IMPRIMIS
Because Ideas Have Consequences
HILLSDALE COLLEGE
Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan 49242
May 1990 Volume 19, No. 5

"Why We Need a Core Curriculum for College Students"

Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities

Editors' Preview: *Where once virtually all schools taught an accepted canon of great Western works, many components of the traditional humanities curriculum are being discarded in favor of allegedly neglected minority authors, texts and views. Are we moving in the direction of healthy diversity, pluralism and broadened perspective, or are we justifying an ideological assault on Western culture? Moreover, are we abandoning the very notion of a core curriculum since all courses of study and all subjects are increasingly being treated as equally valid?*

NEH Chairman Lynne V. Cheney first addressed these questions in her widely remarked 1988 report on the uncertain fate of the humanities on the college campus. This month, Imprimis *features an edited excerpt from her latest report,* 50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students, *which she discussed at Hillsdale last fall.*

Reporting about curricula, Professor Rudolph once observed, is hardly the same as writing about the winning of the West or the collapse of the Old South. The word curriculum is, for many, almost pure denotation, almost pristine in the way it refuses to call up images that compel interest. It is a dull word, dry and dusty, and yet it goes to the heart of formal learning. It is through the curriculum that college and university faculties establish a design for education. It is through the curriculum that they communicate what it is an educated person should know.

While the matter of what should be taught and learned is hardly one on which we should expect easy agreement, the confusion about it on many campuses has seemed extraordinary in recent years. Entering students often find few requirements in place and a plethora of offerings. There are hundreds of courses to choose from, a multitude of ways to combine them to earn a bachelor's degree, and a minimum of direction. In the absence of an ordered plan of study, some undergraduates manage to put together coherent and substantive programs, but others move through college years with little rationale. All too often, as *Humanities in America,* a 1988 report from the National Endowment for the Humanities, noted, it is "luck or accident or uninformed intuition that determines what students do and do not learn."

The Endowment's report was by no means the first to make such observations. Indeed, throughout the 1980s there has been growing concern about the fragmented state of curricula. In reports, books, and conferences, educators have talked about the need for greater structure and coherence–particularly in the area of college study known as "general education." It is here, outside the major, where students can gain insights into areas of human thought that are not their specialties. In general education, as the Harvard "Redbook," a classic study of curriculum, noted, the primary focus can be on the student's life "as a responsible human being and citizen."

But recognition of the importance of reforming general education has far outpaced actual reform. A recent survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities showed that in 1988-89 general education requirements were still so loosely structured that it was possible to graduate from:

- 78 percent of the nation's colleges and universities without ever taking a course in the history of Western civilization;
- 38 percent without taking any course in history at all;
- 45 percent without taking a course in American or English literature;
- 77 percent without studying a foreign language;
- 41 percent without studying mathematics;
- 33 percent without studying natural and physical sciences

Explanations abound for the slow pace of reform. A contributing factor may well be the highly general nature of national discussions. Wise commentaries set forth important aims for undergraduate education, affirming, for example, that students should learn about science and history, understand institutions and symbols, and be able to think critically. But exactly how these ends might be accom-