures, classroom discussions, and (intensive!) readings of the "great books."[21] With two lectures and two discussion sessions per week, students were immersed in a serious engagement with the western humanistic tradition from Homer to the 20th century.[22]

There was a detectable connection between the nationwide prosperity of the great books ideal and the flourishing of the IWU Humanities program in late 1960s and early 1970s. Former co-coordinator of the Humanities program, Professor Emeritus Jerry Stone recalled the days when he first came to IWU in 1965 and said that there were serious discussions and debates among the IWU faculty about the national great books movements and the newly implemented Humanities 301-302 program, and that the faculty members did make specific references to figures from Chicago such as Robert Maynard Hutchins.[23] It was clear that the faculty members were fully aware of what was going on nationwide, and they could feel, if they did not know for sure, a strong influence of Hutchins's ideal on the IWU Humanities program. Also there is evidence of this connection and influence in one of the talks given by Professor Emerita Doris C. Meyers. Doris Meyers was an influential figure on campus and a strong advocate of the general education ideal. Her insistence on the Humanities program was crucial to its success. On March 20th, 1974, Doris Meyers presented a talk to the University Colloquium of Illinois Wesleyan University. The talk was titled "A Hope for Humanness." In this talk, she

---

in Religion (choices: 301, 302, 307, 308), plus (c) a two-hour course in Music Appreciation *or* the History of Art.]" So in order to substitute to the eight-hour Humanities 201-202, students had to take 11 hours of other carefully selected courses instead. In the "Further Requirement Details" on the same page of the *Bulletin*, there is a further explanation of the "Basic Courses" (another name of the "survey courses") concerning Humanities 201-202: "…The natural science and humanities courses must be taken by the end of the junior year."

[19] *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, *February 1965*, 60.

[20] Ibid., 46.

[21] Syllabi, "The Humanities 301," First Semester, 1977-1978; "Humanities 302," Second Semester, 1976-1977.

[22] *Illinois Wesleyan University Course Catalog*, *1974-1975*.

[23] Interview with Professor Emeritus Jerry Stone, 25 April 2009.

pointed out the existence of a single and eternal human nature, which she referred to as the "*one* culture of man."[24] She also raised criticisms on issues such as scientism, which was very similar to that of Hutchins's. She said that "humanists…cannot possibly ignore the projections made by the natural and social scientists, though these prophecies frequently threaten the very core of humanism. Their implications involve not just the quality of a humanistic future but, more essentially, the question whether or not such a future is even possible."[25] Doris Meyers's emphasis on a common human nature and her criticism on scientism and its threat to humanity both bore very strong resemblance with the thoughts of Robert Maynard Hutchins, which I have mentioned above. Here we can see a clear intellectual trace of the underlying rationale of the Humanities program, especially Humanities 301-302 at its height.

On October 1st, 1976, the IWU Curriculum Council submitted to the faculty a proposal of a new general education program. In this proposal, the nearly mandatory Humanities requirement, which had lasted for 18 years, was deleted, and a completely new system of general education was introduced. In this new five-part system, the status of humanities was downgraded significantly: Humanities now fell under the section of "Arts and Humanities," in which three course units were required in at least two of the three categories: Humanities, Literature, and Philosophy (excluding Logic courses). There was a specific reference to the humanities in the description of this section: "The current course which satisfies II. C. 1. [i. e. Humanities] is Humanities 301-302. The Curriculum Council anticipates that new courses will be created under the Humanities rubric."[26] This proposal became the official curriculum policy in the following year. From then on, Humanities 301-302 became nothing more than two normal elective courses—In the meantime, the sequence was also deprived of its year-course entirety, and the two semester halves "may be taken separately."[27]

The introduction of this new general education system at IWU was the turning point of the development of the Humanities program. The earliest modification of the curricular policy concerning Humanities 301-302 came as early as 1969, when a revision was made on the substitution policy so that 8 hours of other courses could substitute the same amount of 8 hours of

---

[24] Meyers, "A Hope for Humanness," 3.

[25] Ibid., 1.

