The Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults and the Great Books Movement in the United States

Novelist and English professor John Erskine is the grandfather of the Great Books movement in the 20th century. He tested his technique in a training program he established for American doughboys in Europe after World War I. Then, in his controversial and enormously popular General Honors Course begun in 1921 at Columbia University, Erskine established a reading list of 52 authors and a captivating, idiosyncratic discussion method. Students were enthralled and turned into disciples. One of these students was Mortimer J. Adler. He in turn converted the young dean of Yale law school, Robert Maynard Hutchins. In 1929 Hutchins was chosen to be the new president of The University of Chicago. One of his first acts as president was to invite Adler to join the faculty and together they championed the great books idea at Chicago.

Hutchins and Adler had not originally envisioned great books as a mass popular movement. They were involved in a crusade for educational reform at the college level. Like Erskine, they were humanists reacting against what they perceived as lethal trends in higher education: academic specialization, which fragmented the curriculum and stranded students and professors in different disciplines with nothing in common, and wholesale abandonment of the liberal arts tradition in favor of student electives and vocational training.

Hutchins and Adler staunchly opposed the ideas of educator John Dewey and the prevailing philosophical positions of pragmatism and positivism. At the University of Chicago, they hoped to challenge the “service station” model of a university, in which students were offered an even larger menu of courses and facts, facts, and more facts. “What shall we do with the facts?” bewailed Hutchins. The educational system, Adler said, was turning out students “chaotically informed and viciously indoctrinated with the local prejudices of professors and their textbooks”—students unable to read, write, or think properly. These students in turn became citizens ill-prepared to participate in the type of civil discourse and critical thinking necessary for good government in a democracy. Hutchins and Adler believed that only knowledge of the great books would enable people to participate in the “great conversation”—the ongoing discussion of great issues by the greatest minds of the Western world.

“WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE FACTS?”

In his “New Plan” of 1931, President Hutchins proposed that the University return to a medieval or classical model, in which the entire curriculum was integrated and reflected a unifying philosophy. His reforms met with resistance from the faculty, and he was never able to realize great books as the basis for the entire curriculum at the University of Chicago. (The experiment was instituted by Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr in 1937 at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland: the program continues to this day both there and at a sister institution in Santa Fe, New Mexico.)

However, Hutchins and Adler were able to successfully pioneer great books discussions in a seminar format for University of Chicago undergraduates. Together, they taught a dynamic honors course for freshmen that rattled professors and galvanized students; as an alumnus of the “Hutchins College” recalled decades later, “there was an excitement of intellectual discovery, a sense of shared adventure...”

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Hutchins and Adler also began to develop a vision for the great books that outstripped the bounds of the university. They believed it was important to offer a liberal arts education to adults as well as to undergraduates. Adler had been independently leading a discussion group for adults in Highland Park, Illinois, since 1930. In October 1943, Hutchins recruited prominent Chicago businessmen and their wives to experience the Great Books method for themselves. “The Fat Men’s Great Books Course,” as it came to be known, was a select group that met downtown every other Friday evening. Invitations to participate offered this elite a sly challenge: Were they educated? Were they educable? Hutchins was secretive about the membership list and strictly forbade photographs. Nonetheless, the Fat Men’s Course generated fantastic publicity and had some of the city’s wealthiest public figures clamoring for the privilege of reading Aristotle and Locke with Adler and Hutchins.

Tremendous curiosity about the great books ensued. In 1939, The University of Chicago’s downtown campus, University College, had begun offering great books courses. Growth in enrollment was modest for the first five years, but in 1944, in the wake of the Fat Men’s Course, the program took off. The dean of University College convened a committee to study the problem of liberal education for adults and develop a program to be administered through University College. Preston Cutler, who would become the program’s first director, admitted some difficulty in naming the new program. He offered as his best suggestion ‘The Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults’ and invited the staff to make further suggestions. The consensus was that the name did not ‘sing’, but no one could think of a better one. So it stuck. On August 4th, 1946 the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults was publicly announced and the first courses began that fall.

During the same period, Encyclopedia Britannica became part of the University of Chicago. In 1943, Adler and Hutchins worked with its staff to create and edit a fifty-four volume set of books called The Great Books of the Western World, completed and published in 1952. To introduce the set, Adler created a unique index, The Syntopicon, a series of essays about 102 “great ideas,” allowing readers to follow one topic as it was discussed in the great books throughout history.

To capture the burgeoning interest in the great books throughout the United States, Lynn A. Williams, Jr., a member of the original Fat Men’s Course taught by Hutchins and Adler, suggested forming a new organization. In 1947, The Great Books Foundation was established to provide the means of a genuine liberal education for all adults through forming great books discussion groups. By 1949, an estimated 50,000 individuals in thousands of book discussion groups across the country were meeting regularly in public libraries, homes, churches and synagogues.

Four years after the Basic Program began at the University of Chicago, the first alumni course was offered. Two years later, the Basic Program Lecture Series began. By 1959 the Fall Weekend at Lake Geneva was a great success, drawing a record crowd of 160. Today adult students continue in the great tradition begun by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler at the University of Chicago. The Basic Program will celebrate its seventieth anniversary in 2016.

Acknowledgements