

The Chronicle of Higher Education

November 19, 1999



*Prof. Bruce M. Gans of Wright College:
"Ideologies have no place as a controlling
dominant lens through which to see literature."*

A Campus Revival for the Great Books

With help from the National Association of Scholars, 11 colleges have started programs

By SCOTT CARLSON

Boredom led Bruce M. Gans to start a Great Books program at Wilbur Wright College. He had graded too many student essays on abortion, handguns, and other "hot" topics.

"The student responses were full of clichés -- whatever the TV guy or their community leaders were babbling," says Mr. Gans, an associate professor of English at the two-year institution within the City Colleges of Chicago.

So, two years ago, he created a certificate program on the Great Books of the Western tradition, designed to expose students to "the best that's been thought and said." These days, his students turn in papers with such titles as, "A Politically Incorrect Defense of the Athenian Empire" and "It's All About Respect: Social Codes in *Beowulf*."

Mr. Gans is among at least 11 faculty members around the country who, in the past few years, have started courses and programs focusing on Western culture. What links the 11: They are all members of the National Association of Scholars, the Princeton, N.J.-based group that is known for its crusades against multiculturalism and political correctness.

To the scholars' association, the new programs represent a grassroots change in

academe. And while some liberal faculty members are suspicious of the association's role, Stephen H. Balch, president of the group, says there's nothing sinister about its involvement in the curricular projects.

The organization has not handed out seed money for the programs. Mostly it has offered moral support and contacts. Four years ago, when David D. Mulroy created the first of the ventures -- a Great Books program at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee -- the association found an anonymous donor who gave the classics professor \$16,000 to help establish the program. In 1997, the association hosted an invitation-only conference on how to set up Great Books programs.

Mr. Balch emphasizes that the new Great Books programs were initiated by individual association members, not by the group itself. On each of the 11 campuses, people who are not members of the scholars' association were involved in the process, he notes. "Our faculty often act as catalysts -- they get it going, but it's not in any way an N.A.S. program that's being created."

The mission of the programs, he says, is simple: to offer undergraduates a solid foundation in Western thought, in contrast to the scattershot general-education requirements that students typically fulfill in college.

"The world we live in today is a world that has been largely shaped by developments that originated and grew out of what's loosely called the West," Mr. Balch says. "If you are asking why all these things happened, you can't even begin to answer those questions without studying the West."

The programs are different in design and intent. Five offer a minor on the Great Books or Western culture and three are certificate programs. The remaining three involve a year-long survey course for freshmen, a Great Books core curriculum, and an on-line master's-of-arts program for schoolteachers.

Most of the programs concentrate on classic texts of the Western world -- written by those much-maligned dead white men. The efforts focus on teaching the primary texts, based on the belief that students should rely on their own interpretations rather than on literary criticism that the professors find to be politically motivated or predictable.

That is exactly what makes some scholars skeptical of the new programs. A Great Books curriculum itself is hardly free of political motivations, these critics say. They note that Great Books programs can lack rigor by venerating the so-called classics and preventing students from applying modern interpretations.

Pious invocations of the Great Books are just as "brainless and uncritical" as some extreme forms of multiculturalism, says Gerald Graff, a professor of English at the University of Chicago. "I think there's a lot wrong with American education, and it

needs to be made more rigorous. But I don't think it's going to happen if we follow N.A.S.'s lead."

Undergraduate interest in the new Great Books programs has varied from campus to campus. Only 40 students are enrolled in Milwaukee's program. But at Wright -- where most of the 30,000 undergraduates are minority students -- more than 800 are enrolled in 30 courses in the Great Books program. The courses are linked by a theme chosen every semester -- this fall, it's "The Quest for Identity."

Mr. Gans, the English professor who started the program at Wright, thinks the curriculum at most two-year colleges is too vocational and aims for the lowest common denominator. "Community colleges are always looked down upon by four-year institutions," he says. "I wanted to give these kids an opportunity to say, 'Look, when I went to school, I didn't do my research paper on the death of Princess Diana' or some ephemeral, shallow thing. 'I did my research on *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides. I didn't take 'Literature of My Neighborhood.' I read *Beowulf*.'"

