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Ursinus Colloquium on Liberal Education

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Ursinus Colloquium on Liberal Education: Curriculum Matters

Paul Stern

Ursinus College

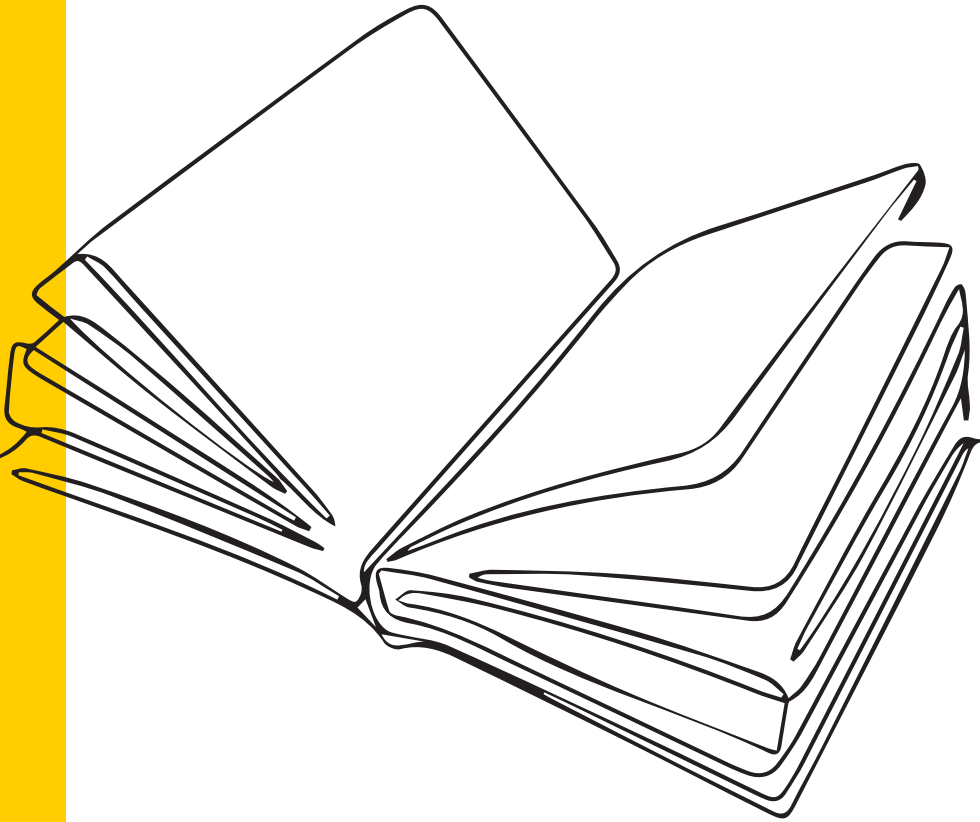
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June 6-7, 2024

URSINUS COLLOQUIUM ON LIBERAL EDUCATION:

Curriculum Matters



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CONNECT WITH US

During the Colloquium

We want to help you make productive connections with other participants! Please fill out this form to indicate areas of interest you might wish to collaborate with others beyond this colloquium. We will follow up with participants and help you connect.



← SCAN ME

After the Colloquium

We are keeping an archive of materials related to this colloquium at ursinus.edu/colloquium. Please return to that page after the colloquium for an expanding list of resources.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum Matters!

What should our students read? No question is more crucial to liberal education, nor more vexed. It's tempting to avoid it, which we sometimes do by telling ourselves that any mandatory curriculum subverts the good of student choice. Yet it's doubtful that those who come to us for an education are already equipped to specify its content. What's more, why our students should read texts as part of one curriculum beyond their disciplinary focus is a question that requires clarity among ourselves as practitioners of liberal education as well as for productive engagement with current and future students.

Thus, rather than avoid these questions, we propose to tackle them head-on. That is the aim of this year's Ursinus Colloquium on Liberal Education. There is no shortage of matters to consider: Are there texts that must be on the syllabus? By what criteria do we make this judgment? How is it possible to establish a program of prescribed readings? Once established, how is it possible to maintain it? Our discussion of texts makes reading central to liberal education. To encourage students to read complicated texts carefully has always been difficult. How should we address the impact of social media and artificial intelligence? Finally, what change do we hope to bring about in our students' lives with this program of reading, talking, and writing about a set of prescribed texts? These are the topics that will engage us during the next day and half.

Consensus about such matters of perennial and profound dispute seems unlikely. But in the present circumstances, when the worth of liberal education is widely challenged, we can't afford to evade the controversy. Fortunately, as we know, there's pleasure in thinking together about perennial disputes. The Ursinus Colloquium provides a forum for free, spirited, and wide-ranging discussion of the purpose of liberal education and the practices required to sustain it. This year's theme—Curriculum Matters—will, we trust, produce just that sort of discussion and reinvigorate practices around curriculum development and design. We're pleased to join in this conversation with colleagues who care deeply about an education of such great worth.

