

**THE GREAT IDEAS: THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO AND THE IDEAL OF LIBERAL EDUCATION**  
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Introduction

In the 1930s, Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins set out to infuse the University of Chicago curriculum with the spirit of the "Great Books." Their project helped to shape the College's celebrated core curriculum and eventually led to the University's collaborative efforts with the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, and the Great Books Foundation to spread the gospel of the "Great Ideas." Their experiment in liberal education reflects the aims and goals of the University of Chicago during the Hutchins era and into the present, while illuminating broader intellectual battles waged over the role of culture in American life.

The idea of the Great Books was not born in Chicago. Adler and Hutchins drew their inspiration from an experimental program to teach the classics developed by Adler's Columbia University mentor John Erskine. Prior to Erskine's efforts, the Great Books, as Adler and Hutchins would identify them (Erskine often used the phrase "Great Books" synonymously with "the classics," but it was Adler and Hutchins who popularized the phrase), most famously appeared in 1909 as Charles Eliot's "Five-Foot Shelf" of Harvard Classics. Eliot believed that a liberal education was available to anyone committed to reading the classics and that the true classics were a highly select collection of works that could fit comfortably on a five-foot shelf. Collier and Sons publishers saw the marketing opportunity and contracted with Eliot to edit a set. This milestone in the genteel tradition was based on Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century supposition that "culture" was "the best which has been thought and said in the world." Cultivating a close relationship with the "best" was a sure path toward becoming "cultured," and what better way to start than by purchasing a set sanctioned by the president of Harvard University?

But genteel culture and the classics came under attack soon after the Harvard set was produced. Modernist critics argued that the classics represented an easy, but unproductive, standard for Americans with "lazy" taste. Others saw the genteel tradition, with its stress on the culture of the leisured gentleman, as hopelessly out of date in a modern world. For these critics, the nineteenth-century cultural dilettante had no role in twentieth-century America where highly specialized professionals drove progress. This debate over the nature of culture had been simmering on university campuses for decades. Faculty devoted to narrow fields of study thought the modern university ought to equip students for advanced and specialized scholarly training befitting a modern professionalized world. But others considered the undergraduate college as a cultivator of a supple mind by means of a general education based on the liberal arts.

During this debate the Great Books were reconceived at Columbia University. John Erskine deplored the narrow specialization rampant at Columbia. Harkening back to an idealized past, he hoped an education based on the classics would provide students with a shared culture to foster communication and community in a world of ever-increasing specialization and alienation. Calling culture "an interplay of life and ideas," Erskine envisioned an education based on the classics that "would circle through the moment in which we now breathe." Education, and culture as well, became for Erskine a "working up" of the past and the present "into new values" expressing the spirit of a people.

Erskine's definition of culture as the interplay of life and ideas clearly articulates one aspect of the liberal arts ideal: the classics were valuable for their ability to inform the modern mind and create a more fulfilling life.

Perhaps at no other university was the debate over the Great Books and Great Ideas more pronounced than it was at the University of Chicago where the concept of a shared, classical foundation to undergraduate education formed part of William Rainey Harper's original plan. It emerged in the 1920s as a fundamental question of institutional identity—was the undergraduate curriculum to be designed to prepare students for advanced work of a highly specialized nature, or should the College be devoted to ensuring a general liberal education? In 1930, Mortimer Adler joined Robert Hutchins on campus with hopes of creating a curriculum based on the Great Books. They failed to achieve their goal, but they successfully positioned the University of Chicago as one of the most active champions of the Great Books. The popularization of the Great Ideas reached an apogee in the 1950s with the publication of the University of Chicago-sponsored Great Books of the Western World, the proliferation of Great Books clubs and the maturation of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. Through the Culture Wars of the 1980s and amidst more recent debates about the core, the ideal of liberal education at Chicago has been shaped by these concepts.

Drawing primarily on the papers of Robert M. Hutchins, Mortimer J. Adler, Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke, and William Benton, this exhibition takes you through the history of the Great Ideas at the University of Chicago—a history that says as much about shifts in American culture as it does about education at Chicago.

This exhibition was curated by Jay Satterfield, Head of Reader Services for the Special Collections Research Center, with invaluable help from Mark Alznauer, doctoral student in the Committee on Social Thought, and Sandra Roscoe of Reference and Information Services. Valarie Brocato and Kerri Sancomb executed the design and installation.

