Pepperdine "Great Books" Program Review Report
By Heather James
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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of one day, March 18, 2019, I sat in on two of the Great Books courses, spoke with three key faculty who teach in the Great Books Program, and spoke also with three dozen students. My report is informed as well by my experience of meeting and conversing with faculty and students when I delivered the keynote speech and joined the students and faculty at the reception and dinner for the 30th Anniversary of Great Books celebration that took place on March 22, 2017.

What follows are my observations and recommendations based on these enjoyable if brief engagements with the Great Books Program as well as my understanding of the program's self-description and especially its self-assessment.

1. CURRICULUM

From listening to testimonials by Pepperdine students in person and reviewing online reports, it is clear that Pepperdine students as a whole know that they have come to the school for reasons that link missions of deep reflection and lifelong service to a meaningful sense of history and global presence. The students with whom I spoke on two different occasions expressed a strong sense of the ways in which the Great Books Program addresses a core mission of the university, namely the grounding of U.S. and many Asian citizens in dialogues, even epochally long dialogues, about the value of higher education, moral philosophy, and action in the world.

The program serves a traditional and highly respected model of education even as it swerves from the fairly modern view that academic disciplines are disparate rather than deeply connected and, moreover, on their honor to find the points of contact between and among the divisions. In short, the idea of academic divisions, from the perspective of the Great Books Program, has to do with identifying and connecting different fields of knowledge and then putting that knowledge forward into the world. The idea of specialized knowledge in most modern universities has come to sharply separate natural sciences from the humanities (literature, arts, and politically engaged aesthetics) and even to separating them (especially the sciences) from political philosophy. The disjunctions between and among the three major divisions in modern university campuses can be over-emphasized, especially when it comes to asserting a supposed differences between a practical (i.e., economically productive) and a philosophical life (i.e., a life carried out in relation to a credo). The Great Books Program takes a more holistic and salutary approach to the relationships among the academic disciplines.

Pepperdine is known for its strengths in general education in the humanities and evidently takes to heart that the liberal arts form an essential base in a broad undergraduate education and in citizenship. The Great Books Program appears to be the "jewel in the crown" of Pepperdine's general education system for four main reasons

1) a rigorous syllabus for each of the courses focused on Classical, Medieval/Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Modern literature and culture as well as the optional course in Asian literature and culture;
2) a faculty committed to working closely with undergraduates;
3) the program's commitment to small classrooms;
4) and its consequent appeal to especially motivated students.

Every student I spoke with expressed a strong feeling that small size is a great asset contributing to their sense of group cohesion and to the quality of the learning experience. In addition, the faculty with whom I spoke felt that the student workload required by Great Books courses is consistent across the four main divisions and various sections within each division.

The idea of "great books" is fully described in the program's self-study and may be aptly summarized as follows: they are texts that summon and even demand vigilant attention from the reader, particularly as they relate to the largest questions of moral philosophy (i.e., the conjunction of ethical and political philosophy). This conception of "great books" shifts their study from the long histories of specific disciplines such as literature (single language or comparative), classics, religion, history, and philosophy and places them instead before the general reader and intellectual. The conception works very well for undergraduate populations, who wish for a liberal arts education in addition to discipline-specific training in another field, whether that field is in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences or a professional school. The core of such a program is intelligent dialogue and debate in a circle of friends.

The required texts are without exception excellent. That said, the set list cleaves so closely to a venerable tradition — Aristotelian and Thomist — that it runs a risk of enshrining these texts rather than submitting the individual texts and especially the process of selecting texts to the very spirit of dialogue and debate that the program is designed to encourage.

Specifically, the syllabi for the earlier historical eras contains a rich array of Greek texts (including Plato, Aristotle, Homer, and the three great tragedians) but just a single Roman text, Vergil's *Aeneid*. The idea that "Greek is for brains, Latin for drains" is dated.

Recommendation

The department should begin regular discussions of the nature and scope of the curriculum, perhaps beginning with a retreat at which curricular goals and designs could be the sole focus. Faculty members appear to have innovative ideas about the curriculum that deserve to be widely discussed.

Secondly, room should be made in the syllabus for Roman texts considered to be "great books" in the pre-Adlerian moments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The epics of Lucretius, *On Nature*, and especially Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, are as important as Vergil's *Aeneid*, while Terence and Plautus are as "great" as Aristophanes in terms of moral philosophy. Seneca, too, stands as one of the great thinkers about *how* a writer and reader responds to the myths and texts of the past, especially in a historical moment of tyranny (imperial Rome under Nero).

