When Stanford's student government asked me to serve on the committee that oversaw the dissolution of the Western Culture program, I expected a reenactment of the original debate: radical students and faculty winning "reforms" at the expense of a Great Books education. The fact that I was the only vocal member of the pro-Western Culture viewpoint to be named to the committee grimly reinforced these expectations. Having served on the committee, however, and having taught in the new program, I have come to believe that a Great Books education will persist at Stanford, at least for the time being, despite that school's much decried 1988 decision to replace its Western Culture requirement with a loosely defined requirement designed to emphasize issues of race, gender, and class. While the radicals undoubtedly won a major victory in abolishing the Western Culture requirement, and one that bodes ill for the future of undergraduate education at Stanford, a variety of obstacles to radical curricular reform, both intellectual and concrete, currently frustrates the plans of the campus Left.

The 1988 reforms were hardly the first chapter in Stanford's Western Culture saga. In the late 1960s Stanford University abolished requirements—including its longstanding Western Civilization requirement—in favor of a laissez-faire educational system that would "let the teacher teach what he wants to teach and the student learn what he wants to learn." The theory behind the change held that Stanford's recent transition from a regional college to a national university demanded that it find a way to match the newly specialized interests of its faculty with the general needs of its undergraduate students. This decision can also be explained in part by the late-sixties California Zeitgeist.

In any event, the reforms failed. Too many students did not "want to learn" the things that the Stanford faculty increasingly grew to believe that they should. The perception widened that Stanford was graduating students who were broadly and embarrassingly ignorant. A British newspaper reporter crystallized this perception when, after interviewing Stanford students in England, he declared that for most of them "the period between the second Ice Age and
the inauguration of John F. Kennedy seems largely undifferentiated." In this context, a proposal in the late seventies to reinstitute a freshman requirement in Western Culture was widely applauded.

Stanford formalized the Western Culture requirement in 1980 along with a new system of graduation requirements designed to insure breadth of study. "Western Culture" could be satisfied by taking one out of seven or eight year-long "tracks" taught from different disciplinary perspectives. There was, for example, one track emphasizing history, another, literature, another, philosophy. Several tracks offered a traditional Great Books course. An innovative track studying the development of Western culture through technology and science was also offered, as was an intensive nine-unit track in which the students lived and ate together. Two things united the tracks. First, a common acknowledgement of their task: to provide a structured introduction to the Western intellectual tradition under the supervision of senior faculty. Second, a "core list" of fifteen books read in common. Historians and philosophers, engineers and social scientists all read selections from the Old and New Testaments, Plato, Homer, a Greek tragedy, Augustine, Dante, More, Machiavelli, Luther, Galileo, Voltaire, Marx, Freud, and Darwin. Another eighteen works—including Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Locke—were strongly recommended. All together, between one-half and two-thirds of the readings in each year-long track were derived from the core list.

Western Culture was both popular and successful. The core list gave structure and intellectual common ground to the courses, while the track system allowed students and teachers to match areas of interest and expertise. Students gave the course extraordinarily high marks. (Even during the acrimonious debate in 1987–88 about the fate of the program, between 65 percent and 80 percent of Stanford students rated the course favorably.) Professors lauded both the course itself and the foundation of knowledge that students derived from it. Some even saw intellectual community—a commodity that Stanford notoriously lacked—being borne out of the course. In 1982, one somewhat shocked professor offered this panegyric to the Western Culture program: "A miracle has happened among Stanford undergraduates. They do talk about Plato at dinner and about Shakespeare on the grass."

Four years later, no one was calling Western Culture a miracle. Instead, people were saying that "Western Culture is not just racist education; it is the education of racists." This movement—a movement that associated the Western Culture program, particularly the core list, with racism, sexism, imperialism, and cultural insensitivity—finally toppled the Western Culture requirement in 1988 and replaced it with an amorphous requirement in "Cultures, Ideas, and Values" (CIV). During the debate over the fate of the requirement, radical groups invested the Western Culture program with most of the evils, real or perceived, of America in the 1980s. As faculty in the course loudly countered these accusations, the requirement transcended its educational role. It became—
both to Stanford, and, in a lesser degree, to the nation—a symbol of the fate of higher education at the century’s end. In this heated and often rancorous atmosphere, the political and the pedagogical merged, and reasonable debate was rendered impotent by the willful ignorance of too many of its contestants.