#### Case 1            GENERAL HONORS AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Despite being edited by Harvard University President Charles W. Eliot, the 1909 Collier and Sons edition of the "Five-Foot Shelf" of Harvard Classics had little to do with Harvard or higher education. It was not until 1921 that an education centered on the classics first entered the modern college curriculum at Columbia University. Four years earlier, Professor of English and noted poet and novelist John Erskine had proposed a two-year course where students would read one classic in translation each week and discuss it in a seminar. Erskine hoped to clear the barrier students perceived between themselves and the classics while providing them with a common tradition (other than "girls or athletics or compulsory chapel") lost in the modern elective system. He reasoned that all classics were originally written for popular audiences, but their haughty reputations combined with faculty members' obtuse scholarly interventions made the texts daunting to students. To Erskine, "A great book is one that has meaning, for a variety of people over a long period of time," and a true classic ought to speak to the modern mind as effectively as it spoke to its original audience. The faculty at Columbia rejected his proposal on the grounds that students could not be expected to master so many works in such a short time and that the essence of most classics was lost in translation. As one of the first volleys in the battle that would rage through twentieth-

century academic history, the faculty rejected Erskine's liberal arts ideal. They maintained that it was far superior for students to specialize and read a few books deeply than it was for them to acquire a general knowledge of a wide range of texts. The University should cultivate the expert devoted to a narrow subject--after all, some members of the faculty at Columbia had spent their careers commenting on only one or two of the texts Erskine wanted his students to breeze through.

World War I gave Erskine a chance to test his theories as Director of the Education Department for the Y.M.C.A. and the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe. Flush from his success on the front, he persuaded the faculty at Columbia University to allow him to teach General Honors, a two-year seminar devoted to the Great Books.

### Case 2

Among Erskine's early students at Columbia were future University of Chicago faculty members Richard McKeon, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, and Mortimer Adler. Adler, who described himself as "an objectionable student" found the refined culture and reverence for greatness he longed for in Erskine's General Honors course. He enthused that it "was a college in itself--the whole of a liberal education or certainly the core of it," and it was taught "in the manner of highly civil conversation." When Adler moved to the graduate school (without earning his B.A. for failure to complete the College's Physical Education requirement), Erskine hired him to lead a section of General Honors with fellow student Mark Van Doren. Following Van Doren's lead, Adler learned to curb his usual argumentative style and teach using the Socratic method. Together they refocused the class discussions on the students' perceptions of the ideas presented in the Great Books. With Van Doren's calm temperament and Adler's enthusiasm, the course fulfilled Erskine's ideal of living culture. The Great Books came alive through the students direct interactions with them: culture was reinvented as the "interplay of life and ideas."

### Case 3            GENERAL HONORS COMES TO CHICAGO

During his first year as President of the University of Chicago, twenty-nine-year-old Robert Hutchins hired Mortimer Adler, just one year his junior, to help reform undergraduate education at Chicago, an institution devoted to graduate instruction that attracted many undergraduates unlikely to continue their studies beyond their bachelor's degrees. Two years earlier Hutchins, who was then acting Dean of the Yale University Law School, had invited Adler to New Haven to discuss Alder's first book *Dialectic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927). The two found common ground in their theories of law, but Hutchins was also intrigued by the young scholar's zeal and devotion to the liberal arts.

Even before he arrived at Chicago, Adler persuaded Hutchins to offer General Honors at Chicago. Hutchins, who lamented that he had never read the Great Books himself, was so excited by the prospect of General Honors that he agreed to co-teach the class to round out his own education. During the summer of 1931, Hutchins read the "easy books," *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Pere Goriot*, and *John Stuart Mill*, but he struggled through Hume whom he found an uninteresting "old ass." He enjoyed teaching the class so much that he continued to teach it in one form or another with Adler for nearly two decades.

Set up almost exactly as it had been at Columbia, General Honors was offered as a two-year course for entering freshmen in the fall of 1931. The inauspicious announcement in the Freshman Week calendar attracted eighty students who interviewed for a spot in the class, from which twenty were selected.