—Paul Stern, Professor of Politics (Ursinus College)

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Day 1: Thursday, June 6

2:30 to 3 p.m.
Schellhase Commons
Check-in

3 to 3:15 p.m.
Commons 105
Welcome and Opening Remarks
President Robyn Hannigan (Ursinus College)
Paul Stern (Ursinus College)

3:15 to 5 p.m.
Commons 105
Afternoon Roundtable and Discussion: Curriculum Matters!
Participants:
Laura DeSisto (Johns Hopkins University)
Katherine Jo (Duke University)
Pano Kanelos (University of Austin)
Jonathan Zimmerman (University of Pennsylvania)
Moderator: Stephanie Mackler (Ursinus College)

5:30 to 7 p.m.
**Faculty and Staff Dining Room,
Wisner Center**
Dinner

7 to 8:30 p.m.
**Student Interactive Space,
Schellhase Commons (second floor)**
Informal Conversation and Reception

Day 2: Friday, June 7

8:30 to 9 a.m.
Innovation and Discovery Center (IDC) Atrium
Continental Breakfast

9 to 10:40 a.m.
IDC 114
Session 1: What should we read?
Discussion facilitated by Elizabeth Catania (Vanderbilt University) and Thomas Merrill (American University)

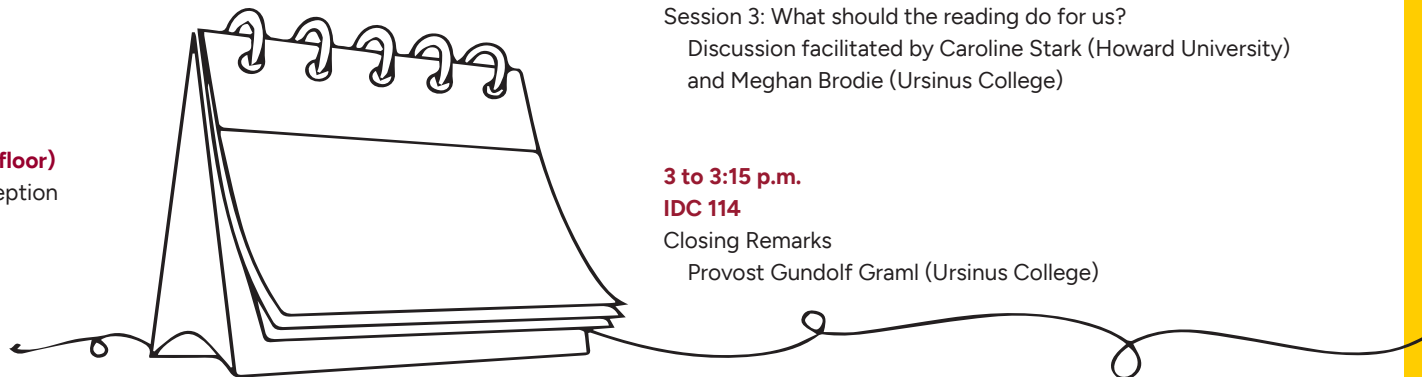
10:40 to 11 a.m.
IDC Atrium
Coffee Break

11 a.m. to 12:40 p.m.
IDC 114
Session 2: Why should we read?
Discussion facilitated by Dale Brown (Western Michigan University), Dini Metro-Roland (Western Michigan University), and Diane Skorina (Ursinus College)

12:40 to 1:30 p.m.
IDC Atrium
Lunch

1:30 to 3 p.m.
IDC 114
Session 3: What should the reading do for us?
Discussion facilitated by Caroline Stark (Howard University) and Meghan Brodie (Ursinus College)

3 to 3:15 p.m.
IDC 114
Closing Remarks
Provost Gundolf Graml (Ursinus College)



FOR CONSIDERATION

In the spirit of Socratic inquiry, we will think together about a series of open questions around liberal arts curricula. Please consider the following:

Opening Questions

- What does it mean to say that the curriculum *matters*?
- Is it necessary for curriculum to be “common”? If so, why? If not, why not?
- How should colleges situate “the curriculum” in relation to pre-professional or career training?
- What do you think are the most significant obstacles to meaningful conversations about the curriculum?
- What, if anything, gives you hope about the future of the curriculum in liberal education?

What should we read?

- What should be in the curriculum?
- What guides your thinking on selecting texts for transformative conversations?
- How do you navigate different priorities among your faculty (and student!) communities?
- How do you bring new faculty into an existing curriculum?

Why should we read?

- Why do you read?
- Do you/why do you think reading is necessarily the foundation of an education?
- What do you do to convince your students that reading is worthwhile, and what strategies do you use to get them to do it?

What should the reading do for us?