But what, really, were the arguments against Stanford’s Western Culture program? The first, loudest, and most often repeated in the media was that it was racist and propagated racism at Stanford. This complaint took two forms. First, that Western culture itself—that is, the Western tradition generically, the thing studied—was racist, and that Stanford students should not study it for risk of contamination with a polluted past. “Why do we hesitate for one moment in recognizing the bulk of Western culture as a plague upon human consciousness. . . . Why do we insist on indoctrinating youth with the same misinformation?” read one obviously extreme letter to the Stanford Daily early in 1988. The correspondent’s intellectual lunacy aside, one’s attitudes towards the past should have been irrelevant to one’s attitudes towards the program. Stanford’s Western Culture tracks were hardly a celebration of the “culture of the West.” They provided education, not propaganda. To claim that we should not study Western culture is to claim that we cannot learn from history and that the effort itself might be dangerous. Moreover, the authors and works read in the program—such as Marx, Plato, and the Bible—were almost uniformly critical of their societies. And far from propagating the “isms” against which universities now fight, the Western intellectual tradition has as one recurring theme the fundamental equality of men. Martin Luther King’s dream that Americans be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character resonates most deeply within the breast of someone who, like King, is schooled in the intellectual traditions of the West.

If the thing studied was racist, according to some campus groups, so was the manner in which it was studied. Most damning: the complaint that the Western Culture program was de facto racist and sexist because all the authors on the core list were white men. Ironically, the profound racism and disturbing antiintellectualism of this statement seemed to bother none of the racy intellectuals who made it. The astounding suggestion that the university judge the books on the core list by the color of their authors’ skins struck no one as dangerous or even disturbing. Nor could the critics of Western Culture point to any individually offensive work or author on the list. Nor was there a large alternative corpus of works by women or minority writers which was being excluded; virtually all agreed that the historical “sexism and racism” of general European society foreclosed the possibility of such an “alternative canon.” Indeed, it was the impossibility of creating a politically palatable “new core list” that made the complete abolition of the old core list the most central of the protestors’ demands. No specific works were criticized; no new works were lobbied for; yet, at a conceptual level, the core list was racist, sexist, imperialistic, and had to be dismantled. That this argument operated on a level of hazy generality and
bogus logic which would probably have been rejected in a student’s paper by any Stanford professor did not prevent a majority of Stanford professors from accepting it in political debate.

The subjective undercurrent of this argument—the “it doesn’t speak to me” undercurrent—also had an enormous impact on the debate. Stanford minority groups claimed that the Western Culture program was racist because it studied white culture, and that it therefore alienated contemporary minorities from full participation in a Stanford education. This powerfully expressed, emotive response to Western Culture was irrefutable; if doing something makes people feel bad, no one can tell them that it does not. But nonetheless, the reasoning behind these declarations was highly suspicious. The idea that the books on the core list were the products of some discrete, anthropologically defined “culture,” and that such a culture is the same as modern WASP culture, is simply untrue. Plato’s culture was vastly different from Shakespeare’s, which was vastly different from that of Aquinas. There is an intellectual tradition here—that’s why we study something called Western Culture—but there is not a “culture” in the academic sense.

Moreover, far from being the particular heritage of some of us, these books are the common heritage of us all. A black American and a white American are culturally much closer to each other than either is to Homer. Part of the magic of the great works of the past is precisely that none of us can claim proprietary rights to them. In a sense, we are all equidistant from these books, both because of their separation from us in time and space, and because of their excellence. As one teacher in the program said in defense of the core list: “Marx is not in this program because he’s white.” To assume that he is, to focus on the color of his skin rather than the content of his thought, not only trivializes the humanities approach to education, but incarcerates us in the prison of prejudice from which a quality education in the Western intellectual tradition attempts to liberate us.

