

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



OPINION

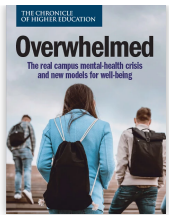
By *Roosevelt Montás*

NOVEMBER 16, 2021

As an undergraduate at Columbia University 30 years ago, I learned to make sense of the adult world into which I was entering through the university's core curriculum. I grew up in Cambita Garabitos, a rural town in the Dominican Republic, and then in Queens, N.Y. My father had only a sixth-grade education. The core set me up for a lifetime of intellectual growth.

Years later, when serving as director of Columbia's Center for the Core Curriculum, I was confronted with the criticisms such programs face. Given the university's emphasis on the "Western tradition," I often had to contend with accusations that liberal education was, in fact, indoctrination in Western values. This criticism came from predictable sources, like Chinese government bureaucrats wary of the introduction of American-style liberal education in Chinese universities. I also encountered it from people championing voices and interests that have been historically marginalized in the Western tradition — women and people of color especially.

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In responding to these criticisms, I made two arguments at once. First, that a liberal education does not need to be, as it is at Columbia, centered on Western classics. And second, that Western texts and debates in fact underpin much of the emerging global culture and that their importance, especially in Western societies, is inescapable. Contemporary notions like human rights, democracy, gender equality, scientific objectivity, the free market, equality before the law, and many others, cannot be adequately accounted for without studying the so-called Western tradition.

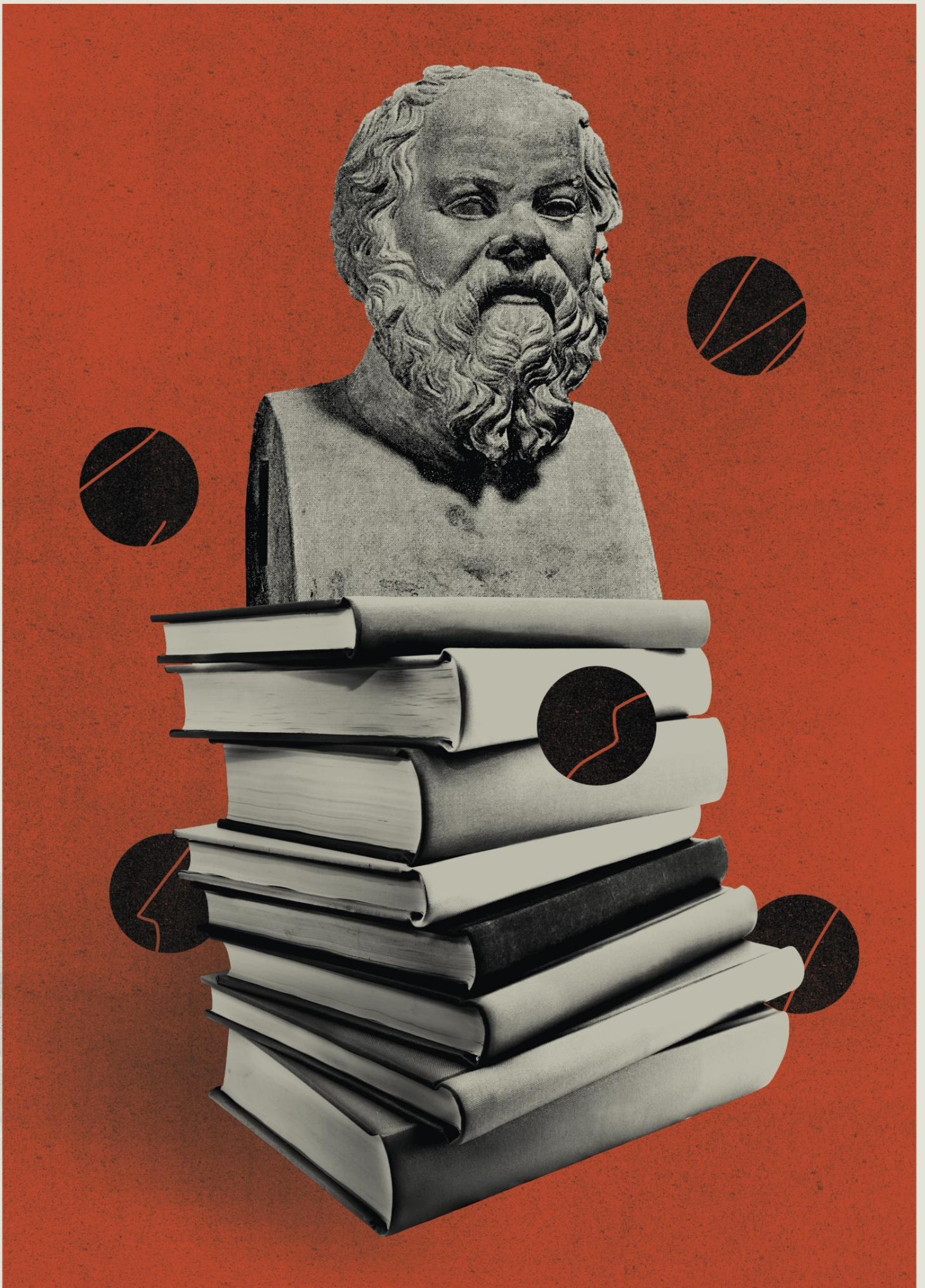
At Columbia, the first-year literature requirement acts as a “gateway drug” to the humanities.

