

THE POWER *of* THEN

Does a historical perspective clarify or cloud the perception of events?



BY MARGARET CAHOON

AS A MILLSAPS STUDENT'S education never ends, neither does the College's energy and drive to make that education ever better, ever more rounded, and ever stronger. When the Millsaps College faculty instated the Core Curriculum in the early 1990s, the goal was for students to graduate with seven distinctive Liberal Arts Abilities. In the 2005–06 school year, the Liberal Arts Abilities were reconsidered and reborn. This thinking and rethinking is symptomatic of the larger and ongoing process of developing and maintaining an appropriate and ideal liberal arts curriculum for the College.

Originally, the Liberal Arts Abilities numbered seven: Reasoning, Communication, Quantitative Thinking, Aesthetic Judgment, Global & Multicultural Awareness, Valuing & Decision-Making, and Historical Consciousness. So named, the Abilities were an effort to delineate what it was, exactly, that Millsaps intended to teach its students.

In the 2005–06 school year, Dr. Michael Gleason and the Core Council's primary agenda was to reevaluate that big question: What do we want our students to learn?

"We open up students' minds to the possibility of looking at and thinking about materials in new ways," says Gleason, director of the Core Curriculum. "What they do with those materials—that's



their call, that's their choice. Which they accept or reject as worthwhile to pursue or valid, that's entirely up to their skills of reasoning and communication. Accept or reject—I don't care, but above all, develop a coherent ability to analyze and formulate persuasive arguments."

The Liberal Arts Abilities that were already in place "turned out to be, in fact, what we wanted our students to be learning," says Gleason. Having decided that the Liberal Arts Abilities formed the foundation of a Millsaps education, Gleason says, the Core Council "looked at each one of those Abilities, defined them, and examined their implications. We considered adding, we considered subtracting, and what we actually did was reorganize and redefine the main abilities."

The redefinition was largely the result of faculty input. Over eight or nine months, faculty members were asked in a series of surveys to analyze and comment on the standing Liberal Arts Abilities. As a result, the Liberal Arts Abilities have been reorganized and restructured and now number four: Reasoning, Communication, Historical Consciousness, and Social & Cultural Awareness. "They're all still the same—they've just been reorganized and, in my opinion, sharpened," Gleason says.

The question of Historical Consciousness and its definition was a particular point of contention, in part because of its original

definition as “the ability to understand the achievements, problems, and challenges of the present with perspectives gained from a study of the past.”

“There were historians who became very upset that this so-called ability, Historical Consciousness, was based on an understanding of the present,” Gleason says. “The argument was made that Historical Consciousness should be linked first with an understanding of the past and use the past at least as a point of comparison.”

Historical Consciousness, as opposed to its previous focus on the present, is now defined by the Core Council as “the ability to understand the achievements, problems, and perspectives of the past and to recognize their influence upon the course of events.”

THE LIBERAL ARTS ABILITY of Historical Consciousness is not an issue of memorization or even of a specific learning objective. “I don’t know that in teaching a history class I’ve ever said ‘Historical Consciousness,’ to be perfectly frank,” says Dr. Sanford Zale, associate professor of history. “I do think that it’s just what we do in history. I know the current definition—we try to understand the achievements

and problems of the past, and we try to see how they’ve influenced the course of events. Obviously, that is in fact what we are doing, among other things. It’s not the only thing we’re doing, but it is the most important thing that we’re actually doing, at least in my judgment, when we teach history.”

The concepts of history and historicism are an intellectual issue for Dr. Steven Smith, professor of philosophy and religious studies and director of the Heritage program, whose academic interests include the philosophy of history. When he came to Millsaps in 1985, there were many things that he found encouraging about coming to the College and the state: “People at Millsaps had a sense of being a part of Mississippi history,” he says. With the College’s own trail-blazing history in refusing to stand down on teaching evolution, in integrating and encouraging integration, in caring about the local public schools, there was a feeling, Smith says, of seeing Millsaps as the leader of progress. Millsaps is a product of its history, as students are a product of theirs.

