TO READ WILLIAM J. BENNETT’s account of it, Stanford University’s decision to alter its Western Culture program might well have been the first step in a guerilla war to undermine Western Civilization.

What Stanford did was replace its mandatory Western Culture program and its required reading list with “Cultures, Values, and Ideas,” or CIV, a program in which instructors will decide year by year what the content will be, but in which works by “women, minorities, and persons of color” must be included.

So incensed was the recently resigned Secretary of Education Bennett that he flew west and held a news conference denouncing the University’s decision to throw out the former “core” reading list of 15 significant works in Western philosophy and literature required of all students.

CHRIS ZENOWICH, a free-lance writer and 1987 graduate of SU’s program in creative writing, wrote most recently for Syracuse University Magazine about SU’s West Coast basketball connection. He is preparing a novel for publication early next year by Harper & Row.
Whether the number is 15, 50, or 100, what Bennett refers to are the “Great Books of the Western World,” and to the assumption that every college graduate should have some familiarity with all or a critical cross-sampling of key works by Plato, Kant, Shakespeare, Euclid, Ptolemy—works made famous as a college curriculum by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler while the two were at the University of Chicago.

This assumption has not gone unchallenged. The question of whether every “liberal arts” education should include the reading of specific texts deemed “Great Books” by virtue of their purported influence upon Western culture has spawned an energetic debate over the past several decades. Reading lists like this, usually defined by courses and distribution requirements, are often referred to as a “core” curriculum. The proponents of a “Great Books” core program, such as Bennett and Allan Bloom, (whose bestseller, The Closing of the American Mind, has brought the debate to the attention of the press and public), contend that universities have a responsibility to educate their students in Western culture, and that too many have surrendered it. Opponents argue that any such core is exclusionary, and that there is no such thing as a discrete Western culture.

While Syracuse University has its own core program, it is different in many ways from the core embraced by the Ben­netts of the world. Implemented during the 1979-1980 academic year, the Liberal Arts Core, according to Marshall Segall, associate dean of arts and sciences, “has the objective of getting students to recognize the artificiality of disciplinary boundaries, and the fact that the connections among disciplines are more important than their separateness.” As such, the Liberal Arts Core at Syracuse encourages students to leave their narrow areas of study and explore those ideas and concerns shared by alternative disciplines, rather than separate them.

Within this “core” framework, a great deal of ideological ground can be covered. “As you can see,” explains Segall, “we are not particularly influenced by national calls—Allan Bloom’s, for instance—for a return to the good old days of prescriptive reading of great works. We are not as ethno-centric as a Bloomian prescription.”

What is the True Mission of the University?

At the heart of this debate is a question of how a college or university perceives its mission. Bennett, writing in the National Review (May 27, 1988) contends that “our universities . . . are the bearers, the transmitters, of Western civilization.” To Bennett, the decision to adopt CIV “was primarily a political, not an educational, decision.”

Those who challenge the core concept as advocated by Bennett or Bloom take exception to the assumption that a university should be a “transmitter” of Western civilization. They contend that such an assumption is itself an intensely political one, especially given the tradition of excluding works by and about women and minorities from the “Great Books” which Bloom would install at the core of a core curriculum.

Alison Bernstein, for example, questions just what Bennett means by “Western culture.” “My impression is that his version of ‘Western culture’ is Western Europe—that he has a very Euro-centric approach to it,” says Bernstein, an historian by training and a program officer for the Education and Culture Program of the Ford Foundation. In that latter role, Bernstein helps to fund colleges and universities developing curricula that include writings by and studies of women and minorities.

“But there’s no reason why,” Bernstein continues, “the history of the West can’t be seen as a history of conflict and consensus, with many subordinated and alternative cultures. In other words, the history of the West can also be seen as the history of the non-West.”

The challenge of incorporating the study of cultures and texts that have been subordinated or oppressed by mainstream Western culture prompts many to be suspicious of the “Great Books” version of the core curriculum. To require such a core, these critics argue, suggests that certain works and courses are indisputably more important than others a student may read or take in college. Although Bennett defends the study of non-Western cultures, there is no way in which he considers the Great Books, from a value-driven point of view, as anything less than the best.

If there is something known as a “liberal arts education,” what is it? Does it vary from one generation to the next? Is it politically and culturally biased?
Rather than prescribing particular courses, SU’s Core offers flexibility within limits,” says one faculty member. “It’s exciting for students when done well.”

Questions about core curricula have led to one of the most significant efforts to radically alter the way students are educated or, as some theorists state it, “enabled” as political subjects. The questions include, If there is something known as “liberal arts education,” what is it? Does it vary from one generation to the next? Is it politically and culturally biased? Does it have anything in common with “professional training”? Is there a definable, unified “Western culture” that can be studied without politically ensnaring one’s ability to think conceptually?

Critics of the Great Books core do not advocate taking Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Plato off the college reading lists. But, as Bernstein suggests, these classical writers can be read in different ways. “We can look at how these writers and thinkers perceived power struggles in their cultures, or at how they viewed peasant cultures. College can be, and I would argue should be, a time to do for students what we don’t do for them as a culture—namely, to provide a perspective from non-Western or subordinated or oppressed cultures that in effect becomes a lens by which we can look back on our own culture.”

LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR THE 1980s UNDERGRADUATE

TAKE ALL THE ISSUES EMANATING from the Great Books controversy, and add what may be the most perplexing question of all: Does today’s student care?

At many universities such as Syracuse, the schools and colleges providing professional training co-exist with the liberal arts and sciences. Often the relationship is uneasy, and students who have come to purchase their tickets into the professional world do not desire or appreciate a mandated dose of the liberal arts.

