



# Essays in Perspective

Fostering Judgment:  
Sixty Years of Well-Directed Studies

by Judge José A. Cabranes

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## INTRODUCTION

At a time when the study of Western civilization is often under attack, two programs—at Columbia and at Yale—continue to introduce students to the great books of Western literature, philosophy, history, and politics.

The Core Curriculum at Columbia and Directed Studies at Yale were launched in the wake of word wars, largely with a view to training students for active citizenship in difficult times.

On October 13, 2006, the Yale Directed Studies program celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and former students, faculty, and supporters gathered in New Haven to mark the occasion. Among those present was Judge José Cabranes, a former trustee of Yale, who offered concluding remarks.

With eloquent and moving prose, Cabranes outlines the historical premise of both academic programs: “Future leaders needed to know the history and ideas that had shaped the West in order for our country to protect itself and to pursue its ideals.” According to Judge Cabranes, “[r]eadings from the great texts of the West would provide the necessary background for whatever political, ideological, or intellectual struggles lay ahead.”

In the intervening years, the need for a strong general education curriculum has by no means diminished. Indeed, Cabranes argues that a strong general education curriculum—like Directed Studies—is invaluable since it “is about teaching students how to make choices with informed and discerning judgment ... helping students ensure that their studies and their lives ... are *well-directed*.”

For that reason, Judge Cabranes fervently pleads that Directed Studies programs, and others like it, grow and flourish so that students may “confront the beliefs of others and thereby challenge their own understanding of the world.”

Judge Cabranes is United States Circuit Judge for the Second Circuit. A graduate of Columbia College and the Yale Law School, Cabranes served as General Counsel at Yale from 1975-1979, and was a member of the Yale Corporation for 12 years. He is currently a trustee of Columbia University.

Through its periodic *Essays in Perspective*, the Institute for Effective Governance seeks to stimulate the discussion of key issues in higher education. The pieces reflect the views of their authors.

# Fostering Judgment: Sixty Years of Well-Directed Studies

By: Judge José A. Cabranes

It may seem curious that I, who am not a graduate of Yale College, much less an alumnus of the Directed Studies program, have been asked to close this celebration of the 60th anniversary of Directed Studies. I suppose that I was offered this honor, at least in part, because of my ties to this university. I attended the Yale Law School, I served as General Counsel of the University and I sat on the Yale Corporation for twelve years—over time working with six Yale presidents. I recognize, of course, that none of this will *ever* make me as “authentically” Blue as a student or alumnus of Yale College—but since I *have* managed to observe the university from many angles, I’m happy to confirm the words of the former Dean of Yale Law School, Tony Kronman ... that “[i]f Yale College is the jewel of Yale University, Directed Studies is a jewel within a jewel.”

I suppose also that I was asked to speak here today because I am a graduate of Columbia College, whose Western civilization curriculum—or core curriculum—caused me to spend my freshman year, as every Directed Studies student does, reading the great books of literature, philosophy, history, and politics. Like the students of Directed Studies, my Columbia classmates and I wrestled at the seminar table and the lunch table with Aeschylus and Cer-

vantes, Augustine and Rabelais, Marx and Austen, forming lasting friendships through our discussions and arguments. As a representative of Columbia (and as one of its current trustees), I bring you its greetings and congratulate you on the 60th birthday of Directed Studies. And I take this opportunity to comment briefly on the sort of education I had at Columbia and that you have had at Yale.

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Jacques Barzun, the Columbia cultural historian who was a preeminent intellectual leader of the latter part of the Twentieth Century, was both an early beneficiary of the Columbia core curriculum and one of the early teachers in the program. Still remarkably vigorous at ninety-nine years of age—he ranked first in the Columbia College class of 1927—Barzun recently reminisced about the origins of the modern Columbia curriculum. (See IEG *For Trustees Only* article “The Columbia Core: A Look Back.”) “At the conclusion of the First World War,” he explains, “a few of the faculty members who had been abroad with the troops came back resolved to teach the new generations the ideals and the history of Western civilization, in hopes that when they were leaders of opinion and makers of policy they might avoid the ghastly mistakes

that had brought the Continent to self-destruction in total war.”