#### Case 4

The press jumped at the novelty of young President Hutchins acting as "Mr. Adler's straight man" in a course for freshmen. Visiting dignitaries often sat in on the class: actors Lillian Gish, Ethel Barrymore, and Orson Wells attended sessions, as did Eugene Meyer, publisher of the Washington Post, but none caused quite the stir that Gertrude Stein did in 1932. Skeptical of the entire endeavor to teach the Great Books (she insisted that the classics could not be understood when read in translation), Stein led a session on Homer's *Odyssey*. Alice B. Toklas remembered that Stein gave the students more freedom than Hutchins and Alder normally allowed, enabling the students to "formulate their own ideas." But, according to Adler, Stein abandoned the Socratic method and "harangued [the students] with extempore remarks about epic poetry which she thought up on the spot, but which none of us, including Gertrude, could understand, then or in the years to come."

The grandiose scope of Adler's liberal arts mission (as well as the fears of those who thought the seminar could never teach any subject in depth) is best summed up by the first question on the exam he and Hutchins prepared for the completion of the first year of the class: "Discuss the Renaissance in the light of the books of this course." Students who dared take on the topic were forbidden from also choosing Part B, Question 7: "Discuss the following authors, Erasmus, Montaigne, Rabelais, and Francis Bacon, in the light of the four R's: romanticism, revolution, reformation and renaissance."

#### Case 5 FROM GENERAL EDUCATION TO THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM

In 1936 Robert Hutchins delivered a series of lectures at Yale University that was published as *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936). Showing the influence of five years of teaching with Adler, he advocated restructuring undergraduate education based on "a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, the best exemplar of the processes of human reason." He argued that the modern specialist is "cut off from every field but his own," but that a liberal arts college experience could provide a basic shared intellectual experience.

Seeking to institute just such a liberal arts core at Chicago, the next year he brought in Adler's Columbia associates Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan as visiting professors to sit on the Liberal Arts Committee headed by recent-hire and former Adler associate Richard McKeon, Professor of Greek and Dean of the Humanities Division. The Committee was charged with exploring the possibility of an undergraduate curriculum based on a study of the Great Books. Not surprisingly, many members of the faculty (who Adler claimed were in general uprising at the time) viewed the Committee made up of recent hires and visiting professors as nothing more than nepotism designed to railroad through Hutchins' reforms. At first Adler was purposely left off the Committee because, as he wrote to Stringfellow Barr, his name was "still the big bugaboo which [could] ruin

anything it [was] connected with." Further damaging the Committee's credibility was an internal battle between McKeon, Adler, and Buchanan. Although they agreed in principle to the same set of values and beliefs, they were unable to agree on much of anything else: from the structure of their meetings to the content of their discussions.

#### Case 6

While the battle of the core raged on campus, and the faculty argued the merits of the Great Books as teaching tools, Mortimer Adler explored other avenues for promulgating his beloved canon. In 1940, he published his most famous work, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940). In it Adler espoused the belief that a direct relationship with the Great Books would enable people "to lead the distinctively human life of reason." Surprising nearly everyone, *How to Read a Book* shot onto the bestseller list, spurred by its publisher's aggressive marketing campaign.

Adler's strict adherence to a static canon of culture and his pedantic, prescriptive lists and instructions for reading stirred the ire of critics. University of Chicago alumnus James T. Farrell reacted to *How to Read a Book* with a stinging critique in the *Partisan Review*. Calling Adler pompous and superficial, he accused him of employing "weak" and "shabby" logic to support his brand of medieval absolutism. In an attack clearly shaped for his *Partisan Review* audience, Farrell compared Adler to John Starkey, the 1930s fellow traveler who could never bear to actually join the Communist Party, and to Torquemada, the brutal leader of the Spanish Inquisition.

While critiques such as Farrell's stuck with Adler for the rest of his life, a far less caustic criticism also greeted *How to Read a Book*. Penned by the pompously named pseudonymous, Erasmus G. Addlepatte, *How to Read Two Books* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1940) parodied Adler's opening line, "This is a book for readers who cannot read," with comic instructions written "for readers who cannot think." It included chapters on "How to Read in Bed," "Catching on from the Title," and its own list of the Great Books including such canonical titles as the Sears Roebuck Catalog, the Telephone Directory, *What a Girl Can Make and Do*, and *Light Gymnastics*.