A final note: the early syllabi would benefit from inclusion of a famously playful text, since the idea of "serious play" in texts by Erasmus and More (for example) depends on ludic and destabilizing textual models such as those by Lucian (e.g., *A True Story*) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* or *Fasti*). The point is that moral philosophy at times must take forms that seem as diverting or risible as Socrates as a kind of Silenus. Great Books could only benefit from the wisdom of satire, epigram, lyric, and pastoral, which are all slender but nonetheless "great" genres that establish productive and dialogical relations with the weighty genres, namely tragedy and epic, at the high end of the scale of genres, and with philosophical dialogue.

2. TEACHING METHODS

The method of teaching described in the self-study emphasizes Socratic questioning that unfolds in three waves or phases.

1) First considerations emphasize the facts of a given text so as to ensure a grounded discussion among students and also to identify the ways in which an objective account of the texts seems to get stuck at the literal level of meaning;
2) Second considerations focus on the initial steps taken by students to deliberate questions of meaning: this phase links *interpretation* to *social dialogue*;
3) The third phase leads inward as each student makes deliberative decisions about his or her own personal relationship to the text and its questions: this phase leads to the formation of an intelligent and informed credo.

In the teaching method laid out in the self-study, the backbone of the program is keywords more than key texts: truth, justice, memory, experience, imagination; happiness, reason, habit, virtue; prudence, temperance, courage; fate and duty. These are some of the major themes of great books, and they are certainly topics in moral philosophy. The use of such keywords enables students to establish dialogues and relationships among the authors/texts as well as their peer group.

The actual teaching methods in Great Books, however, vary considerably from this description. One class I attended dealt with vigorous and intense questions between the instructor and individual students rather than topics or keywords. The students appeared to accept and relish their moment in the "hot seat" for the good reason that they had come to understand there were many ways to "win" and no way to "fail": even failing to come up with thoughtful responses was a learning experience in which there was no loss of face. By contrast, the second class I attended generated a sense of mutual-fostering among students and the instructor. Students volunteered their input and shared their experiences of interpreting the choices and speeches of characters in a complex 19th-C novel. The class ended with students going on a "field trip" to the rock at the church, reading the closing passages of the novel (*The Brothers Karamazov*) and reflecting on how the characters and the students themselves think about "bedrock" when it is poised between principles and personal dispositions. Students in both classes described the discussions and experiences as success.

Recommendation

While the faculty teaching in the program would surely respect the teaching methods of other instructors, they might profit from open exchange in a retreat about the pragmatics of engaging students in dialogue with texts, each other, themselves (individually), and their God. It seems to me that the teaching methods used by faculty differ from each other and converge in ways that are entirely acceptable and even beneficial. Yet a sense of duty to a past model of this kind of course may become a bugbear in the near future.

3. ENROLLMENT, STUDENT EXPERIENCE, AND OUTCOMES

Observations

Students expressed a strong sense of identity with the program, fostered by small class size and an engaged faculty. They felt the program provided them with an intellectual and social home at Pepperdine. These students differentiated between "big, drone-like" classes in other divisions of general education and the opportunity to "interact with the material in a novel way" in Great Books courses.

It is clear that the Great Books Program is providing a strong draw to students from all over the university. With its current structure and curriculum, it is serving a wide range of students' interests and abilities. The main challenges of the undergraduate program in the coming years will be to think more deliberately in its approach to the curriculum and the productive grounds for change and acknowledging change.

A further note: grade inflation is a potential issue for consideration by the core faculty.

4. HISTORY AND MISSION STATEMENT

The Great Books Program came to Pepperdine in the 1980s, when its major pioneer, Mortimer Adler, visited the campus and, with the support and oversight of Pepperdine's President, inspired the idea of such a program at Pepperdine. A good deal of the self-study focuses on the history provided by Adler at Columbia and Chicago. Much of the program's present curriculum — more the selection of texts than the more flexible methods of approach — may be explained by Adler's own passion for Aristotelian and Thomist principles and their application to students resembling the first beneficiaries of such an educational mission: young soldiers in Europe immediately following WWI.

Recommendation

It is worth dwelling long and hard on what it takes young men to find themselves and reorient themselves to their civil and domestic lives after a massive war. I believe this part of the Great Books history should be elaborated and historicized and then released, not

enshrined, for students to find their own positions in relationship to this extraordinary and meaningful history.

It will be important to the future of the Great Books Program to omit the historical description of its purpose and replace it with a narrative of origins that embraces change.

Note: no one outside of Pepperdine would be deeply concerned by a narrative dwelling on the usual conflicts and misunderstandings that form part of a program's *history* but have no logical part of its *mission statement*. The program should be about value and progress, not conservation (i.e., it should exist as an affirmative, not a defense).

5. STAFFING

Observations

In light of the demographics of the department's faculty by stage of career, I anticipate that the faculty may be considerably different in ten years. This fact will have an impact on the program.

Recommendation

Introduce more junior faculty into the program by asking how they would conserve the best of Great Books and enlarge its mission to the current undergraduates and the current state of moral philosophy in the United States as it exists in the global world.