But there is a larger issue at stake here: Is history even real? Is there any single, objective perspective on the past that can be taught and learned? Is there one true story of civilization? “Where we



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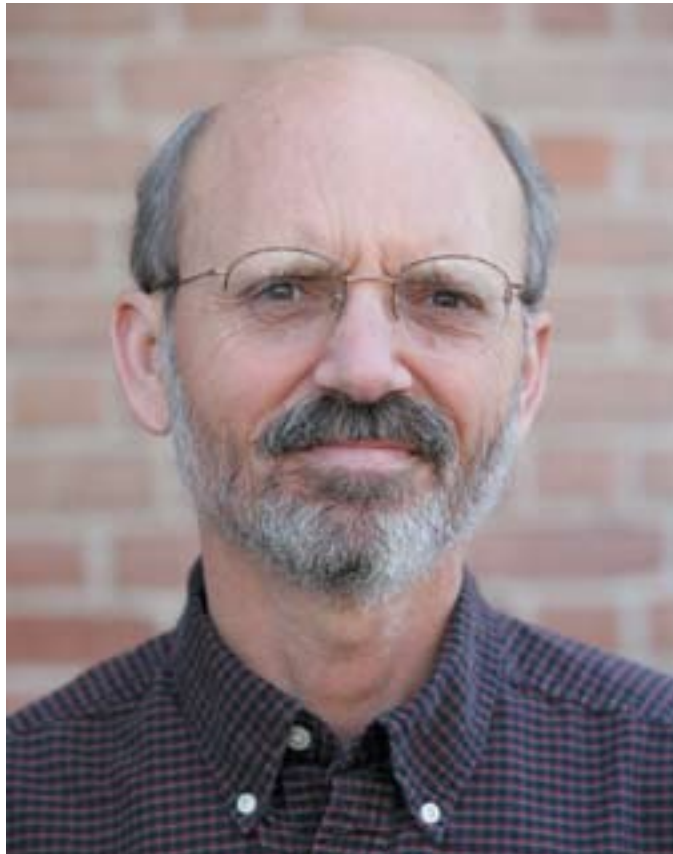
do have debates among Millsaps faculty,” Smith says, “is whether there’s anything stretching over time and across cultures that’s coherent and powerful enough that we could all agree that it’s a reality and that our various courses should somehow serve as studies of history in this sense.”

This debate is not limited to faculty, either. “Right now my Millsaps education is forcing me to question the very essence of history,” says Meagan Malone, a sophomore majoring in French and philosophy, with a concentration in piano. “What we know as historical content or fact is necessarily constructed after the event. To make history even more subjective, it is necessarily constructed by someone who is inherently linked with a variety of values, ideas, and goals.”

INDEED, THE Historical Consciousness Ability has proved contentious in both its old and new forms precisely because it is not merely a matter of content knowledge or historical literacy. “It’s not a completely innocent thing that just any right-minded person would be in favor of,” Smith says. “It can be understood to involve seeing yourself and your society immersed in this larger historical flow, with a larger logic to it that would actually constrain people and limit their horizons.” Smith posits that if students see history as a predetermined set of baggage they are destined to carry with them, they may not be able to lift themselves above that to “see in a more truly universal, more fair way what’s going on around them.”

Historical Consciousness is expected to be best developed by the courses taken to fulfill Core Requirements 2-5, in which faculty from the Division of Arts and Letters teach multidisciplinary courses that combine history, philosophy, literature, religion, and fine arts. “It’s part of the design of our Core Curriculum that, in all the Core classes, these Liberal Arts Abilities are addressed—not every single one in every class, but most of them in any given class,” says Smith.

Students may choose between two methods of fulfilling these four course requirements—they may take four separate Topics courses (one each semester beginning in the fall of the freshman year and continuing through the spring of sophomore year), or they may enroll in the Heritage program, which fulfills the requirements in a single year. The intensive Heritage program is equivalent to two courses each semester with a tag team of faculty teaching across disciplines, and may be taken only by first-year students.