One of those American soldiers in war-torn France, the Columbia literature professor John Erskine, organized for himself and his friends a program of reading great books while waiting to return home after the end of hostilities. Erskine concluded that a similar program of reading great books would be good for undergraduates, instead of the customary program of teaching undergraduates *about* great books. His Great Books seminar evolved into the course entitled Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West.

“CC,” as the course came to be called, was especially concerned with the study of politics and economics. It was the foundation of a general education curriculum at Columbia that in time would include also the required course in “Humanities A” or Literature Humanities, as well as required courses in the history of music, history of art, and the sciences—all in the service of an education that would embrace what Barzun called “the broad divisions of thought and action in the world.”

In addition to teaching the ideals and history of Western civilization, the Columbia requirement of a common course of study for all freshmen served another, closely-related purpose: to introduce the children of newly-arrived immigrants, many of whom were from public high schools and thought to be under-prepared compared with graduates of elite private schools, to the culture they could all inherit and share. The post-World War I Columbia curriculum, notably the course in Contemporary Civilization, was designed in part to sustain what Dean Frederick Keppel had described as early as 1914 as the new “social diversity” of Columbia College.

These high purposes—to teach the history and ideals of our own civilization in order to avoid catastrophe and to reinforce the common ground

of students of different backgrounds by placing them on an equal footing—informed the Columbia program from its beginning. The reading of great works was to be an inclusive endeavor, and a prescribed endeavor. Often described by the term of art “general education,” the Columbia curriculum made it possible (among other goals) for members of otherwise marginalized groups to understand and inherit the Western intellectual tradition—a tradition expressed in terms of ideas and institutions, not of pedigree.

These purposes were still important two generations later, in the late 1950s, for those of us who arrived on Morningside Heights from public schools and immigrant backgrounds—in my case, from the fringes of “the American empire” (Puerto Rico).

Students at Columbia College “approach[ed] the making of contemporary civilization through the ideas and institutions which helped make it.” For our teachers, as for us, it was obvious (in the words of our teachers) that “[r]eflection by the student upon society and history supplies both a pattern and a perspective for intelligent control[; that] such reflection is impossible apart from the traditions of human thinking[; and that a] civilized person has a past and must be conscious of his own roots and growth in order to participate intelligently in his society.”

The Columbia general education curriculum was widely influential in American higher education in the three decades after the First World War, finding favor in colleges and universities as different as the University of Virginia, the University of Chicago, Reed College, St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, and Brooklyn College, and of course in universities founded by religious organizations hospitable to a curriculum that accounted for their origins, development and influence.

Although the early Directed Studies program at Yale had content similar to that of the Columbia

program, it has never been as open or readily available as the Columbia program, which is required of all freshmen and sophomores. From its founding, Directed Studies has been open only to a select group of Yale College students, limited at first to 50 students and growing now to 125 students per year. After the Second World War, the Dean of Yale College, William C. DeVane, wanted an elite program to ensure that, even with the many changes affecting Yale after the War—such as more open admissions policies for veterans and a growing emphasis on research instead of teaching—an older, more fraternal aspect of Yale College would survive. Instead of a fraternity based on room assignments or extracurricular life, Directed Studies would be a fraternity comprised of specially selected (and *self*-selected) students and faculty who would become a community of intellectual colleagues. I commend those of you who had the wisdom and presence of mind to elect a difficult and demanding curriculum and thus become a part of this extraordinary fraternity.

Even though Yale's program is optional and selective, and Columbia's is mandatory for all students, the two programs, as we have seen, had similar origins. Each was founded after a great war that had brought our civilization to its knees, with a view to training students for active citizenship in a culture under stress. Directed Studies at Yale arose after World War II out of a sense that universities had an obligation to prepare students to defend liberal democracy. That same sentiment had motivated Columbia's leaders a generation earlier, in the wake of World War I.

After the Second World War, Yale President Charles Seymour observed that “[a] new opportunity has been given to us which now and hereafter we must firmly resolve we shall not waste. The occasion demands of us, both old and young, qualities which, as we were wont to boast, are those of a liberal democracy but which are achieved only

through tireless and selfless effort.” He added: “We must confess that over the years we have erred and strayed from the virtues essential to democracy and we must pray for power to return to the pursuit of them.”