#### Case 7                    CREATING A GREAT CURRICULUM

By the early 1940s, Adler was withdrawing from the University to pursue other interests. His *How to Read a Book* was a national bestseller, and he had become a celebrated popular intellectual. As Adler receded, Richard McKeon became increasingly more influential. In 1938, the student yearbook reported that McKeon had displaced Adler as the "intellectual lodestone of the undergraduate body." The faculty, too, were drawn to him. The *Cap and Gown* noted a general shift from Aquinas to Aristotle in several departments feeling McKeon's influence.

More importantly, events in the early 1940s gave the College greater autonomy in defining the curriculum. In 1941, Hutchins named Clarence Henry Faust as Dean of the College. Faust set out to reexamine the curriculum across the College. The exigencies of the U.S. entry into World War II heightened the need to reexamine the curriculum: universities across the country were searching for ways to expedite the educational process for young men and women about to enter the war effort. Reacting in part to "the emergency of war," just six weeks after Pearl Harbor the University Senate voted 63 to

48 to allow the College to grant bachelor degrees and to determine its own curriculum, two roles previously given to the divisions. The most controversial change brought about by the revamped "Chicago Plan," was the College's decision to grant bachelor's degrees after only two years of work for students who could pass their comprehensive exams. Less publicized was Faust's effort to incorporate the Great Books into every student's College experience.

The new curriculum outlined four sequences of three courses each in the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the Physical Sciences, and the Natural Sciences. The new course of study was not based exclusively on the Great Books, nor was it intended to be, but dozens of texts from the General Honors list appeared on core syllabi in all areas except the Physical Sciences.

#### Case 8

The first goal of the Humanities sequence was "increasing the experience of students with the great products of the arts by examination of a considerable body of the best works in the fields of literature, the visual arts, and music." The Humanities core rejected specialization in favor of "extensive familiarity" in a "great variety" of works. The reading list was wider ranging than Adler's Great Books. It included many authors favored by Adler but also women writers such as Jane Austen and it even ventured into the twentieth century with Thornton Wilder, Elizabeth Bowen, and E. M. Forster. While it incorporated many of the Great Books, it was a far cry from the curriculum envisioned by Hutchins and Adler. The Socratic method employing only discussions in long seminars was eschewed for five one-hour meetings per week where students were taught analytical methods for use in the art of criticism. In addition, entire books were rarely assigned. Instead, excerpts provided a wider variety of texts.

Because the Social Science sequence favored American history and politics over the Greek and Roman cultures, the Great Books did not make an appearance in force until the third year when the students read Plato, Mill, Hobbes, Locke, and Kant.

The Natural Science sequence included entire works or excerpts from Archimedes, Galileo, Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Darwin, and other luminaries from the Great Books list to give students a sense of the interrelations between the disciplines within the Natural Sciences. According to Professor of Natural Sciences Joseph Schwab, "the science program expresses the principles of liberal education as a whole, but as mediated and modified by the qualities which distinguish science from the humanities and the social sciences; therefore, the science program is best understood in the light of what these principles become when expressed through the materials and procedures of science."

#### Case 9

The liberal arts ideal was most fully realized in two courses: "History of Western Civilization," and "Observation, Interpretation, and Integration." The two capstone courses were taught after students had completed the other core requirements (usually in their final year), and were designed to "integrate the College curriculum: the one historically, by focusing attention on genesis and development, the other philosophically, by concentrating attention on intellectual analysis and methodology." The structure and methodology of the courses varied significantly from the Great Books seminars, but the

reading list for McKeon's O.I.I. course clearly shows the influence of his days teaching the Great Books at Columbia.

The curriculum reforms of the wartime era satisfied Adler, whose influence on campus had dwindled to the point where he could not play a significant role in the decision-making process. Compared to the rebuffs he and Hutchins had met with a decade earlier, the modest inclusion of the Great Books in the curriculum was a major victory for their vision of the liberal arts.

#### Case 10

In 1937 four members of the Liberal Arts Committee frustrated by the inflexibility of the University left Chicago to establish the New Program at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. Although most colleges and universities saw increased enrollment during the Depression, St. John's admissions dropped and the College was on the verge of financial collapse. Stringfellow Barr accepted the position as President, then installed Scott Buchanan as Dean and asked to have Robert Hutchins placed on the Board of Trustees. Together with two other members of the Liberal Arts Committee, R. Catesby Taliaferro and Charles Wallis, they reconstructed the College with the nation's first true Great Books curriculum.