- How do written, visual, and aural texts, which we “read” in different ways, cultivate different types of discernment?
- How do we communicate the value of reading at a moment when technology conditions us to consume short texts (tweets, photos, TikToks, posts, etc.) rather than longer ones, and makes it easier for students to access AI-generated summaries and/or interpretations of longer texts?
- How do you make the case to students and families that reading in a common curriculum gives them an edge that no other educational experience can?

Ursinus College respectfully acknowledges that our campus rests on Lenapehoking, the ancestral and spiritual homelands of the following five nations: Delaware Tribe of Indians, Delaware Nation, Eelūnaapëewii Lakhëewiit (Delaware Nation at Moraviantown), Stockbridge-Munsee Community, and Munsee-Delaware Nation (Ontario). Our community carries names derived from the Lenape language—names holding spiritual and cultural meaning while also bearing the remembrance of the systematic removal of the Lenape people over 250 years ago by European colonial powers, whose legacy still reinforces and benefits from the Lenape’s disenfranchisement. Ursinus College commits to collaboration, representation, and inclusion as we work together with the Lenape people to bring about healing and reconciliation between and among all our communities.

About Ursinus College

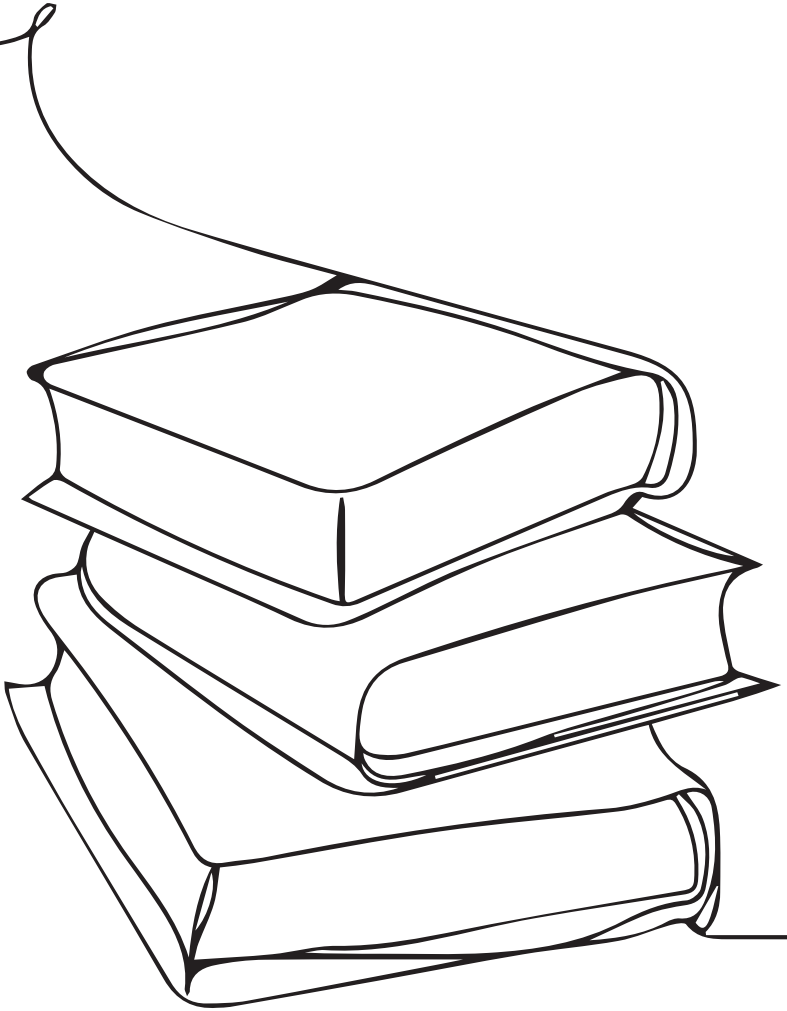
As one of the nation’s “Colleges that Change Lives,” Ursinus College and its 1,500 undergraduate students have the unusual advantage of viewing today’s greatest challenges through a multi-disciplinary lens that permeates our academic culture. Our Common Intellectual Experience and the Quest: Open Questions Open Minds inquiry-based core curriculum are nationally recognized for providing a support structure that encourages students to challenge their own assumptions. A top 100 national liberal arts college, Ursinus is noted among the most prestigious in the country for its undergraduate teaching and within the state for its career outcomes. We see ourselves as environmental stewards with a legacy of civic engagement, spearheaded by our longstanding affiliations with the Bonner Foundation and Project Pericles. Our tree-lined, 170-acre campus is located 25 miles northwest of Philadelphia in Collegeville, Pa.

About the Teagle Foundation

The Teagle Foundation is committed to supporting educational excellence and to enhancing student learning by broadening exposure to the liberal arts. Liberal arts learning helps individuals to develop their critical thinking skills, to be better able to evaluate claims and ideas on the basis of evidence, and to communicate with clarity and civility, both verbally and through the written word. The Teagle Foundation is focused on how we can best champion the liberal arts while being attentive to the challenges facing American higher education.

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