

CORE PROGRAM OF THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES LEWIS AND CLARK COLLEGE

SYNOPSIS OF CORE PROGRAM

Liberal arts education at Lewis and Clark is composed of three interdependent curricular elements: the Core Program, the departmental major, and electives. The component that traditionally receives the most attention from students, parents and faculty is the major. It provides a rich opportunity for studying a subject in depth, for gaining a sense of mastery over a specific body of knowledge. The second is electives -- those glorious opportunities to follow one's own curiosity, to develop new tastes and interests. The emphasis in the major and in electives is on developing and deepening individual interests and capacities. This is also the goal of study in the Core, but here the accent is different; for the Core stresses the need for asking what is, could, or should be held in common, thus giving students the means and the opportunity for integrating the different components of their liberal arts education.

The Core Program is composed of ten courses that students take throughout their four years at Lewis and Clark College: three Inquiry courses, Basic Inquiry, Critical Inquiry and Advanced Inquiry; and seven Perspectives on Inquiry courses, two each in Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, and one in Fine Arts.

INQUIRY SEQUENCE

In the Inquiry sequence students and faculty from all departments and divisions of the College come together in courses that share a common emphasis on language and writing as an essential means of thought and inquiry. All of the Inquiry courses are writing-intensive courses, and are centerpieces in the College's unique writing program. All use language and writing as the means of generating communities of inquiry within each classroom. All are taught in a context and format in which it is clear that inquiry involves discourse (that is, conversations with others), that it depends on community, cannot be done alone.

BASIC INQUIRY: The cornerstone of the Inquiry sequence and the Core is Basic Inquiry, a specially designed course taken by all first year students during their first term at the college. It is intended to develop in students the habits and appetite for intellectual inquiry in the four major areas in which students do further work in the Core, namely Natural Sciences, Social Science, Humanities, and Fine Arts. Familiarity with the modes of inquiry in these four areas, as well as some significant understanding of the state of knowledge within them, will come through study in Perspectives on Inquiry courses (seven total) that students complete usually in their first two years at the college [see below]. But primarily Basic Inquiry is a course in writing, thinking and reading that is intended to engage and empower students as active learners by developing their habits, capacities and passion for personal expression, for thinking and writing about demanding and difficult ideas, texts, issues. The course should help them feel confident and ready to take on whatever is tossed to them in other courses, to know that they have a quiver full of strategies to pull out and use as needed, and to know that they have each other and the Basic Inquiry faculty team.

In 1985-86 the Basic Inquiry team selected "authority" as the general theme for the course, a theme explored in particular as civil, scientific, aesthetic and ethical/religious authority. Important texts, worthy of serious study in themselves and broadly useful as introductions to large divisions of the College included: selections from Hobbes' LEVIATHAN, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, E.O. Wilson's SOCIOBIOLOGY, Nadine Gordimer's BURGER'S DAUGHTER, GENESIS 22 -- "The Binding of Isaac," and selected Impressionist paintings.

CRITICAL INQUIRY: In Critical Inquiry, taken by students some time during their first three years, students and faculty have the opportunity to explore in common at least one of the concerns that have been given special institutional priority: international and cross cultural relations, gender, and science and society. These courses involve "critical" inquiry in two senses of the word: they deal with issues that are crucial for the human community and they involve modes of thought that are not merely descriptive and explanatory but also evaluative.

ADVANCED INQUIRY: In Advanced Inquiry, taken by students late in their Junior or in their Senior year, after they have completed most of the work for their majors, students once again have the opportunity to take a course that brings home the need for inquiry within a community. The focus of these courses might be a local, national, or world problem, or it might be a theoretical issue or set of issues that arises at the borders of two or more disciplines or fields. The course is intended to help students recognize the possibilities and limitations of training in a particular discipline or field by tackling and proposing solutions for hard problems alongside students trained in other disciplines. An important feature of this course is that shortly prior to graduation students are expected to construct and present to others their own informed and thoughtful answers or solutions to the inquiry problem.

PERSPECTIVES ON INQUIRY

Students take a total of seven Perspectives on Inquiry courses, two each in Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, and one in Fine Arts. These courses are similar in some ways to the courses most liberal arts institutions require as breadth or distribution requirements. In most institutions students are "distributed" to the different courses in the curriculum. However in keeping with the spirit of the Core as described above, the Lewis and Clark faculty has embarked on a unique and challenging effort to rethink those courses. The charge given to each of the academic divisions in the College is as follows: assume that your division will have two courses worth of "air" time with each student. Then ask yourselves, as responsible educators in the 1980's, what do you think most essential for students to know and experience in your field? Then develop Perspectives on Inquiry courses that would teach students what it is essential that they know -- what you would not want them to graduate without knowing and experiencing.

Ideally Perspectives courses will give students some informed sense of why disciplines are organized into academic divisions, why certain departments and programs are regarded as constituting a natural group. Such perceptions, of course, involve understanding of basic questions, concepts, content and methods of the four major fields as well as an understanding of intellectual history. Developing such courses is an ambitious, long term project -- one that challenges the divisional faculties to re-evaluate routinely the nature of their discipline's methods and goals, and one that will require continuing attention, experimentation, dedication. With the new Core Program barely a year old, the faculty is still in the beginning stages of this important undertaking.

SUMMARY

Hannah Arendt has written that "no activity can become excellent if the world does not provide a proper space for its exercise." The Core Program is designed to be a central part of Lewis and Clark students' education. Along with a departmental major and selected electives, it fosters students' abilities to become active, autonomous learners, engaged, interested and capable of advancing their own inquiry into the wide range of topics and issues confronting them as adults and citizens. The Core has a special responsibility to give students the essential instruments for such inquiry and to provide a proper space for its exercise.

Susan Kirschner, Core Program Co-Director, May 1986