Taught in seminars nearly identical in structure to those led by Adler and Hutchins at Chicago, students in St. John's New Program discussed the Great Books—the only other classes required, or even offered, were in mathematics and the sciences.

The reading list, which mirrored that set out by Erskine, was based on a five-part test of "Greatness":

A great book is one that has been read by the largest number of persons

A great book has the largest number of possible interpretations

A great book should raise the persistent unanswerable questions about the great themes in European thought

A great book must be a work of fine art

A great book must be a masterpiece of the liberal arts

Expounding on the philosophical base of St. John's, Scott Buchanan wrote: "The clearest historic pattern of the liberal arts for the modern mind is, curiously enough, to be found in the thirteenth century." He then laid out the Trivium and Quadrivium that would guide the students' education.

Trivium	Quadrivium
Grammar	Arithmetic
Rhetoric	Geometry
Logic	Music
	Astronomy

The New Program failed to attract students at first (only forty-six applied in the first year) but it soon blossomed, and it has become a well-established and successful program with an offshoot in New Mexico. John Erskine saw the enterprise at St. John's as one of several "aberrations" on his original intent. He had thought of the classics not as a complete education in and of themselves, but as a way to provide students with a broader perspective than that being offered by the modern elective-based curriculum.

### Case 11            SPREADING THE GOSPEL

In 1943, Hutchins invited several dozen prominent business leaders in Chicago to a luncheon to discuss a method for "successful business and professional men" to remedy their educational gaps "in a relatively painless fashion in congenial surroundings." The idea was a hit: just one month later Hutchins and Adler offered their Great Books seminar to Chicago's business elite. Dubbed the "Fat Man's Great Books Course" by everyone involved, the class met each month at Chicago's University Club. Adler and Hutchins led most class sessions, but they brought in guest discussion leaders such as Dean of the College Clarence Faust, Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun from Columbia University, and veterans of Erskine's classes, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, and Richard McKeon.

Among the first students was future Senator William Benton, University of Chicago Trustee, CEO of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and Hutchins's former classmate at Yale. He proposed a Great Books set to be edited by Adler and Hutchins and published by Britannica. It promised to put the Great Books in middle-class living rooms while codifying their selections. Adler immediately seized the idea. It fit his dreams of popularizing the Great Books while also promising to give him an opportunity to bring together a kind of twentieth-century Summa Theologica he referred to as a Summa Dialectica. Hutchins balked at the idea. He feared that under the auspices of Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Great Books would lose their educational value and be sold like encyclopedias. He refused to endorse the set unless he could be assured that it would be an instrument of popular education.

Adler devised the idea of a grand index of the Great Ideas contained in the Great Books to make the set an educational force. Hutchins was persuaded, and he allotted \$60,000 dollars to the project that he hoped would be completed in two years.

### Case 12

The production of the Great Books of the Western World proved to be a much more labor-intensive task than Adler, Hutchins or Benton anticipated. The two years lapsed in to eight years and the \$60,000 ballooned to over \$2,000,000. Adler assembled an editorial board that included himself and Hutchins; two other University of Chicago professors, Professor of Natural Sciences, Joseph Schwab, and Dean of the College, Clarence Faust; his cohorts from St. John's College, Stringfellow Barr, and Scott Buchanan; his first teaching partner, Mark Van Doren; and constitutional scholar and former president of Amherst College, Alexander Meiklejohn. The last to be invited was Adler's Columbia mentor and first champion of the Great Books, John Erskine, who had grown wary of his prodigy and only reluctantly accepted the post.

Using the same general criteria for greatness set down in the St. John's catalog, the initial selection of Great Books would have filled nearly eighty encyclopedia-like volumes, which the publisher rejected as unmarketable. After a brutal round of cuts (expressed in Joseph Schwab's recommendations for "oblivion") the list was pared down to 443 works by seventy-four authors designed to fill a set of fifty-four volumes, one volume of which was to be devoted to an introductory essay by Hutchins and two more to Adler's index of Great Ideas. The set started with Homer and ended with two writers who helped set the stage for modernism, Freud and William James--no women were included.