To earn a certificate in Wright's program, students must complete four Great Books courses in English, humanities, or philosophy. The program includes some activities not often seen at community colleges. It has spawned a journal of literary criticism, *Symposium*, which publishes student essays. Last spring, the college held a symposium in which students delivered papers on the pursuit of happiness as it relates to ideas from Shakespeare, Plato, and others.

While many professors have been using issues of race and gender to help students understand classic works, Mr. Gans is not on that bandwagon. "Ideologies have no place as a dominant, controlling lens through which to see literature," he says. "Literature has to do with the soul, not with political movements."

At least half of the books assigned in each of the Wright program's courses must come from a list of about 185 authors approved by the Great Books Committee, which Mr. Gans leads. The list -- from Aeschylus to Yeats -- is based on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* "The Great Conversation: A Reader's Guide to Great Books of the Western World." The committee requires that an author's work be more than 50 years old to be included on the list, which contains few women and even fewer writers of color. Although Mr. Gans is willing to include non-Western writers, he says he will never include them on the basis of race or gender. He doesn't mince words about that:

"It really infuriates me. I'll tell you Calderon is in -- but he's not in because he's Hispanic. He's in because he's good. Ellison is in because he's good."

Mr. Gans didn't have much trouble getting his program approved on the campus, although a few eligible faculty members have chosen not to participate. They say

that's mainly because they prefer to teach contemporary topics.

Don Barshis, Wright's dean of instruction, points out that only half of the texts in a Great Books course have to come from the approved list, making for a good compromise between the traditional and the contemporary.

The Great Books programs vary in the degree to which they limit study to Western works. For example, Michael J. Neth, an associate professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, wants to recruit faculty members to teach more non-Western writers for the new minor he has created. Laurie P. Morrow, a professor of English at Louisiana State University at Shreveport, says the on-line master's program that she is designing for schoolteachers will feature many Western writers but will also include works from Africa, East Asia, and South America, such as *Snow Country*, by the Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari, and *Petals of Blood*, by the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The program, which is still in the proposal stage, has strong support from some campus officials, she says.

Securing campus approval for the programs has been relatively easy on more-conservative campuses, such as Gardner-Webb University, a Baptist-affiliated institution.

At California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, few critics emerged to challenge a new minor on the "Western Intellectual Tradition" that was approved by the faculty last month. Kenneth J. Brown, a professor of English who specializes in minority literature, says he didn't take much notice when he was handed a proposal for the minor by his friend George M. Lewis, a mathematics professor. "I'm not always certain of the agenda of people who are pushing these canonical perspectives," Mr. Brown says. In California, he adds, with its increasingly diverse population, the motive behind Great Books programs seems to be "a kind of fear of being wiped out, and it's ill-founded." He says he kept quiet, however, because he felt that his opinion would not find sympathetic ears on what he calls an "ultraconservative" campus.

Establishing a Great Books program has not been easy in every case, though. Thomas F. Woods, a professor of English at the University of Montevallo, met with some resistance. So did Mark R. Winchell, an English professor at Clemson University, where critics of the minor in the "Great Works of Western Civilization" suspected it of being "a Trojan Horse for a right-wing takeover of the curriculum" two years ago, he says. "I think the way we got around that was not so much in convincing our opponents they were wrong than it was building a critical mass of support, so when it came around for the final approval, we had more votes than they did."

Many members of the National Association of Scholars find inspiration in Mr. Mulroy, the classics professor who started the first Great Books program four years

ago at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, amid heated debate over its near-exclusive focus on Western works.

The program includes requirements in history, philosophy, and literature as well as in mathematics and foreign languages. The math requirement, in which students must take at least two intermediate-level courses such as calculus, has been an enrollment-killer, says Mr. Mulroy, by way of explaining why only 40 students are currently in the program. So far, it has produced four graduates.

His choice of Great Books, however, was what caused the most trouble when he presented the program to faculty committees for approval. All of the courses that were listed as counting for credit toward the minor featured texts primarily by white male authors. "We were criticized for being Eurocentric, and beneath that, between the lines, they were saying that we were racist," Mr. Mulroy recalls. He dismisses such resistance as "ideological posturing" by "self-styled liberals" in the history and English departments, who saw "an opportunity to gain publicity."