These arguments against the program were made primarily by radical students and some radical faculty. There were, however, two “respectable” arguments for the shift from Western Culture to the CIV requirement. The first—predominantly from the Stanford administration—was that the passage of time had rendered courses such as Western Culture obsolete. This complaint stressed that Western Culture was a fine course, but that it was no longer sufficient to have as Stanford’s primary graduation requirement a program that did not give students the information they needed as contemporary Americans in a multi-ethnic society. The administration, in other words, not being able to justify a liberal arts requirement on the basis of social utility, sought to discard it. Against which one can only say: the value of reading great books cannot be quantified, but if the administration of Stanford University does not recognize their value, then the battle for Western Culture truly has been lost. And as salutary as the goal of teaching people to live in a multiethnic society is, how do
you go about doing it? And why do it instead of, rather than in tandem with, a focused education in Western culture? University administrations may not recognize the limits of classroom education and book learning, but there is probably no way to learn to live in a multiethnic society other than by doing it. As nice as it would be if Stanford could eradicate racism by means of a three-hour per week class, it probably cannot be done.

The Stanford administration’s argument also revealed its ignorance about the purpose of the Western Culture requirement. The administration wanted cultural education; the program was designed for high cultural education. The administration was talking about ideologies; the program presented ideas. The administration sought education about great peoples; the program sought to give students contact with great minds. In sum, the administration had no real grasp of the humanities education that the Western Culture program tried to give. Rather, it saw a crisis at hand (minority student unrest) and a mechanism to manage that crisis (dissolving the Western Culture program), and that was that.

The second respectable argument was that the core list hamstrung the course and would have to be abolished for a year-long, freshman requirement to attain its potential. According to this argument, young faculty were discouraged from teaching the course—and older faculty discouraged from innovating—because of the pedagogical rigidity imposed by the core list. This innovation argument, however, ignored the fact that only half of the books taught each year were required, core-list books. One of the strengths of the Western Culture program was precisely that it fulfilled two very different needs: with the core list, it provided intellectual continuity within the tracks, but did not blunt their individual character. (Since the abolition of the core list and the adoption of “Cultures, Ideas, and Values,” exactly three new teachers have entered the program, teaching exactly one new track. Getting rid of an extremely successful and popular program has been a high price to pay for such limited “innovation.”)

Those were the arguments against Western Culture. Examined in the bright light of history, none seem strong enough to have toppled the requirement. But it was the symbolic importance of Western Culture rather than its strengths or weaknesses as a college course that caused its downfall. The environment at Stanford at the time—created by the campus Left, fostered by the administration, and finally joined by the educational Right—denied reason and refused to allow intellect to moderate emotion. In such an environment Western Culture ceased to be a pedagogical issue and became a cipher invested by both sides with powerful meanings that often had little or nothing to do with the “issue” at hand.

In this symbolic sense, Western Culture became a vessel that bore and focused the powerful tensions that lie at the heart of the modern academy: the pedagogical versus the political as the justification for scholarship; the humanities versus the social sciences as the king of the methodological hill; the old, some would have it, versus the new. Radical students threatened, teased, protested, and smeared; but it was the faculty, not the students, who changed the
requirement. It was the faculty (and the administration) who recognized these tensions and played them out during the winter of 1987–88. It was the faculty who really understood the stakes of the game that the students had started. And at the last minute, the “conservative” faculty decided that the course mattered more than the symbol and hashed out a “compromise” to address (poorly) the most serious of their educational concerns.

Where the original CIV course proposal would have utterly destroyed the benefits of the Western Culture requirement, the compromise only partially destroyed them. The original CIV proposal would have made the study of different cultures, ideas, and values the theme of the course; would have abolished Western Culture’s comprehensive historical scope in favor of a focus on the period of European colonization; and would have had no common intellectual experience to unite the tracks other than that conveyed by the process of studying diverse ideas and values. The compromise kept CIV’s focus on diversity, but mandated that there be a “substantial” historical dimension to the new requirement (i.e., that it not completely ignore antiquity). The compromise also included a few clauses about “shared intellectual experience,” although it agreed to the dissolution of the core list. Now, the instructors of the course must meet every year to decide on the “themes, authors, texts, or issues” that all the tracks will share. Initially, this translated into a “mini-core list” of the Bible, Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, Marx, and Darwin.