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General education at Yale and Columbia, and at like-minded institutions such as the University of Chicago, was meant to answer this call. The wars in Europe and in the Pacific had reminded Americans of how fragile our institutions could be and how easily our system of ordered liberty could be threatened. By the mid-1940s, fascism had been defeated, but the specter of communism was now truly “haunting” Europe, and we were forced to fight a cold war to resist the challenge of Europe's other totalitarian menace. As often remarked, the Cold War was “a struggle for men's minds”—a struggle between conflicting visions of a good society; a struggle of ideas. Future leaders needed to know the history and ideas that had shaped the West in order for our country to protect itself and to pursue its ideals. Readings from the great texts of the West would provide the necessary background for whatever political, ideological, or intellectual struggles

lay ahead. In other words, students would need a liberal education in order to defend American and Western cultural and political institutions.

Apart from affirming and exploring the importance of the cultural heritage of the West—and doing so without disabling guilt or pathological self-loathing—a Western civilization curriculum serves no ideological purpose. It is true, as Jacques Barzun observes, that this sort of curriculum is “for understanding, not indoctrination.” And it is also true that we study the Western tradition for the uncomplicated and sensible reason that it is, after all, our own tradition.

Even though it involves the teaching of a prescribed course of study, a curriculum like that of Directed Studies at Yale represents a commitment to the idea that education is about choices—about informed choice, about hierarchies of choices established by reason, by experience, and by the good sense of our teachers. A curriculum like this is about teaching students how to make choices with informed and discerning judgment; it is about helping students ensure that their studies—and their lives—are *well-directed*.

A general education curriculum reflects a series of choices—the choice of the lasting over the ephemeral; the meritorious over the meretricious; the thought-provoking over the merely self-affirming.

Although an education in the Western tradition is about choices, it is *not* in any way a repudiation of other cultures or other fields of study. Columbia had pioneered the study of other cultures and long ago established a renowned undergraduate elective sequence on Asian civilization and humanities that thrived in harmony with the mandatory Western civilization curriculum. And Yale’s program dedicated to the study of China, which pre-dated Directed Studies, has continued to flourish. Indeed, a Western civilization curriculum serves as a use-

ful foundation for those who spend most of their undergraduate experience studying other cultures or pursuing courses in science, math, engineering or the arts.

Although Directed Studies at Yale and the core curriculum at Columbia are self-consciously non-vocational, they nevertheless affect every aspect of the lives of their students and alumni—the civic, the professional and even the personal. Through rigorous training in the foundational ideas of the West, students learn the persuasive power of reasoned thought, the uplifting effects of disciplined effort and the communal benefits of the pursuit of virtue. They also explore the meaning of good and evil. These lessons are not the tools of any specific trade. Rather, they provide a broad foundation that can undergird virtually any endeavor.

My own profession is one in which practitioners would benefit greatly from an education of the sort provided by Directed Studies. The proposition that a broad general education is useful for all who are called upon to exercise judgment will not surprise alumni of Directed Studies, who may recall the observation of Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that “each man judges well the things he knows, and of that he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-around education is a good judge in general.”

A quarter of a century ago, the president of Yale, A. Bartlett Giamatti, speaking to a gathering of federal judges from our region, commented on the relation of law and liberal education. He lamented that the study of law was no longer regarded as “appropriate to a liberal education for undergraduates,” on the theory that the law is “a complex, technical and professional discipline.” His argument in favor of the study of law as part of a liberal education powerfully supports also the converse proposition—that a broad liberal education is especially important for

my profession. For, as Giamatti observed,

[t]he law is not simply a set of forensic or procedural skills. It is a vast body of knowledge, compounded of historical material, modes of textual analysis and various philosophical concerns. It is a formal inquiry into our behavior and ideals that proceeds essentially through language. It is a humanistic study—both as a body of material wrought of words and a set of analytic skills and procedural claims involving linguistic mastery. . . .

As it reforms us and mirrors us, [the law] reshapes or reflects through the medium of language—hence its ancient, and modern, links to rhetoric, religious texts and moral philosophy.

