Chapter 4

Getting to the Core of the Humanities, or Who’s Afraid of Gloria Anzaldúa?

Virtually all of the issues central to debates about the nature and value of a humanities education have figured prominently in the history of the core curriculum in the United States. For this reason, I want to extend my exploration of the perennial nature of the so-called humanities crisis by looking at how debates regarding the practical value of a humanities education, and the role that theory, criticism, and professionalization ought to play in the design of both courses and programs, have also shaped the struggle to define what a core humanities education ought to be.

I want to begin with a story. In the early summer of 2010 faculty members in my department received an urgent email from our chairperson. As part of a recent initiative to revise the core curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences we were being asked to develop a new set of core courses. Moreover, if we wanted to retain the current two-course requirement in literature (fulfilled jointly by a mix of courses in English, Classics, and Modern Languages and Literatures) we would have to come up with a new, two-tiered system, an initial foundational course required of all students, and a second set of courses at a more advanced level, from which students could choose one more course to complete their core literature requirement. Since we did not currently have such a foundational course, we would have to spend the summer developing one (along with the other departments), rearticulating the mission and goals of our core courses,
and choosing a set of current or new courses that would fulfill the requirement for a second course. An ad hoc group of faculty began to meet, and by late August they had hammered out the detailed outlines of a plan. The foundational or first-tier course would be called “Literature, Interpretation, and Value.” It would introduce students to a range of literary forms (poetry, narrative fiction, drama, etc.), a critical vocabulary of terms and concepts often used in the analysis and interpretation of literature, and a framework for exploring the relationship between literature and culture. Faculty in the departments of English, Classical Studies, and Modern Languages and Literatures would teach this course. The foundational course would prepare students for a range of second-tier courses in which they studied literature in more focused and specialized kinds of ways, applying the critical vocabulary and methodologies—and exploring in more detail some of the issues—they covered in their foundational course. While I had some questions about the details of the foundational course, and about which courses ought to qualify for inclusion on the list of second-tier courses, I was basically in support of the proposal, which seemed like a reasonable compromise among competing views about what a core course should do. I assumed the core revision committee would accept it without much debate.

I was wrong. When the final product went to the committee it generated a number of concerns that revealed more clearly just what the committee was looking for and how it conflicted with our department’s own vision of how core courses in our discipline should be shaped. It turned out that the committee wanted a foundational course mainly organized around the reading of canonical texts in the Western tradition. They were concerned that we did not stipulate that our foundational courses would have this orientation, and that we did not stipulate which specific texts students would be required to read. Indeed, the committee was so concerned about making sure our reading lists comprised canonical works that they urged us to come up with a single reading list or multi-department canon that students in all of the foundational courses would read. They also wanted us to keep the course content general in nature, to avoid focusing too much attention on critical approaches or intellectual subjects they believed were keyed to our own professional interests and areas of specialization. The committee’s concerns echoed the deep anxiety about professionalization I discussed in chapter 2. In their view, core courses should not focus either on theories and methods specific to the disciplines, nor should they be about issues related to the faculty member’s