“The West” as a category is, of course, itself problematic. For one thing, no large cultural formation has ever developed in isolation, and none can be treated as a separate and self-contained unit. For another, the banners of “Western civilization” and “Western culture” have been used to give cover to imperialist, racist, and colonialist agendas and to justify the subjugation and exploitation of “non-Western” people. But the term is also used to describe something more legitimate: a large and porous cultural configuration around the Mediterranean Sea, with strong Greco-Roman roots, that served as the historical seedbed for the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and much of what is called “modernity.” While the European continent figures prominently, the tradition incorporates defining elements from non-European sources like the Arab world, ancient Egypt and North Africa, and even the East. It is a tradition rife with fissures, where overturning the past is preferred to venerating it. Loose and fractured as this tradition of contest and debate is, key aspects of the modern world emerge from it. The tradition matters not because it is Western, but because of its contribution to human questions of the highest order.

One of the strongest currents in this tradition is *textual* — a documentary lineage of literary, philosophical, and artistic reflections stretching as far back as Homer and the pre-Socratic philosophers. This documentary tradition is a long and contentious conversation about fundamental aspects of human life. It is, roughly, what the Columbia core curriculum organizes into a program of general education via four required humanities courses (two of them yearlong): literature, ethics and politics, visual art, and music. (The core also includes required writing and science courses.)

Columbia's required core curriculum, weighted toward the history of Western writing and therefore toward "dead white males," also invites questions about inclusivity, diversity, and representation. Students never fail to ask these questions, and they are right to ask them: Such queries are integral to, rather than a distraction from, the liberal education that the core delivers. The very existence of a core curriculum puts the question of what is most worthwhile for all students to learn front and center, forcing the faculty and administrators to address it directly among themselves and in an ongoing dialogue with students and the public. A core curriculum requires that an institution think concretely about the meaning of general education and clarify for itself the values that inform its curricular choices. It also requires faculty members to think beyond their discipline and articulate their own specialized concerns within a broad framework of what a generally educated person ought to know.

The often uncomfortable and sometimes perilous task of defending a particular common curriculum is perhaps one of the reasons such programs are so rare. At most institutions, the faculty and administrators have decided that arguments and defenses for a specific required curriculum are not worth the trouble, and have simply replaced required courses with distribution requirements — and sometimes no requirements at all — that allow students and faculty to stay within their chosen intellectual comfort zones. It's an understandable decision, but one that shirks a basic responsibility of the faculty and which, in the long run, does a disservice to the students, to the institution, and to society.



JOAN WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE

In my years in the “hot seat,” as it were, I found students, as a rule, to be highly receptive to the logic that organizes the core curriculum once it is presented lucidly, honestly, and nondefensively. The fact that I am myself a person of color was always helpful in these

conversations in that it helped some students be more open to what I had to say and more willing to engage in good-faith dialogue.

