

SHOW ME YOUR GARDEN, THE SAYING GOES, AND I'LL KNOW  
WHAT KIND OF PERSON YOU ARE. WITH THIS IN MIND, WE  
PUT EDUCATION'S BIG QUESTION—WHICH SEEDS TO  
PLANT?—TO SOME OF MU'S FINEST MINDS. DO YOU AGREE  
WITH THE EXPERTS ABOUT WHAT AN EDUCATED PERSON  
OUGHT TO KNOW?

# *Cultivating a* Fertile Mi

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THE DEBATE RAGES ON WITH NO end in sight. On the one side you have those who accuse American higher education of being disgracefully negligent in terms of exposing students to important figures and cultures that are not white, male and Western. It's high time we expand the definition of what's necessary to teach, they maintain.

Those on the other side of the issue, however, claim that standards are slipping shamefully, that curriculum decisions have less to do with academic values than with ideological agendas.

The traditionalists—arguing just as vehemently as their opponents—insist that there's no excuse for passing over Plato or Homer or Chaucer in favor of some thinker whose enduring value has yet to be proven. Political correctness!

goes the battle cry.

What sometimes gets overlooked in all the commotion over curriculum standards, however, is the fact that you can lead students to Chaucer, but you can't make them think.

Clearly the matter of exactly what knowledge is worth teaching is important. But the aspect of getting an education that transcends such concerns is not something you can look for on a syllabus. It's not about meeting minimum requirements or getting good enough grades to earn the desired degree, but instead involves what goes on in the heart as well as the mind. "What education does best is create habits," explains Provost Ed Sheridan, MU's chief academic officer. "And the most important habit to cultivate is that of learning." The key, he says,

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is to develop that part of the self that confronts the world with a spirit of discovery, to find out that seeking answers to questions and studying new things can be one of life's greatest pleasures.

Which is not to say we should teach students to think but not give them anything to think about. "There are some essential raw ingredients that students need in order to better understand and function in the world," says Bill Bondeson, Curators' distinguished teaching professor of philosophy and family and community medicine. "It's a matter of what knowledge you have, what skills



you have, and what your values are."

Bondeson offers some guidelines as to what a culturally literate person's education should encompass: "You ought to know something about the basic ideas and works in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities and the fine arts. That includes, at the bare minimum, a basic knowledge of the history of one's own culture and a basic knowledge of the history of at least one or two other cultures." An acquaintance with the basic principles and concepts of science is equally important, he says.

Amassing some background knowledge in a variety of areas can mean the difference between making good decisions and bad ones in your day-to-day life, Sheridan points out. "You really can't be an intelligent reader of the newspaper unless you can interpret what you find there," he explains. "Let's say someone in a political race has a lead of 52 percent over 48 percent with a margin of error of plus-or-minus 4 percent. If you have some familiarity with statistics, you realize that means there's essentially no difference between the two candidates."

**L**IKEWISE, BIOLOGY PROFESSOR Kathy Newton makes a compelling argument for why it's worth spending a little time learning about her field. "Biological issues permeate our existence—everything from health care, to the environment, to the law," she notes. "These days consumers are expected to be responsible for a lot more of their own health issues. If you have some basic knowledge of biology and you do some reading, you can learn about your condition, be informed about the range of treatments, and become much more active in your own health care." Taking the initiative in this way could involve anything from researching the various options for treating breast cancer, Newton says, to understanding how both diet and genes can contribute to a high cholesterol count.

In terms of the skills a student should

leave college with, Bondeson continues, they boil down to reading, writing, speaking and thinking. "You should be able to think critically, write well, read carefully and analytically, and speak clearly and persuasively," he says.

"I also think a person should be able to navigate in another language or two, and that in this day and age a person ought to be computer literate. Those skills will pay off no matter what your career, no matter what you're going to do."

And as far as values are concerned, Bondeson says, move in the world of academe and you're bound to come away with some of the values of that world: integrity, honesty, reliability, a respect for the facts, respect for evidence and tolerance for other views and perspectives.

That last item on the list—tolerance for other views and perspectives—is one of the hoped-for outcomes of ensuring a diverse collegiate environment, Sheridan says. Working to establish and maintain a racially and culturally varied student population isn't a matter of juggling the demands of competing interest groups, he explains. Exposing students to peers with viewpoints and experiences different from their own not only encourages mutual understanding, it also sharpens their intellectual abilities as well. Being challenged to defend, test and re-think one's ideas tends to stimulate the rigorous scrutiny of all ideas.

