

# The Washington Times

[www.washtimes.com](http://www.washtimes.com)

---

## Dead white males live

Suzanne Fields

Published 1/27/00

---

Bored with polls? Tired of spin? Suffering political fatigue? If you'd like to enjoy something written by a literary man rather than a presidential candidate or pundit, brush up your Shakespeare, your Milton and your Aristotle, you're not alone.

The Great Books are back.

They haven't yet broken through the canon at some of our most expensive institutions of higher learning, but blacks, Hispanics and other adults are enrolling in night-school classes dedicated to reading works by Dead White Males. So bold is this trend that The New York Times put it on the front page.

Wilbur Wright College, a community college on the North Side of Chicago, appeals to high school graduates who aren't ready for a four-year college. Its classic literature courses have an expanded enrollment of X-ray technicians, cellular-phone sales clerks and bank tellers who want the best that's been written and thought in Western civilization.

In less than two years, 900 students have taken classes in the great books course taught by Bruce Gans, who recites and illuminates the verse of T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, and John Keats, along with excerpts about good and evil from the Bible. Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who wrote "Beyond Good and Evil," is studied, too.

Dozens of colleges have discovered that students crave the classics and that authors don't have to be politically correct to be relevant and exciting; that, in fact, the opposite is usually true. Older sisters and brothers, with the wisdom of hindsight, are seeing the irrelevance of a college degree in gay and lesbian studies or black, Hispanic studies and gender philosophy and are warning against the narrow constraints of such trendy knowledge. Politically correct courses have become in the words of one student, an "intellectual ghetto."

Some of the credit for the revival in the classics goes to the National Association of Scholars (NAS), an organization of university professors which has mounted a vigorous defense of the classics. In conferences, newsletters and scholarly articles, they testify to the importance of the literary canon and the danger of removing a great work to make room for what can be delicately described as not really very good at all. Diversity is fine as long as academic standards are upheld, but the NAS is alarmed at the enthusiastic dumbing down of Western culture.

A look at the Internet finds lots of private groups meeting to discuss great books. In the suburbs of the nation's capital, men and women seeking more than mere politics are meeting once a week at a Borders book store to discuss Great Books based on a guide devised by St. John's College. The humanities are taught on audio tapes that can be ordered directly through the Internet. The Teaching Co. in Springfield, for example, records erudite professors in a series of lectures. One popular course covers the Bible as literature and demonstrates its influence on the West's best writers. Another course asks provocatively: "Can Virtue Be Taught?"

Interest in the Great Books is bubbling as concern grows over a college generation that is woefully unprepared for rigorous learning. The good news is that drinking and smoking is declining among college freshmen. The bad news is more and more students are not bothering to go to class. A survey of 680,000 freshmen at 683 colleges, conducted by the Education Research Institute at UCLA found attendance down and boredom up. The number of students who are unprepared and who must take remedial courses is the highest in three decades.

When Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, a leading Democrat, announced that he wouldn't run again for re-election he gave lots of reasons. He wants to get off the Washington treadmill, find time to do other things, to indulge in "real life." "When you come to Washington you start living off of and depleting your intellectual capital," George Will, the TV commentator, explained the other day. "[Sen. Kerrey's] been in the Senate 12 years. He says, 'That's enough. I'm going to go out and read some books.' There's a thought."

Mr. Kerrey has been a think-for-himself legislator. Years in politics can make a man appreciate — and miss — some of the finer things in life. He said he might return to elected office one day. If he does, he'll be a wiser man than the man who's leaving.

Copyright © 2000 News World Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.

---

[HOME](#)