A Note to the Reader

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In 1984, a laudatory *New York Times* article appeared about the Columbia University Seminars. Among the featured players was McVickar Professor of Political Economy (and future Nobel Prize winner in economic science) William Vickrey, a full member of half a dozen sessions. Although his primary interest was Full Employment, Social Welfare, and Equity (Seminar #613), which he cochaired, the *Times* noted that he also was “concerned with questions of methodology in the social sciences, and as an urbanist, he studies the history and development of cities. As a pacifist and Quaker, he worries about world peace.”

Vickrey explained his wide-ranging Seminars curiosity by quoting the Roman playwright Terence: “I am a man, and nothing human is beyond my interest.”

Such is the nature of this volume. The assemblers have hoped to provide an intelligent lay readership with a diverse sampling of some of the most nettlesome, challenging, and rewarding intellectual excursions of both the present and the past, as broached within the unique framework of the Seminars. We trust that none of the contents are beyond *your* interest.

Admittedly, we were faced with a formidable challenge. How could we present a fair representation of the more than two hundred Seminars that have ever existed and the more than ninety that are still active? Without dwelling on administrative esoterica, suffice it to say that we embarked on an extensive process of soliciting and winnowing to yield the baker’s dozen

of essays now before you. We'd like to think that we've made a game effort. In any event, a complete list of all the Seminars is appended. May they further whet your appetite for this unique enterprise.

When Robert Pollack, the Seminars' current director, approached me to edit this volume, I was both flattered and fearful. As dean of Columbia College for most of my undergraduate years, Bob had been *my* dean. Now here he was, asking his former charge—who he knew back in the day mainly as an upstart reporter for the *Columbia Daily Spectator*—to head up a project of the deepest importance to him. For his trust and confidence, I am most grateful.

In his preface to the *Columbia College Bulletin*—the annual catalogue of course descriptions, requirements for majors, faculty titles and degrees, rules of conduct, lists of prizes, and other essential information for students—Bob always provided a welcoming overview. Invariably he summed up, “I hope you will be properly dazzled, as I am, by the richness of the intellectual fare in the pages that follow.” That is now this editor's hope as well.

A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS