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Mark Mossa, S.J.

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WONDERFULLY UNTRANSLATABLE EXCHANGES

A Student's Guide to the Liberal Arts

Edited by Wilburn Stancil

Rockhurst University Press, \$35 cloth, \$20 paper

By Mark Mossa, S.J.

Those who have taught college freshmen know the diverse challenges that can come with that endeavor.

Despite the fact that the SAT scores of the students we accept may be higher, the kind of preparation we can presume them to have seems harder and harder to predict. Thus, as Wilburn Stancil notes in the preface to *A Student's Guide to the Liberal Arts*, "Approximately three-quarters of all American colleges and universities have some type of first-year seminar for freshmen." This collection of essays, edited by Wilburn Stancil, is meant for just such a seminar. An introduction to the liberal arts, it includes thirteen essays by scholars who each address one of the liberal arts disciplines, considering communications, psychology, religion, political and social science, mathematics and the other major disciplines of the liberal arts curriculum today.

Though I wish ultimately to recommend the book, I must point out what I take to be its immediate handicap for the type of seminar for which it is intended—the introductory chapter by James V. Schall. Entitled "What Are the Liberal Arts," it is emblematic of the tension



Bill Abbott & Kathryn Nantz co-teach an honors class at Fairfield University.

which led to the formation of freshman seminars in the first place. Schall immediately launches into a discussion that involves Crito, Plato, Socrates, Callicles, Gorgias and philosophical *eros*, presuming a level of knowledge and sophistication which, unfortunately, we can no longer presume of our freshmen.

Rather than engender enthusiasm, this dizzying survey of philosophy, history, metaphysics, ethics, and oratory is likely to be discouraging. This chapter would better be placed at the conclusion of the

readings, when more might indeed be expected of the students. As a remedy, the might simply switch Schall's introduction with Stancil's

Mark Mossa, S.J., student at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA, has taught introduction to English composition & literature to college freshmen, and more recently taught introductory philosophy courses at Loyola University in New Orleans.

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far less daunting conclusion. This is also indicative of something which instructors must be aware of in using this book. The essays included in the book draw heavily—though not exclusively—on classical and medieval sources like Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine. Some faculty members will have to bone up on their own understanding of the classical tradition to make use of it.

Keeping this in mind, this guide is nevertheless quite appealing. Among its appeals is the obviously conscious effort to make students aware of some of the internet resources in each field. Each chapter includes a list of both print and electronic resources, as

well as some important caveats regarding their use.

As for the essays, each is well-written, taking a variety of approaches to the virtues of a given discipline, and offering a strong sense of their interconnect-edness. This is the book's greatest virtue. In addition, the essays are sufficiently dissimilar to appeal to students of various learning styles, while still managing to answer the question: Why on earth would I want to study *that*? My favorite, and one that is likely to have broad appeal among students, is M. Kathleen Madigan's essay on "The Study of Language." It made me eager to study another language! She shares passionately "How I Fell In Love With Languages" and offers a challenge "to think of your study of languages as a lifetime journey which will transform you and increase your understanding of your own language and culture, while enabling you to enter into wonderfully untranslatable exchanges with others." This, in some ways, sums up the message of each of these

essays. Those who enjoy the passionate approach of Madigan will be drawn also to the essays on music and art history (by C. Randall Bradley and Roger C. Aikin, respectively). Those who prefer a more dispassionate clarity will be drawn in by the essays by Robert D. Hamner (literature), Joseph W. Koterski (philosophy), and Trudy A. Dickneider (science).

I expect that this would not be used as a stand-alone text. First of all, because it fails to address itself *directly* to the virtues of careful reading and writing necessary to the liberal arts (and often sorely lacking in students). Secondly, it has the limitations of an introduction. Hamner's literature essay, for example, while a fine introduction to literary interpretation, offers almost no concrete examples of fiction or poetry. Additional resources will be needed to sufficiently engage the merits of this volume. Nonetheless, this is a fine introduction to the liberal arts (and among the few of its kind). And what especially recommends this volume is the striking way in which its essays complement one another. Only the most stubborn of students will be able to close this book unconvinced of the relevance of the liberal arts to their studies and their lives. ■



Political Science Professor/Chair,
Dr. Jon Ray, leads a discussion
among Xavier University students.