Peter Marsh, SU professor of history, has written in Contesting the Boundaries of Liberal Arts Professional Education that “the most remarkable development in American higher education over the past decade has been the massive escalation of undergraduate enrollment in professional programs of study, and the corresponding fall of enrollment in arts and sciences degree programs.

“There is... no denying the thickness of the administrative walls that divide liberal arts and professional colleges or the depth of the material interests that they entrench,” Marsh adds. “Universities are supposed to bring lively minds together, yet contrive to keep them apart.”

Attempts to overcome this paradox at Syracuse University resulted in a cross-disciplinary program that is now a model of its kind nationwide. The “Syracuse Experiment,” sponsored chiefly by the Mellon Foundation, provides new courses and faculty seminars designed to bridge the perceived gap between liberal arts and professional degree programs. Marsh’s book, recently published by Syracuse University Press, is comprised of a series of essays by an interdisciplinary group of faculty members; it suggests reforms to further reduce the gap between liberal arts and professional educations.

The “Syracuse Experiment” succeed ed at Syracuse because, almost 10 years ago, the faculty fashioned an approach to liberal arts education that allows and encourages boundary hopping—the Liberal Arts Core. SU’s Core, required of all undergraduates in its entirety or in a modified form (except those in the College of Engineering and the College of Visual and Performing Arts) predates the Bennett/Stanford debate by almost a decade.

The Liberal Arts Core is divided into three parts: basic skills, clusters, and continuing skills. The first component, according to the handbook given to incoming students, requires attaining “a minimum level of competence in expository writing and either a foreign language or mathematics.” The second requires that students complete one cluster—a set of four courses that either focus on a significant theme or provide a general introduction to an area of study—from each of three divisions: Humanities, Natural Science and Mathematics, and Social Sciences. Last, students must by the end of their junior year complete courses requiring “substantial writing” in an area meeting a continuing skill requirement, and must complete a course involving additional writing, foreign languages, mathematics, or computers.

Even a quick glance through the Liberal Arts Core handbook reveals many non-European options available for students—clusters such as “Human Values in Non-Western Cultures” and “Issues in
Third World Modernization,” for example. Specific offerings aside, the fact remains that there is a great deal of latitude for students to “create” their core.

THE CHALLENGE OF COHERENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

THE CHALLENGE OF GUIDING students to select a well balanced and individually significant core falls to both the advisor and the administration. As Stewart Thorson, professor of political science and former chair of a faculty committee on the Core curriculum, poses it, the problem is not an easy one: “Rather than prescribing particular courses, this Core offers flexibility within limits. It’s exciting for students when done well, but, on the other hand, it’s hard to do well. It requires a lot of coordination.”

The burden of that coordination falls on the shoulders of cluster coordinators—faculty members within departments who volunteer to link up courses with a shared subject or concern to create a cluster, making certain that the parts of the cluster come together as a sensible whole. It’s important, Thorson says, that faculty members feel rewarded for this extra effort. It takes a great deal of time away from a faculty member’s scholarship and offers minor rewards, none of which is directly monetary. “‘There needs to be some set of incentives,’ Thorson suggests, ‘for coordinators to provide the time and leadership it takes to make a cluster intellectually coherent.’

Beyond the administrative challenge of creating clusters with intellectual or ideological relevance, there is also that of the faculty members, functioning as advisors, who direct students to those clusters that offer the best possible educational experience. Advisors also must encourage the completion of the Core requirements by the end of the junior year. The latter dilemma—timely completion of requirements—is largely administrative. There are still students—nine years after the implementation of the Core—who scramble during their senior year to fulfill basic requirements.

This year, the University will survey seniors and freshmen to determine their understanding of and experience with the Liberal Arts Core. “No one has questioned the basic philosophy or content of the Core,” Marshall Segall says. “But nevertheless, it needs continual monitoring and tinkering. It’s continually reviewed by the Curriculum Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences, and this survey will provide the first overview of how the students perceive it.”

Unless the survey produces radically unanticipated results, the Liberal Arts Core at Syracuse will remain an alternative to the rigorous inflexibility of a Great Books curriculum, such as that at St. John’s College, where students read nothing but Great Books; and an alternative to an academic equivalent of a smorgasbord, where students can sample anything they wish.

It may not satisfy William Bennett’s prescription that a university should be the transmitter of Western culture. But even if such a mission were uncontested, in a university as heterogeneous as Syracuse it would be virtually impossible to fulfill. Thus the Liberal Arts Core and the Syracuse Experiment share a concern for encouraging students to seek out and make connections among departments, schools, and colleges. There is little attempt to spoon-feed a specific set of books to every student, regardless of race, color, creed, or major.

“It’s difficult to knit together the diversity that is the hallmark of the institution,” explains Robert McClure, director of the Honors Program. “You don’t want students to get lost in the little pockets that exist in a school of this size. That’s why as a university we allow more movement back and forth between liberal arts and professional schools than many other institutions.”

That educational diversity may frighten some, but it enlightens many others. If students at Syracuse want a steady diet of Great Books, those books and faculty members knowledgeable about them are found easily. Syracuse as an institution may encourage, but does not require, students to read them. As such, the Core at Syracuse embraces an academic spectrum that reflects the institution as well as the Western world.

To quote Alison Bernstein, “My basic problem with Bloom and Bennett’s core curriculum is that I’m not sure there ever was such a thing in the first place—and if there was, it was for a small elite who didn’t reflect the heterogeneity of Western culture.”