Every year, I held continuing discussions with student groups and met individually with dozens of students. I would often begin these conversations by explaining my role as head *administrator* of the program; I did not determine its content nor dictate its shape. No one, in fact, does. The core, especially its content, represents a loose and shifting consensus among the instructors who teach it. It was important for students to understand that the core evolved over decades of debate and experimentation, and that it has never obeyed the vision of any single individual or interest group. I would then explain the logic of the core's curricular organization. What follows is an overview of that logic. I offer it as a model.

The four humanities courses in the core curriculum are taught in seminars of about 20 students each, so that the entire student body has the experience of examining roughly the same works at the same time in small, discussion-driven classes. While the content of the Columbia core curriculum undergoes regular revision, the program maintains a set of commitments that have guided its evolution for over 100 years. Those commitments fall into three categories: form, content, and revision.

Form

1. *Small classes.* The current maximum number of students in a core-curriculum class is 22. Small classes are absolutely necessary to develop intimacy between instructor and student and among students themselves.

2. *Discussion (rather than lectures).* The core instructor does not present him- or herself as an expert but as a facilitator of conversation about issues raised by the text under discussion. It is the active and engaged participation of each member of the group that constitutes a core class. Knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to student but constructed by the group through a shared process of inquiry and reflection.

3. *Nondisciplinarity.* Core instructors come from all academic disciplines, and while each brings specific disciplinary perspectives, the courses themselves are predisciplinary — that is, they occupy the ground from which the disciplines arise. Their goal is to introduce students not to the academic disciplines but to the intellectual problems that motivate them.

4. *Commonality.* A frequent quip among Columbia instructors who teach advanced undergraduates is that we know exactly what each student has forgotten. The shared intellectual background of the core opens unique pedagogical possibilities. When I teach the American Revolution in my senior seminar, I know that students have read Locke, as

well as Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, and Marx. When I discuss American slavery, I know that students have grappled with Aristotle's claims about natural slavery and with W.E.B. Du Bois's reflections on the Black experience in America. Beyond its intellectual benefits, the common intellectual experience is also a powerful creator of community, equipping students who may come from different backgrounds with a common vocabulary with which to talk across differences. Similarly, the core provides a link among alumni and between alumni and the institution — as our development officers admit, the core is a powerful tool for cultivating alumni relations.

Content

1. *Core texts*. That is, works of major cultural significance — a designation that is, of course, always open to debate and revision.

2. *A chronological presentation*. Each course begins in antiquity and moves toward the present, drawing connections among texts and paying attention to the evolution of ideas and debates. This approach, as noted, means that elite white men dominate the syllabus, reflecting the social conditions of intellectual production for much of Western history. But this deficiency is an occasion to examine both the mechanisms by which that status quo has been maintained and the ways in which it has always been challenged.

3. *Western focus*. In important ways, the core is a genealogy of the present. As such, it focuses on the lineage of thought and debate that has most directly shaped the Western world.

Revision

Lastly, the core is committed to continuing revision. In the case of the two yearlong humanities courses, the list of works read by all students is revised every three years, with a facultywide vote determining the set of works to be included in any given cycle. A syllabus revision is typically spearheaded by a small committee of faculty representing a broad range of disciplines and expertise. This committee will invite all faculty who teach in the core to propose changes in the syllabus. On the basis of the feedback gathered and of its members' own experience teaching in the core, the committee will draft a new syllabus. This draft syllabus is then subjected to scrutiny by the entire faculty teaching in the core, in various town-hall-style meetings. From this process, a final proposed new syllabus emerges. The faculty then votes on whether to adopt this new syllabus or keep the old.

I have traveled extensively in the U.S. and abroad to talk to faculty, students, and administrations involved in liberal-arts programs. And almost everywhere I go, people are surprised by the Columbia model. I often hear, almost reflexively, that

Columbia's model is impractical and could not be carried out anywhere else. This easy dismissal comes in various flavors: That such programs are too expensive; that no professors would want to teach them; that students won't want to take them; that college students in any but the most elite colleges lack the intellectual preparation to benefit from such programs. None of these objections stands up to scrutiny.

I readily grant that the Columbia program cannot be easily replicated in a wholesale way. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for a program in general education. But the broad set of principles and practices that guide the Columbia model can and should be widely adopted.