[26] Curriculum Council Report, 1 October 1976, Record Group 10-3/1 Curriculum Council Minutes & Reports, Tate Archives & Special Collections, The Ames Library, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, 11.

[27] *Illinois Wesleyan University Course Catalog*, *1977-1978*.

Humanities 301-302.[28] Yet this 1969 revision was nothing compared to the 1977 policy change. After 1977, the Humanities program went on its steady decline. A new pair of Humanities 101-102 was developed as individually taught introductory level humanities courses designed for freshmen. In 1980 the Gateway Colloquia started, then called "freshmen seminars."[29] The Humanities 301-302 did survive the eighties, although with significantly declining influence. In 1992, the courses were renamed "Interpreting Western Culture."[30] Three years later in 1995, both the Humanities 301-302 sequence and the Humanities 101-102 sequence were deleted; instead, a new set of four humanities courses was introduced as what is known till today the "World of Ideas" series, under the directorship of Professors Nancy Sultan and Daniel Terkla.[31]

What was the reason of the decline and fall of the Humanities 301-302 program? There are many different interpretations about this, and each interpretation may convey the interpreter's opinion on who should be responsible and how to evaluate this program as a whole. External opposition and nationwide criticism of the great books ideal was certainly a very important factor. Faculty members outside of the College of the Liberal Arts proposed many times in the sixties and seventies asking for lighter curriculum requirements for their students. The general education ideal was not taken very seriously by every faculty member across the campus, a phenomenon contrary to the idea of a common intellectual background among faculty, which Hutchins proposed. Also, as it was indicated by Professor Emeritus Jerry Stone, the internal opposition also helped bring down the Humanities program. The mechanism of the course did not work perfectly as wished: team-teaching and discussion leading caused the problem of discrepancies of contents among different discussion sections. Not all guest lecturers could do the proposed reading or finish the proposed contents, which caused problems in the progression of the course. Gradually some faculty participants of the course lost interest in teaching.[32] The problem with team teaching was demonstrated

---

[28] *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, *1969-1970 (February 1969)*, 47.

[29] Robert S. Eckley, *Pictures at an Exhibition: Illinois Wesleyan University*, *1968-1986*, *An Academic Memoir* (Bloomington, Illinois: Illinois Wesleyan University, 1993?), 61.

[30] *Illinois Wesleyan University Course Catalog*, *1992-1993*.

[31] Curriculum Council Course Proposals Received, 1994-1995. Record Group 10-3/1 Curriculum Council Minutes & Reports, Tate Archives & Special Collections, The Ames Library, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, 3.

[32] Interview with Professor Emeritus Jerry Stone, 25 April 2009.

in the 1976 Curriculum Council Report, which made it clear (seemingly unnecessarily) that "the substance of general education is achieved in courses taught by individual faculty members."[33] Another explanation of the decline and fall of the program is the retirement of Doris Meyers. The absence of a powerful leading figure is always detrimental to programs under constant attack. Hutchins's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions declined in influence after Hutchins deceased, and *The Great Books* agreed to include minority and female authors after Mortimer Adler passed away, who insisted the opposite opinion all his life. It may therefore be reasonably inferred that the retirement of Doris Meyers was also an important reason of the decline and fall of the Humanities program.

The rise of general education was a major phenomenon in American higher education in the twentieth century. This movement, headed by several key figures in Chicago, had its root in the philosophy of education and theory of human nature. The movement spread around the continent, from Massachusetts to California, for more than half a century. Soon after its initial sprouting in Chicago, the general education movement came to central Illinois and flourished at Illinois Wesleyan University. The growth of the movement culminated in the creation of a Humanities 301-302 sequence, a climactic general education curriculum in the history of IWU. Throughout the decades of its duration, the practice of the Humanities course came across theoretical opposition and practical difficulties, and was eventually abolished in early 1990s. The development of the Humanities course at Illinois Wesleyan University reflected the influence of the general education movement nationwide, and was a specific case in which theory and ideas significantly changed the higher education experience of many Americans over several generations, many of whom from around Bloomington-Normal.

---

[33] Curriculum Council Report, 17.