Judgment, as we learn from a reading of the ancients, requires the ability to analyze facts carefully and to apply reason to the solution of problems. Judgment is essential to success in all pursuits and in all aspects of life. But it is not a skill that can be learned through a quick regimen. It is the product of discipline, understanding and experience. And devoting oneself to a rigorous course of study like that of Directed Studies requires discipline, promotes understanding and informs experience.

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*Today, the challenges facing Directed Studies, and its sister programs elsewhere, are institutional and substantive. The institutional challenge is to survive, and to endure, and hopefully to grow in the face of corrosive educational and cultural trends that in our time make programs like Directed Studies and the Columbia core curriculum highly unusual, and even controversial.*

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Study of the Western tradition fosters judgment because Western civilization—*our* civilization—is built on discipline, understanding and experience. The central ideals of our civilization—ideals such as equality under the law, limited government, due process of law, the protection of personal liberties and the availability of opportunity for those who work hard and play by the rules—have been forged through discipline, understanding and experience. Those ideals evolved as our forebears persistently tried and erred. We learn from their example, from their triumphs and from their failures, and, all the while, we strive to develop insight into how and why our foundational ideals retain their vitality.

Judgment, as Yale president Jeremiah Day observed in his 1828 Report on education at Yale College, is promoted by the discipline and furnishing of the mind. The furnishing of the mind includes experiencing the great texts which we have all been honored to read—Homer and Vergil, Machiavelli and Petrarch, Milton and Eliot, and so on.

Just reading, though, is not enough. A program like Directed Studies disciplines the mind by forcing students and faculty to wrestle with such texts and to intellectually spar with one another. These struggles help students better understand the texts themselves and the world in which we read them.

Today, the challenges facing Directed Studies, and its sister programs elsewhere, are institutional and substantive. The institutional challenge is to survive, and to endure, and hopefully to grow in the face of corrosive educational and cultural trends that in our time make programs like Directed Studies and the Columbia core curriculum highly unusual, and even controversial. Survive these programs will, because of the devotion of exceptional and dedicated teachers like Jane Levin, Maria Rosa Menocal, and Norma Thompson, and because of the steadfastness of committed alumni and benefactors like the Yale College Class of 1937—and at

Columbia, because generations of tenacious and deeply grateful alumni continue to support a curriculum that is now synonymous with a Columbia undergraduate education.

Beyond survival and endurance, the substantive challenge will be—as ever—to push students to confront the beliefs of others and thereby to challenge their own understanding of the world. There is nothing self-affirming or self-congratulatory about this program of study—if anything, there is something world-shattering about it.

“World-shattering” not only because it asks its participants to read old books without prejudging their authors or content. “World-shattering” also, as one of your recent alumni (who served as my law clerk after graduating from Yale Law School), recently told me, because, “put bluntly, it teaches its participants ... how ignorant they are.” He added: “Students start DS thinking they are about to learn everything there is to know (that they don’t already know), but leave DS realizing that they’ve merely been given a glimpse into what there is to learn.”

By forcing students to step out of their own lives and engage the ideas and experiences of others throughout the history of our civilization—the civilization inherited from Jerusalem, Athens, Rome and London—the Directed Studies curriculum and its counterparts elsewhere help students cultivate judgment by developing the experience, the understanding and the discipline that result from the rigorous testing of ideas.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed that “[t]he test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” If that is indeed the test of a first-rate intelligence, a program like Directed Studies is the first step toward genius.

It is, I think, no coincidence that both Columbia and Yale speak of light in their Latin mottos. At Columbia the motto is “*In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*” (in your light, we see light). Years before, Yale had assumed its quest for “*Lux et Veritas*” (light and truth). Both universities recognize that educated citizens should have the discipline, understanding and experience—in other words, the judgment—to seek out the good and the just; and if they have the courage to recognize the good and the just, they will not cringe from identifying the unjust and the evil.

A curriculum devoted to the Western tradition casts light that guides the search. For a lucky few—“we few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (and sisters)—for a lucky few, the search begins with an illuminating common course of study in the Western tradition.

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Thank you very much for affording me the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon, and, once again, to extend my congratulations, and that of Columbia College in the City of New York, to the Yale Directed Studies program on its sixtieth anniversary. ■



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