Along the same lines, the scope of material taught should be enlarged, Sheridan continues. "We need to get away from the idea that most knowledge emanates from Western Europe," he says. "We need to get away from the reaction against reading feminist authors, African poets, Hispanic politicians. The status quo view is, 'That's not knowledge—knowledge is reading St. Thomas Aquinas.' But we have to encourage exposure to the real world, and the real world includes radical feminism as well as Aquinas. They both have important things to say. And you don't have to trade one for the other."

Finding time to cover the less traditional material may mean studying one Shakespearean play instead of two or three, Sheridan recognizes. "But we will have created a sense that there are many places where there is knowledge."

**T**HE FACT REMAINS, THOUGH, THAT even if there were unanimous agreement as to what books to include in, say, a contemporary literature class, it's sometimes difficult to convince students of the desirability of devoting time to subjects outside their chosen major. Undergraduates today are facing far more worrisome economic prospects than their parents ever did, and the resulting anxiety sometimes prompts them to be more concerned with matters of career than of culture. As in, Why should I take this course if it doesn't give me an edge in the job market?

For one thing, Sheridan notes, a student's first choice of major may not necessarily be the right one. "If you consider today's students will live to be 85 or 90 years old, that means we're asking these young people to decide what they want to do for the next 50 years."



Four out of five college students change majors at least once, often more. Students need not get caught in the trap of specialization, especially at 18 years of age when they're just starting to learn," he says. After all, brushing up against a new and unrelated subject might just mean unexpectedly discovering one's true calling.

And considering that many of today's students eventually will hold jobs that right now don't even exist in our imaginations, they need to be prepared to adapt and apply talents and knowledge to new problems, adds Stuart Palonsky, director of MU's Honors College and a professor of education. "The best thing we can do is educate students broadly in anticipation of that sort of change," he says.

But of course the point of attending a university isn't merely to learn how to put bread on the table. Ideally, the experience inspires students to make intellectual connections unlimited by the boundaries of the various disciplines, notes poet and essayist Sherod Santos, professor of English and director of MU's creative writing program. "To be confined to any single language—the language of commerce, say, or science, or art—is like being confined to a single cultural condition, and the history of this century provides ample evidence of the dangers in that," he says. "But imagine the possibilities when a conversation opens

between those  
worlds, imagine

the possibilities for thought itself."

Sheridan cites a study in which engineers were asked what they wish they'd taken more of in college. "The older the graduates were, the more they wished they'd had more literature, more theater, more music," he says. "That's what they see as the enrichment that they missed.

"There is a whole world of learning that takes place through metaphor and vicarious experience," he says. "Novels, poetry, painting, plays—they all portray human dilemmas. They help us become sensitized to problems in life, help us become aware of our own blind beliefs."

Poetry, for example, can provide insights as crucial to the scientifically minded as to the liberal arts student. "For all the so-called technological 'progress' of the last hundred years, advances in self-knowledge have been minimal," Santos says. "And we can only advance when we turn our attention to the particular case of the single human being. That is where poetry is so essential.

"Poetry is the great open book of the human heart, and historically everyone who has been interested in the secrets that book contains has discovered the blessing that poetry bestows," he says. "For unlike so many other things, it isn't power over others that poetry seeks, it is power over ourselves."

**T**HERE'S A SORT OF CIRCULARITY to the whole education process, if you consider that an attentiveness to the world leads to profound examination of the soul, which in turn promotes a more enlightened outward gaze. Since one component of a university's mission is to prepare young people to be informed and active citizens, the ultimate aim should be bettering the very soul of society, suggests Darlaine Gardetto, assistant professor of sociology and women studies. "People should be trying to discover within themselves their own potential and then combining that with a moral responsibility to a wider human network," she says. "We need to get back to thinking

about the greater good."

But the point is to progress from thinking to acting, Gardetto says, noting that her own disciplines provide good examples of how education can result in social change. "Women studies, for example, encourages people to question whether the subordination of women has natural roots or human roots," she says. "Both sociology and women studies place emphasis on human agency. They both encourage students to see themselves situated in various historical processes, to think of themselves as actors who can potentially change society as well.

"We can encourage them to focus not only on what is," she concludes, "but on what ought to be."

**I**N THE END, THEN, BEING AN EDUCATED person is not so much a matter of being able to quote Nietzsche, or of having read both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or of never being caught using farther when you should have said further.

"One thing an educated person is, is a little bit humble," muses biologist Newton. "We become aware of what a small fraction of human knowledge we've been exposed to."

You might say that to be an educated person is to recognize that there will always be huge gaps in our knowledge, but to choose to spend one's life passionately striving to fill in those holes.

A pedagogue named Lord Crowther once suggested that education can be thought of two ways. "One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much as it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human society lives and moves."

But Crowther conceived of the human mind not so much as a container as a fire that has to be set alight. Stoke those fires of the mind, he said, tend them until your last breath, and you will have lived a life of inquiry—the life of an educated person. \*