Dr. Steven Smith, whose academic interests include the philosophy of history, is professor of philosophy and religion and director of Heritage.

“Part of the fun of Heritage, certainly, is the interdisciplinary nature of it,” says Gleason, who taught in the Heritage program for six years and served as its director for three. “The historian, the religious studies professor, the lit critic, and the philosopher every single day ask one another to look at this material with new eyes or from a different angle or from some perspective outside of their area of expertise. It really is a fun, fertile area of thought.”

On the other hand, Smith says that some students may choose to take Topics courses specifically to avoid the tidy historical continuity that Heritage may seem to offer. These students would prefer to study specific subjects in their own contexts, as opposed to

within a larger continuum and chronology.

That said, students have not, as yet, risen up against professors who expect them to have an awareness of the past; Heritage remains a popular and distinctive program on campus; and the history department is still thriving.

“Everything I do is meant to foster Historical Consciousness,” says Dr. Amy Forbes, assistant professor of history. “I think the current definition of Historical Consciousness captures very well what we, as historians, try to achieve with our students. Part of understanding the past is recognizing that history is dynamic—it is not facts to be memorized, but arguments to be evaluated.”

Though it may be at the forefront of debate in some circles, there are certainly students who do not even contemplate the Liberal Arts Abilities as part of their studies. Thomas Jackson, a senior, says he believes the Abilities “make for a really well-rounded education.” But because he is so wrapped up in the performing arts department as a music major, Jackson says he doesn’t deliberately consider them in relation to his academic work.

Even so—even when students do not consciously align certain courses with certain Abilities—the concepts find their way into students’ minds and studies. As part of his major, Jackson has studied a lot of music history. “Once you understand the context of the pieces and the circumstances surrounding the composition,” he says, “you put it into your practice, and it becomes part of your performance. You don’t have to think about it while you’re performing.” A sense of a role or a place in the artistic continuum can, indeed, be seen as Historical Consciousness.