His association with the scholars' group didn't help his credibility, he says. "I think my critics saw it as an opportunity to expose what they saw as the evil machinations of conservative groups like N.A.S." Eventually -- and with strong public support -- the minor was approved in 1995.

Gregory S. Jay, a professor of English at Milwaukee, led the opposition. The Eurocentrism of the program was a concern, he says, adding that Mr. Mulroy responded by offering a more eclectic reading list. Mr. Mulroy notes that one of the first Great Books courses in the program was on the Koran -- contrary to the wishes of one of the program's donors.

Mr. Jay says his side made a strategic error when it got caught up in a debate over whether anyone could adequately define a Great Book. "The public is not interested in that debate, and they think it's silly," he says.

The program gained approval, he believes, because professors did not want to balkanize the Faculty Senate and put other certificate programs -- such as those on gay-and-lesbian studies -- in jeopardy.

But Mr. Jay continues to have concerns about the Great Books minor. He and other faculty members question whether the program, designed to bring rigor back to higher education, is itself rigorous enough.

Mr. Mulroy advocates a teaching method in which students discuss the assigned work solely on the basis of the work, with little interference from the professor and no outside criticism that breaks down the text. Mr. Mulroy says he prefers this method because it does not give the students a party line. It prevents them from simply skimming the book and regurgitating the professor's analysis on the exams.

Mr. Mulroy borrowed the method from the Great Books program at St. John's College in Maryland and New Mexico, and it has been borrowed in turn by other members of the scholars' association.

To Mr. Jay, the method is anti-intellectual and has the danger of producing dilettantes. "This is basically the method that was advocated by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*: Sit down in front of Plato and emote, but don't ask questions about the structure of slave society in ancient Greece."

The National Association of Scholars may think it is bringing rigor back to the classroom, but that is a "bogus claim," says Mr. Jay, who co-founded Teachers for a Democratic Culture, a liberal counterpart to the N.A.S. that has had an on-again, off-again existence and is now on again, based at Temple University. In fact, he says, some of the Great Books programs are limiting students' access to dissenting views.

In the end, Mr. Jay fears, both sides have lost to the increased vocationalism dominating higher education. "To debate about whether the books on the N.A.S. list are better than the books on my list," he says, "is to mistake the fact that for many students, there is no book list at all."

In any debate over the rigor of the curriculum at Milwaukee, Mr. Mulroy has no doubt about who would prevail. His program requires students to take at least two college-level courses in a foreign language, while the foreign-language requirement for all undergraduates can be satisfied by courses taken in high school.

Professors in the program are allowed to teach the works as they see fit, he argues. Jane Gallop, the well-known feminist critic and a professor of English at Milwaukee, has taught a course on Freud in the program using deconstructionist methods.

But such debates are entirely academic for some students. For them, a list of Great Books is indeed a new concept -- and nothing short of a revelation. At 31, Keith R. Morgan is enrolled in Mr. Gans' program at Wright for the first time, after serving 10 years in the Army. The term "culture wars" doesn't mean much to him, and he has never heard of the National Association of Scholars, but he likes what he has found at Wright.

"I'm not a reader," he says, but he has become one. Mr. Morgan, who is black, sees universal themes in the Great Books, regardless of the race of the writer or the characters. "I mean, *The Great Gatsby* -- what inner-city child can't relate to looking across the tracks and seeing things that they want to become, and wonder if they're willing to compromise who they are to be what they think they want to be? I think these books, if they're taught the right way, can relate to everyone."

WILBUR WRIGHT COLLEGE OF THE CITY COLLEGES OF CHICAGO**Organizer:** Bruce M. Gans, associate professor of English**Program:** Certificate program involves completing four Great Books courses from an approved list. At least half of the primary texts assigned are selected from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* Great Books list.

SOURCE: CHRONICLE REPORTING

[Home](#)

<http://chronicle.com> Section: The Faculty Page: A18

[Copyright](#) © 1999 by The Chronicle of Higher Education