As a rule, graduate schools do not train generalists but specialists, and the academic profession rewards specialized "cutting edge" research far more than it does commitment to undergraduate teaching. Even at Columbia, where the core curriculum is inextricably tied to the identity of the undergraduate college, the structure of professional incentives in the academy pulls tenured and tenure-track faculty away from general education. Yet it's beginning to dawn on many humanities departments that their institutional future depends on the vitality of general education and the capacity of its faculty to make meaningful intellectual contact with students who will not major in the humanities. Paradoxically, intellectually transformative general education is the best way to attract majors to the liberal arts. As a colleague once pointed out, at Columbia the first-year literature requirement acts as a "gateway drug" to the humanities.

Recent programs that have taken inspiration from Columbia's core curriculum include Ursinus College's common intellectual experience, the university core curriculum at Seton Hall University, the core curriculum at Sacred Heart University, and the Columbia common core at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York. A full assortment of core-oriented programs can be found under the umbrella of the Association for Core Texts and Courses, whose annual conference attracts hundreds of faculty and administrators.

One noteworthy experiment in core-text liberal education was begun at Purdue University's College of Liberal Arts in 2017. The cornerstone integrated liberal-arts program is built around a two-semester sequence for first-year students in which they read, in chronological order, "transformative texts" from antiquity to the present. The program has revitalized the humanities at Purdue, attracting large numbers of STEM students, as well as faculty from across the humanities and social sciences. Students can go on to earn a certificate in liberal arts by following the first-year sequence, which fulfills part of the college's general-education requirement, with thematically arranged courses that extend humanistic thinking into fields like engineering, technology, and the health sciences.

Inspired by the success of the cornerstone program at Purdue, in late 2020 the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Teagle Foundation started a multiyear project to “reinvigorate the role of the humanities in general education” through “shared experiences with transformative texts.” Much about the future of the humanities will depend on whether institutions remain committed to liberal education for all students and find innovative ways to keep it at the center of undergraduate education, even as more and more students seek preprofessional and job-oriented degrees.

One of the dangers facing American higher education — and American civic culture in general — is a return to a time when liberal education was the exclusive province of a social elite. In the radical disruptions that have begun and will continue to reshape higher education, the most prestigious liberal-arts colleges are likely to survive, if not unscathed, at least not fundamentally transformed. Many well-to-do families from the U.S. and abroad will continue to seek — and pay for — a traditional liberal-arts experience for their children. But liberal education threatens to retreat to these bastions of privilege, with technical, vocational, and professional education, much of it online, for everyone else.

Liberal education threatens to retreat to bastions of privilege, with technical, vocational, and professional education, much of it online, for everyone else.

And yet liberal education should be the common education for all — not instead of a more practical education but as its prerequisite. We need nurses, computer scientists, accountants, engineers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, and professionals of every kind, to be liberally educated. And we should not expect economically anxious families to forgo what seems to them the most stable or lucrative careers and instead study only the liberal arts. We — by which I mean college faculty and administrators — should eliminate the opportunity costs of liberal education by embedding it in every undergraduate degree. In turn, putting serious liberal-arts programs at the center of the undergraduate curriculum will not only inspire more students to major in the liberal arts but will reinvigorate the professoriate and reverse the precipitous decline in faculty jobs in the humanities.

The years ahead will be tumultuous for American colleges. In the face of debilitating structural problems, public disinvestment, popular skepticism, and an unsustainable business model, higher education will see a fundamental restructuring in the decade ahead. Many institutions will not recover from the financial punishment the pandemic has inflicted; others will adapt in a way that makes them unrecognizable.

In this time of fundamental change, perhaps our greatest need is for clarity and conviction about the values and purposes of higher education. American colleges have maintained the ideal of liberal learning through previous periods of upheaval. As with every crisis, our current ordeal also presents a set of opportunities. The pandemic has exposed the depth of social inequality in America and may give our generation the necessary spur to address it. Making liberal education available and accessible to all students is the most important contribution that higher education can make to this effort.

This essay is adapted from the author's new book, [Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation](#) (Princeton University Press).