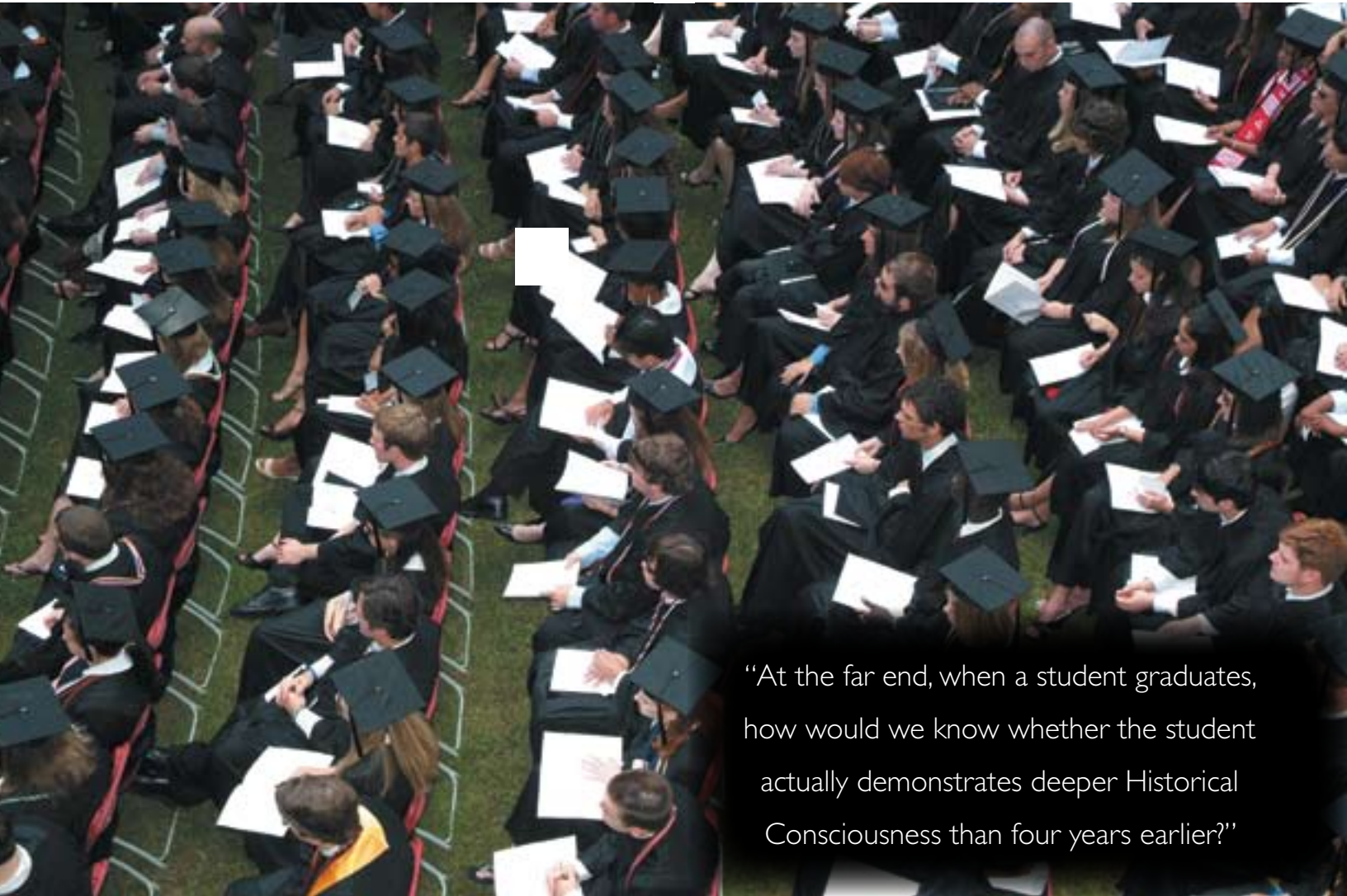
Zale sees Historical Consciousness develop in his Heritage students when they are asked to identify and explain the significance of various works of art. “What many people have difficulty doing

when they first come in as freshmen is giving some sort of historical account of the work of art and architecture, beyond that it was made and where it was made, etc.," says Zale. "What we try to get them to do in Heritage is to see how this work of art or architecture reflects broader trends, broader things going on at the time, political developments of the time, general intellectual developments of the time, religious beliefs of the time, and, in some cases, economic developments of the time. How can we relate this particular art object or architecture object to what was happening in that time and place? How are the principal ideas and realities of that particular time and place somehow or other reflected in, or manifested in, the artwork? Many students do develop the ability to do that over time, and that, to me, indicates that their Historical Consciousness is on the rise."

"For me, it's important to recognize the typical features of past contexts," says Smith. "But the main thing is to see how they're relevant to us now, how they form some sort of legacy. When we're colleagues in Heritage, Zale and I debate these priorities all the time."

Those who do not fully comprehend the meaning of a liberal arts education may well wonder why all this matters. Of course, there is the intellectual contemplation of one's own role in the course of events and society's effects on the past and the present. There is also the pedagogical issue of whether everything in human and world history is connected—and if so, how—and also whether that continuity can be taught. But why formalize through dictated Liberal Arts Abilities what is inherently an unending debate?

IN PART, THE REASON is that students are not the only ones with core requirements: As Millsaps students must meet the College's requirements, so must Millsaps itself meet the requirements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and present to that accrediting body the College's own expectations of its students and how they are being fulfilled. The association calls its core requirements "basic qualifications that an institution must meet to be accredited with the Commission on



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Colleges.” Millsaps was initially accredited by SACS in 1912, and most recently in 2002.