The past year has seen two after shocks of the debate. The first has been the Stanford public relations machine’s attempts to smooth the many feathers that the debate ruffled, chiefly those of alumni donors or potential donors who had thought Western Culture was a pretty good idea. To the accusation—made by then secretary of education William Bennett—that the Western Culture-to-CIV shift was the result of coercion rather than of reason, Stanford president Donald Kennedy and the rest of the administration have issued strenuous denials. In reality, of course, there was tremendous coercion exercised by radical students to insure passage of the CIV reforms. There were thinly veiled threats to sour race relations on campus if CIV did not pass. There were also hints that minority organizations would work against minority recruitment at Stanford. Most importantly, there was an active program of censorship-by-accusation that chilled campus debate on the issue. This McCarthyite use of smear tactics (in this case, “racist” was the damning adjective) kept silent most of the 80 percent of Stanford students who favored the Western Culture program. When, for example, in 1987, the campus newspaper and several columnists came out against a drastic change in the Western Culture program, the chairperson of the black student union wrote an op-ed piece that compared the paper’s editorial board and columnists to the white youths at Howard Beach and in the Ku Klux Klan. She went on: “These individuals [the editorial board and the columnists] are sending me, women and people of color a message that says loud and clear: ‘Niggers go home.’” The vast majority of eighteen-
twenty-two-year-olds, faced with a situation in which to be silent causes them no personal harm and to speak out sees them smeared in the op-ed page of their school paper, will be silent. Unsurprisingly, most were.

On the alumni front, the past year has seen Stanford dispatch handpicked teams of faculty to alumni association meetings for the purpose of fielding complaints about the Western Culture change. Their line is usually a combination of the administration's "we live in a different world than we used to" argument and a somewhat strange denial that anything truly radical has happened at Stanford. The same teachers are still teaching the same books, they say. But if nothing has changed, why did Stanford go through the revisions in the first place? If teachers are still teaching the core list, why did the school get rid of it? And do the campus radicals know that nothing has changed? The fact that an appeal to the Western Culture status quo undermines whatever legitimacy CIV might have does not seem to have sunk in yet in Palo Alto.

In actuality, some things have changed and some things have not. Since the great pool of innovative young faculty eager to teach a year-long course to freshman never materialized, the people teaching CIV are more or less the same ones who taught Western Culture. And because the CIV legislation is so astoundingly vague—the only thing clear is that the program is not called Western Culture anymore—most of the tracks are still teaching some version of the same Great Books course that they taught when the program was more honestly titled. As one Western Culture/CIV professor told me this past spring: "I still can't find anyone who can tell me what we're supposed to teach in this course." So he goes on teaching Shakespeare and Plato, because he enjoys doing it and because the students enjoy reading their works.

The few radicals who have bothered to follow CIV's progress are hardly satisfied with such a treatment of their new requirement. CIV must have seemed like a scholastic dream come true for academic radicals—something along the lines of a freshman requirement in colonial oppression. It has turned out to be quite a bit less dramatic. One new track on the native peoples of the Americas appears to be the only one likely to be offered any time soon that even vaguely conforms to the radicals' conception of what a CIV course should be like. Most of the other tracks are largely unchanged. Faculty in those tracks are doing what all good teachers do: they are presenting the works they teach honestly and in an accurate historical context. Yes, they are milking the books harder for material "relevant" to minority experiences, but these efforts started substantially before the CIV change and would have taken place regardless of the title of the course. They represent an evolution rather than a revolution in freshman instruction at Stanford.

I will take as an example the track I know best—the one I helped staff last year, and which I took as a freshman myself in 1985. The faculty and staff of this track met once each week for an hour to talk about syllabus construction. Never in any of these meetings did any faculty or staff member bring up the
impact of the CIV changes on our syllabus. We did do some “innovative” things—such as requiring students to read the *Bhagavad-Gita* during the same quarter in which they read the Greeks—but this innovation came from within. The Western Culture/CIV change neither coerced nor inspired us to alter our curriculum. As a result, this CIV track differed very little from the Western Culture track in which I was enrolled five years ago.

In this context, the post-CIV frustration experienced by campus radicals is understandable. They had hoped for more sweeping curricular revisions than an isolated lecture on *The Tempest* as a commentary on the European encounter with “the other”—which is how the CIV changes are being addressed in most of the tracks. Why haven’t they gotten what they wanted? Part of the answer has to do with the Western Culture debate itself. The radicals, like most revolutionaries, were almost entirely negative. They knew what they didn’t like, but not what they did. In putting all of their energies into denunciations of the core list of the Western Culture program, radical students left the specific content of their new requirement extremely vague. (Such vagueness was also a political necessity; the faculty that tolerated an ill-defined capitulation to the campus Left might have balked if the alternative to Western Culture had been a precisely detailed account of the campus Left’s Malcolm X-for-Martin Luther academic agenda.) As a result, Stanford ended up not trading one course for another, but rather trading a focused and established course for what amounts to a curricular blank check. The new course must “give substantial emphasis to issues of race, gender, and class,” but contains no mechanism to define substantiality.