### Case 13

For Adler the heart of the Great Books of the Western World was his proposed index of the Great Ideas that unify "the all-embracing universe of discourse in which the mind of western man moves from problem to problem, subject-matter to subject-matter." The index, dubbed the Syntopicon, "would provide a map or chart of the conversation about fundamental subjects in which the authors of the Great Books engaged with one another across the centuries." Further, it would "enable the owner of a set of Great Books to use it as a reference library in which he could look up the discussion of any subject in which he had a special interest."

Determining which ideas to index took Adler over two years. He continuously merged concepts to limit the list to 102 Great Ideas starting with "angel" and progressing alphabetically to "world." He then hired a team of graduate students and independent researchers to find all references to each idea in the titles selected for the Great Books set. Complete with an introductory essay describing the history of each term, the Syntopicon alone took over seven years to produce at a cost of nearly \$1,000,000.

### Case 14

A gala dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York on April 15, 1952, marked the publication of the Great Books of the Western World. After a prime rib dinner, the 500 subscribers to the "Founders' Edition" were treated to speeches by University of Chicago Chancellor Lawrence Kimpton, Jacques Maritain, Robert Oppenheimer, Clifton Fadiman, Senator William Benton, and of course Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins. Celebrating the project as "the most significant publishing event since Dr. Johnson's dictionary," with a touch of irony Benton favorably compared the subscribers present to Lord Chesterfield, Samuel Johnson's less-than-ideal patron. When Hutchins spoke, he was evangelical in his praise:

This is more than a set of books, and more than a liberal education. Great Books of the Western World is in an act of piety. Here are the sources of our being. Here is our heritage. This is the west. This is its meaning for mankind.

The evening concluded with the announcement that the first two sets produced would be presented to Queen Elizabeth and President Truman, the "heads of the two great English-speaking nations." The Queen's set was bound in blue leather, while the President's copy was bound in maroon: "the gone-but-not-fully-forgotten color of the uniforms of the University of Chicago football team."

### Case 15

Reaction to the Great Books of the Western World upon publication was, in the main, politely respectful. But one voice loudly cried foul. In a New Yorker review that Adler called a "hatchet job," Dwight Macdonald referred to the set as a "fetish of The Great" and accused its producers of being "a typical expression of the American advertising psyche." "The way to put over a two-million-dollar cultural project," he lamented, "is, it seems, to make it appear as pompous as possible." To Hutchins' claim that the set of books represented a liberal education upon which the fate of the country and the world depended, Macdonald responded: "Madison Avenue cant" and "poppycock." He concluded, "the problem is not placing these already available books in people's

hands...but getting people to read them, and the hundred pounds of densely printed, poorly edited reading matter assembled by Drs. Adler and Hutchins is scarcely likely to do that."

Macdonald was reacting to the physical format (with two columns of dense, encyclopedia-sized type the set earned the reputation for being virtually unreadable), but he was also reacting to the inferior translations selected. The editorial board saved money by selecting only texts in the public domain, even purposefully overlooking excellent recent translations of Greek texts by University of Chicago faculty members. Homer is presented in prose form, and most of the translations date from the nineteenth century. In a telling sign of the times, no one seriously questioned the texts selected--even Macdonald had no real complaint. Years later, when the second edition appeared, it was greeted with scorn for its lack of inclusiveness.

#### Case 16

Initially the Great Books of the Western World sold poorly. In the first year it sold 1,863 copies (500 to the original subscribers), then a mere 138 sets in 1953. It looked as though the \$2,000,000 expended would never be recouped, but in 1956 Encyclopaedia Britannica hired Kenneth M. Harden to manage sales. A long-time encyclopedia salesman who knew the value of a "foot in the door," Harden understood the hard sell. He marketed the set door-to-door with a simple installment plan (\$10 down and \$10 a month) and used premiums such as a free Bible and bookshelf to entice would-be buyers. Backed by colorful brochures, posters, and magazine advertisements, he reached the mass market to sell over 50,000 copies in 1961. In 1964, William Benton reminded his staff that, "for 196 years, the man with the foot in the door has been the great source of our company's strength," then effortlessly blending culture with commerce, he applauded his staff for their role as educational leaders "in a world hungering above all else" for "an education of which the Great Books is a supreme symbol." The Great Books of the Western World was a financial disaster until it was sold as Hutchins feared it would be--by door-to-door salesmen touting "culture" to an insecure American middle class.