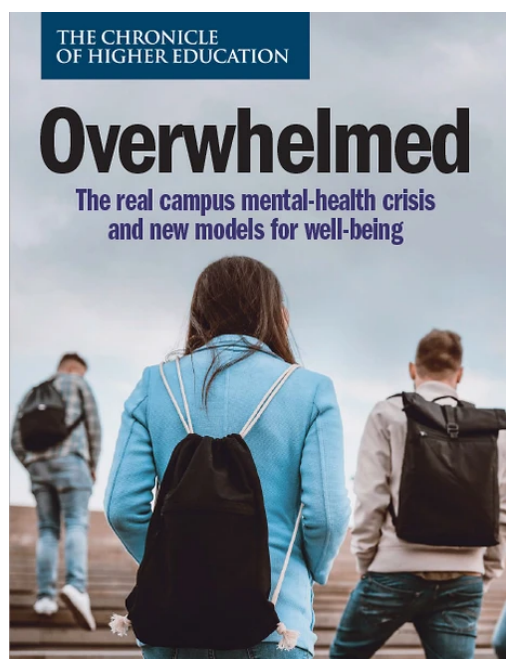
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SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

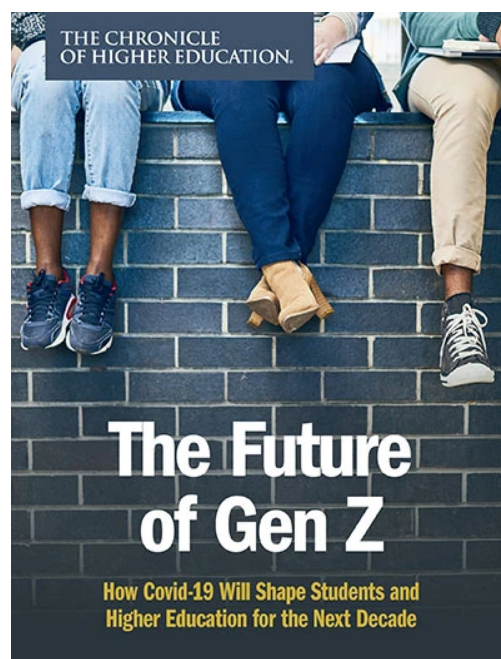
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Roosevelt Montás is a senior lecturer in Columbia University's Center for American Studies and director of its Freedom and Citizenship Program. He is the author of *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton University Press).

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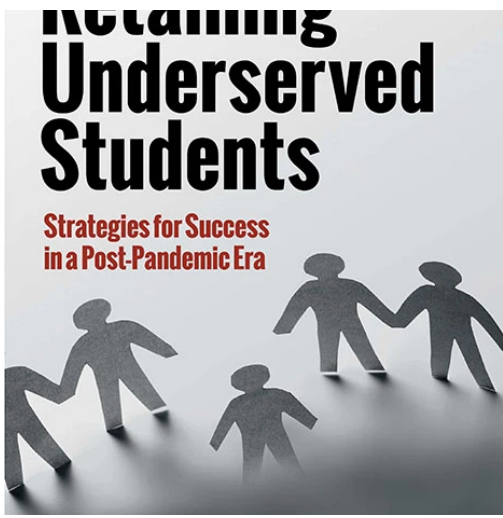


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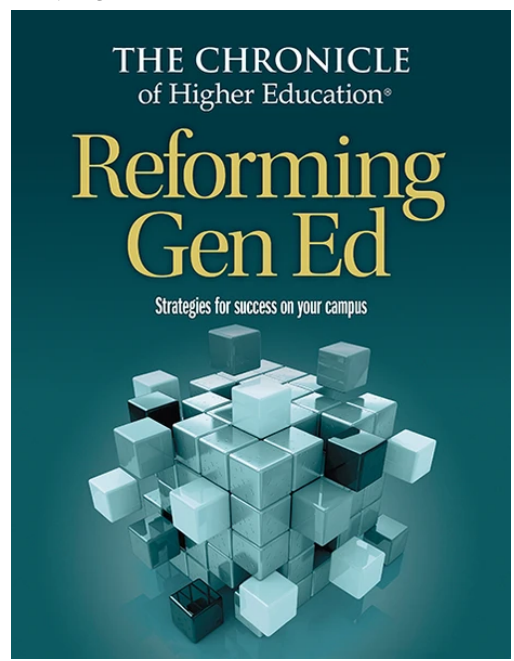


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