Another part of the answer has to do with the very nature of the course and the faculty who teach it. Comprehensive freshman requirements establish a special kind of contract between the school and the professoriate. The school guarantees a full classroom of students who have no alternative but to stick the course out to the end. In exchange, the professors leave the protective shelter of their specialty and of their discipline; sacrifice an enormous amount of time for grading, office hours, staff meetings, and especially preparation; and agree to take more risks and receive less praise. Teaching such a course is, in short, one of the most intense and demanding jobs in a university. Western Culture worked first and foremost because some of Stanford’s best teachers believed in it and were willing to teach it. They neither believe in nor are willing to teach a “radical” CIV course. So they interpret the vagaries of the CIV legislation—vagaries that the radicals thought would “enable” them to drastically “reform,” their syllabi—as permitting them to continue doing roughly what they did in the past. These faculty act as a brake on revolutionary change because (in a pleasant and unpremeditated form of curricular blackmail) if they stop teaching, the requirement becomes an impossibility.

Watching the frustrations of the radicals develop is an exercise in patience. The committee formed to implement the CIV reforms, a committee on which I was the token “conservative,” spent the majority of its time coping with those
frustrations. (My use of the labels "conservative" and "liberal" is for convenience only. Some of Western Culture's strongest defenders were among the most politically liberal faculty at Stanford.) The committee waited half the year for proposals for new tracks to come in and, once it was clear that there would not be any proposals for new courses, talked in circles about how to generate such proposals. Critiques of the program are ignored: the first ten minutes of one meeting were spent laughing at the charges that the Wall Street Journal had just leveled against one of the courses the committee was supposedly overseeing. (Indeed, when I asked the teachers of the course in question how they would respond to the Journal's critiques, both they and several committee members indignantly found my question "extremely inappropriate.")

Everyone on the committee had a picture of where CIV should go, namely in the direction of more minority faculty teaching more about "the minority experience" from a modern social science perspective. But no one could come up with a realistic way to get there. The radicals, ironically, had fallen victim to their own propaganda: that there was a huge pool of faculty eager to teach in a restructured course, that the abolition of the core list would in itself radicalize the program. Upon finding that these assumptions had never been true, the radicals had to restructure their conception of the requirement. In the end the committee decided to focus on neither the faculty nor the syllabi, but rather on the "parafaculty" who work as assistant teachers in the tracks, and has acted even there tentatively and with little impact. The "reforms" or lack thereof have not, however, remained the catalyst they once were for the radical community at Stanford. Other causes—notably a demand for administrative censorship of "offensive speech"—now command the energies once given to CIV. Western Culture is history, and whether CIV ever attains its radical potential is not a common topic of campus conversation.

The one truly new course that CIV has "enabled" is an aggressively modern treatment of the "native" peoples of the Americas and the intellectual products of their experiences with Europeans. It's gotten a lot of bad press in conservative papers, but it is no more egregious in text selection and ideological pigeon-holing than are most of the offerings in contemporary anthropology or "lit-crit" programs, and, at least by all accounts, is well taught. To be sure, its presentation of the European tradition is a mere foil for the rest of the syllabus. But it is difficult to determine whether this inadequate presentation results from the teachers' methods or the syllabus itself. In any event, whatever benefits of cultural awareness this new class brings to freshmen, it is a failure as an introduction to Western culture. But then, under the CIV guidelines, it need not be such an introduction.