#### Case 17 "WESTERN" CULTURE

In 1949 Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke, both members of the "Fat Man's Great Books Course," organized a bicentennial celebration of Goethe's birth. Walter Paepcke, University of Chicago Trustee, was president of Container Corporation of America, and Elizabeth was a designer and decorator who helped to showcase the talents of Chicago designers by using their works in Container Corporation of America advertisements. The Paepckes' commitment to education and the arts meshed with University of Chicago Professor of Italian Literature Giuseppe Borgese's desire to bring recognition to humanist culture and to help revitalize an appreciation for German cultural achievements in post-War America. World War II was a great blow to what Hutchins had termed the "Great Conversation" of western civilization. To the Paepckes, Borgese, and Hutchins, the nationalism of the war years fractured western culture, and they meant to heal the wounds with a celebration of humanism to be held in the dying mining town of Aspen, Colorado. Albert Schweitzer was the featured speaker at the festival that also included Thornton Wilder, William Ernst Hocking, Jose Ortega y Gasset, and Robert Hutchins. Eero

Saarinén designed the festival tent to accommodate the large crowds that gathered for the speakers and musical performances.

#### Case 18

The Paepckes were overwhelmed by their success and anxious to establish a more permanent educational attraction in Aspen, where they had extensive real estate holdings. They first hoped to establish "Aspen College." Hutchins took the idea of a liberal arts college seriously enough that he considered asking Richard McKeon to join forces with the Paepckes to establish the new college. Because it was to be devoted only to the liberal arts, Paepcke joked that the library need only purchase the titles included in the Great Books of the Western World. But the financial infeasibility of a college caused the Paepckes to scale back their ambition--from the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation and Music Festival, they developed the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies into what Adler called the "Athens of the West," a regular series of summer programs that flourishes to this day where people vacation in a beautiful natural setting stimulated by intellectual and cultural fare.

#### Case 19

In its first year Mortimer Adler led a series of Great Books lectures at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. The series bore little resemblance to the seminars Adler usually taught. It lasted throughout the summer with an ever-changing audience. In an effort to capture the spirit of his regular seminars, Adler selected a small panel to read a text that they discussed in front of the larger group of participants who had not necessarily read the book. The approach was a failure. Talking to people who had not read the assigned text defied one of the Great Books seminars' basic tenets: that readers' direct interactions with the Great Books were a precondition for a stimulating and fruitful discussion. Henry and Clare Boothe Luce, who had participated in some of the early panels, shared Adler's frustration with the format. Henry Luce suggested that Adler refocus the seminars on a few texts and a limited audience. Luce found typical American businessmen boorish philistines with little inkling of the Great Books. They seemed a perfect target audience--hungry for self-improvement, as long as it was not too taxing. Adler restructured the Aspen Institute classes into intensive two-week seminars comprising six two-hour sessions each week featuring readings geared toward businessmen. Coined "Executive Seminars," the classes offered the Great Books to America's vacationing business leaders who could enjoy scenery, cool mountain air, and other Aspen attractions as they pursued self-enlightenment and discovered management strategies in the writings of Marx and Machiavelli. Lest the intellectual work prove too strenuous, participants could enjoy a massage at the end of the session.

#### NO CASE 20

#### Case 21 SPREADING THE WORD

Great Books seminars proved to be a very popular form of adult education in the United States. As early as 1927, the American Library Association worked with John Erskine to print reading guides for library groups that wanted to discuss the Great Books. But it took the business acumen of William Benton and Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke to launch

a fully developed program. In early 1947, Walter Paepcke wrote a letter to Elizabeth in Aspen recounting a luncheon with Robert Hutchins where they discussed setting up the Goethe Festival and organizing a "foundation which will handle Great Books courses throughout the country." The Great Books Foundation, as it was incorporated later that year, produced circulars for local libraries to distribute to those interested in establishing Great Books programs, as well as publishing inexpensive reprints of the Great Books for the classes. In 1949, the Great Books Foundation even sponsored a weekly television program, "It's a Great Idea," with Elizabeth Paepcke as a regular panel guest.

