Student Pieces: From Enlightenment to Sparknotes

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From Enlightenment to Sparknotes

By Justin Roberts

Education is dangerous. It patiently explains how everything you know is a lie. Success here requires that you suspend your beliefs and submit to this legacy of dead men. The surrender of individual sovereignty to the intellectual heritage is the cost of admission.

We spent millennia in the dance of hand to mouth. When we traded fire-lit musings for formal schooling, we made a bond to forfeit our primitive identities to the authority of Reason. In the liberal arts, men abandoned lean subsistence thinking for the pursuit of insight and conscience. The first universities devoted the entire bachelor’s degree, six years of study in the major academic disciplines, to cultivate the person by domesticating the species. The animal with a brain became the man with a mind.

Today, the Scholastic’s bachelor’s degree has been reduced to the modern core curriculum. At Saint Peter’s, undergraduates take 60 credits, half of all their classes, in introductory courses of the major fields of study. But this introduction operates without context or mission. The liberal arts promise enlightenment and deliver Sparknotes for the Academic tradition.

The core is the victim of an academic identity crisis. Saint Peter’s advertises a core curriculum that will immerse students in the liberal arts tradition, educate them in all of the culturally influential academic fields, strengthen their bond with Christ and afford them all the exciting experiences of an extended adolescence. All that in only twenty classes.

The resultant mosaic of intro classes leaves a lot of people unsatisfied. Many professors I spoke with agreed that the core is ineffectual. Student responses included “a waste of time” and “a talking point for a slick marketing campaign.” The students wanted the core reduced and were confused when I said it should be better developed. “I like Saint Peter’s,” one student told me. “It’s an easy way to get a degree.”

Many students and professors have offered proposals for improving the core, each emphasizing the kind of character development they thought Saint Peter’s should promote. Whether their solutions were more classes on the history and values of the Jesuits or higher grading standards and a great books curriculum, they all agreed that the changes they wanted would require sacrificing other people’s priorities.

This is the danger of established societies. The road out of the wild is simple and hard, a flight from danger rather than a rush toward civility. The competition to build the first societies favored the groups who won more often and by wider margins than their foes. These groups defined themselves by victory. Once established, however, few outlived their clearly defined enemies. The willpower needed to form a strong identity proves difficult to muster without the convenience of adversity.

Education is the search for meaning in the absence of battle. Students set out to examine the knowledge and methods of great men, studying the still shots of their dance with a mind to learn the rhythm. Without focus, though, the core becomes a clumsy distraction.

Students flip through photosynthesis, police states, Nietzsche, and coordinating conjunctions as if they were channel surfing. Good living, like good writing, requires clarity.

Currently, students and professors alike consider the core an irritating formality. It leaves students ill equipped to understand the quotes they parrot and robs teachers of their sense of purpose. Man’s essence will always be greater than all of the facts and figures on the planet. With material civilization firmly established, we find ourselves with enough knowledge to pursue more endeavors than our ancestors could conceive of. The principle of charity inspires us to respect diversity and vouchsafe the multiple interpretations our affluence allows. Yet this restraint is impossible without the well defined convictions that build strong character.

So long as Saint Peter’s refrains from accepting its limits and devising a core curriculum with a single, coherent focus, it will fail to instill in its students the capacity and the character to preserve the values that the Jesuit Order holds sacred.

Justin Roberts, who graduated from Saint Peter’s College in 2010, was news editor and columnist for the Pauw Wow.