The fact, on the other hand, that most of the other tracks do persist in teaching some variation of Western culture should provide only limited consolation. Indeed, after only a year CIV is already threatening some of the great strengths of the old program. The most disturbing trends in CIV foreshadow
the loss of the common intellectual experience that the Western Culture program provided to the Stanford undergraduate community and that the CIV compromise was designed to insure. This past year, for example, the CIV instructors whose responsibility it is to hash out a means to satisfy the compromise’s “shared intellectual content” clauses have proposed three authors and four vague categories: The Bible, “a Classical Greek philosopher,” “an early Christian thinker,” “a Renaissance playwright,” “an Enlightenment thinker,” Marx, and Freud.1

This list is troublesome. Part of the problem is pragmatic: the categories are not strong enough to insure that Stanford students will leave their different tracks with a common intellectual vocabulary. If you read Rousseau and I read Kant, will the framework for our conversation be as strong as if we had both read one or the other?

But the bigger and more symptomatic problem is the intellectual dishonesty of the categories, a dishonesty that the CIV faculty will apparently pass on to their students. The categories rest on the assumption that reading Plato is somehow the same as reading Aristotle, that reading Paul is intellectually equivalent to reading Augustine, that Shakespeare and Marlowe and Machiavelli are all basically interchangeable. The point is that consensus on what Stanford should teach its freshmen has broken down. “A common intellectual experience” has turned into trivial pursuit, and the idea of a unified freshman requirement has dissolved. What CIV gave Stanford was a license for chaos, and Stanford seems ready to take it.

What could Stanford academics have done to prevent the disintegration of Western Culture? In all honesty, the battle at Stanford, peculiar as it was to its time and place, may not have been winnable. The Stanford administration wanted to get rid of the Western Culture program, and lobbied for its abolition both directly and indirectly. When, for example, teachers in the program sensibly criticized the initial proposal to scrap Western Culture, Stanford president Donald Kennedy issued a statement condemning their critiques as “as strong as six-week old whiskey, and about as ready for consumption.” (President Kennedy never commented on the offensive hyperbole, outright lies, and smears disseminated by those in favor of change.) In 1986 the administration made a Western Culture “educational forum” entitled “Looking at the World with Culturally Tinted Glasses” part of freshman orientation, and thus lent official imprimatur to the attempted radicalization of a quarter of Stanford’s undergraduates. In this atmosphere, with the school administration censuring the Right and encouraging the Left, even traditionalists started to put scare quotes around the “Great Books.” Western Culture, then, labored throughout the fight for its survival with two strikes against it. What Stanford academics notably failed to do, however, was to organize their support of the Western Culture program as well as campus radicals organized their opposition to it. Western Culture eventually lost the battle because it represented only an ex-
tremely diffuse constituency. In the interest group politics that dominates ma-
ajor American universities, it had no group that could point to Western Culture
and say, “This is our issue.” As a result, the debate was defined early on by
those who thought they would benefit from the abolition of Western Culture—
radical students, social scientists looking to move into humanities’ turf, and the
administration. The narrowness of CIV’s final victory gives testimony to the
power of even an unorganized campaign in favor of a Great Books education;
had supporters of Western Culture organized themselves early on, the outcome
might have been different.

The outcome might also have been different had the Western Culture debate
focused on Western Culture as a course rather than as a concept. Arguing for
the requirement on its merits was relatively easy. It was much more difficult to
argue with someone who saw the debate as a referendum on the Closing of the
American Mind. The baggage placed on the program by both “conservatives”
and “liberals” had the effect of masking the real value of the course. Western
Culture was a set of classes before it was a symbol, and the tragedy of its demise
is not abstract, but concrete. Now, a generation of Stanford students will be
allowed to graduate without ever having pitied Lear, or argued with Socrates,
or doubted with Galileo, or gazed with Priam from the high, doomed walls of
Troy.

Note

1. How do these categories get decided upon? Stanford now has “a Renaissance dramatist”
instead of Shakespeare because one track wanted to read Marlowe instead of the Bard—
Shakespeare did not “fit” into its syllabus. So the instructors were going to require that
students read “an Elizabethan dramatist” in order to allow both Shakespeare and Mar-
lowe to satisfy the shared intellectual content clause. But then someone brought up that
his track wanted to do The Tempest and, well, the late works were technically Jacobean.
Hence “a Renaissance dramatist.” In other words, categories get decided upon by a
lowest common denominator approach to higher education. The moral of this story is
that faculty need requirements as much as students do. The core list—a faculty requirement—
kept all the tracks honest, and reduced the temptation for individual faculty members to
allow their academic quirks to dominate the teaching process.