The television program was short lived, but by the mid 1950s the Great Books Foundation had established over 7,000 courses across the country. There was much to celebrate at the fifteenth anniversary dinner for the "Fat Man's Great Books Course": Aspen was a thriving success, the Great Books Foundation was sponsoring adult education classes across the country, and the Great Books of the Western World was selling briskly.

## Case 22      BACK TO CHICAGO

The fifteenth anniversary dinner for the "Fat Man's Great Books Course" was the high-water mark for the Great Books in American culture. Within a decade feminist critics were entering into what would become a prolonged attack on the western canon, a battle taken up in subsequent years by a wide variety of scholars supporting multicultural diversity in the academy.

In the tradition of Adler, and with an educational philosophy similar to the one outlined by Hutchins in his *Higher Learning in America*, University of Chicago Committee on Social Thought professor Allan Bloom re-enlivened the Great Books debate in 1983. Bloom was an established scholar who had written on Shakespeare and translated Plato and Rousseau. His best-selling work, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), which he called "a report from the front," was a lightning rod in the tempest that surrounded the "Culture Wars" of the 1980s. To stem the tide of cultural relativism he saw destroying higher education, Bloom advocated renewed attention to the texts championed by Adler. The goal of a liberal education should be to equip students with the tools to investigate "the question, 'What is man?'" That enduring question, according to Bloom, is best addressed by the classics of western culture. Like Adler before him, Bloom stirred public debate both on and off campus.

University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum, then at Brown University, entered the debate in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. She was disturbed primarily by Bloom's elitism, but she also thought his method of teaching the Great Books negated the possible benefits of such a curriculum. The kind of required lists Bloom advocated, she charged, "encourage passivity and reverence, rather than active critical reflection." Further, she rejected the way Great Books champions such as Bloom and Adler thought ahistorically about the texts and the ideas presented in them. For Nussbaum, a Great Books curriculum could foster a cohesive community with shared intellectual experience, but the books must be taught within an historical context to make them meaningful.

Adler was furious over Bloom's book--not so much for what it said as what it did not. Publicly calling Bloom a "fool," he wrote privately to inform him of his "apparent ignorance or neglect of [his] predecessors at the University of Chicago." The letter included a suggested reading list. First on the list was Adler's own *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

#### Case 23

In 1990, the Encyclopaedia Britannica issued a second edition of the Great Books of the Western World. The set expanded to sixty volumes by adding sixty-eight works by fifty-six authors not included in the original fifty-four-volume set. To many, the new revision purposefully ignored changes that had occurred on the intellectual and cultural landscape since the original set was issued nearly forty years earlier. What seemed to be a bit of cultural pretension in 1952 appeared as a cultural slap in 1990. The new edition gave a cursory nod to women writers (one volume is devoted to Jane Austen and George Eliot, and one title each by Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf was added), but writers of color were entirely ignored. While some critics responded to the new edition with a general rejection of canonical compilations, most attacked the set's lack of diversity. Adler reacted to the criticism as he always had, with vitriolic or dismissive arguments. He told the *Nation* that no African Americans were included on the editorial board "because no black American was necessary. No black American has written a great book." At the Library of Congress-sponsored book launch, he called the arguments for inclusivity "irrelevant."

While the furor surrounded the contents of the set, Encyclopaedia Britannica prepared to sell the set with the pragmatic realization that half of the market would be buying it not for reading, but "for furniture." Critics may have fretted that it contained so few women and no people of color, but Encyclopaedia Britannica was concerned that the original set contained too many olive bindings.

#### Case 24

The Great Books never became fully integrated in the College's curriculum as Adler and Hutchins hoped, but since the 1940s, when the Great Books were first taught in University of Chicago extension courses, they have maintained a vital centrality in the University's adult education program. In seminars not unlike those developed by John Erskine eighty-five years ago, students in the University of Chicago's Graham School Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults discuss the Great Books "from Homer to Joyce." Echoing Adler, the Graham School web site explains: "the authors studied in the Basic Program were chosen not only because their ideas are valued but because their works are models of intellectual inquiry." The School's catalog reiterates Matthew Arnold's cultural ideal when it describes the books as those "containing the best that has been thought and written in the Western tradition." Invoking the liberal arts ideal, the program offers a direct interaction with the Great Books that produces a "good citizenship in a modern democracy" leading to "a good life."