Among these accreditation requirements are stipulations about program content, the mission of the institution, degree-granting authority, faculty, campus resources, financial resources, and student support services. But the most pertinent requirement of the Liberal Arts Abilities discussion is the General Education mandate, which is as follows:

“[The institution] requires in each undergraduate degree program the successful completion of a general education component at the collegiate level that (1) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree, (2) ensures breadth of knowledge, and (3) is based on a coherent rationale. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent. These credit hours are to be drawn from and include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts; social/behavioral sciences; and natural science/mathematics. The courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession. The institution provides a written justification and rationale for course equivalency” (*Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*, 2.7.3).

In short, each accredited institution must require of its students a certain number of credit hours in general education requirements, and those requirements must reflect the purpose of the institution.

The association “puts all members on the spot to back up what they claim,” Gleason says. “We at this college had to look at our list of learning outcomes to see which of them actually were verifiable. ... At the far end, when a student graduates, how would we know whether the student actually demonstrates deeper Historical Consciousness than four years earlier? That’s on this year’s Core Council agenda: How would we know?”

An eventual goal of last year’s reform and redefinition of the Core Curriculum is “not just gathering data but doing something constructive with it to effect curricular reform,” Gleason says. “It’s all very well if we learn that students master Reasoning in their laboratories and their biology senior comps and so forth. It’s all very well to point out that Communication is weak here and strong there in history or in classics. But now that we know that, what are we doing right, and what are we doing wrong that we want to modify?”

Now that the College has redefined and reorganized its Liberal Arts Abilities, the discussion over curricular development continues. “Last year was the what, this year is the how, and next year we’ll be getting on with it,” says Gleason. “It’s time to show SACS that, yes, we know what we’re doing, yes, we know how we’re doing it, and, yes, we’re using that data to sharpen our process even further.”

The Liberal Arts Abilities (1991)

Reasoning—the ability to think logically and reflectively, to analyze critically and constructively

Communication—the ability to express one’s thoughts and feelings coherently and persuasively through written and oral communication and to work effectively in collaboration with others

Quantitative Thinking—the ability to understand, interpret, and use numerical and scientific data and the technology of the modern world

Historical Consciousness—the ability to understand the achievements, problems, and challenges of the present with perspectives gained from a study of the past

Aesthetic Judgment—the ability to understand and appreciate creative responses to the world, and to develop one’s own modes of creative expression

Global and Multicultural Awareness—the ability to understand and appreciate a variety of social and cultural perspectives

Valuing and Decision-Making—the ability to understand and appreciate differing moral viewpoints; to make carefully considered, well-reasoned decisions; and to make a mature assessment of one’s own abilities, beliefs, and values

The Liberal Arts Abilities (2006)

Reasoning—the ability to analyze and synthesize arguments, to question assumptions, to evaluate evidence, to argue positions, to draw conclusions, and to raise new questions; varieties of reasoning include quantitative, scientific, ethical, and aesthetic:

Quantitative—the ability to use mathematical reasoning as a tool of analysis and as a means of conveying information

Scientific—the ability to understand and to use the scientific method

Ethical—the ability to analyze the principles and assumptions of moral claims and to make informed and reasoned moral arguments

Aesthetic—the ability to analyze visual, performing, or literary art

Communication—the ability to express ideas, arguments, and information coherently and persuasively orally and in writing

Historical Consciousness—the ability to understand the achievements, problems, and perspectives of the past and to recognize their influence upon the course of events

Social & Cultural Awareness—the ability to engage perspectives other than one’s own

Requirements of the Core Curriculum

Core 1: Introduction to Liberal Studies

Core 2: Topics in the Ancient World

Core 3: Topics in the Pre-Modern World

Core 4: Topics in the Modern World

Core 5: Topics in the Contemporary World

Core 6: Topics in Social and Behavioral Sciences

Core 7: Topics in Natural Science with Laboratory

Core 8: Topics in Mathematics

Core 9: Topics in Mathematics, Natural Science, or Computer Science

Core 10: Reflections on Liberal Studies