"I Sit with Shakespeare and He Winces Not": The Great Books and the Burgeoning of Citizenship

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For generations, the Great Books have formed the indispensable foundation of a liberal education in American universities. Our forebears viewed acquaintance with the intellectual giants of our civilization—Homer, Plato, Cicero, Dante, Shakespeare, and others—as vital to a good education. They believed that knowledge of the classics cultivates students' minds, promoting intellectual discipline and instilling wisdom. In addition, they held that acquaintance with the philosophical roots of Western morality and law prepares students for responsible democratic citizenship.

I was the beneficiary of just such a liberal education. In 1973, I graduated from the Program of Liberal Studies (PLS) at the University of Notre Dame. The program was a three-year curriculum in the Great Books, modeled on the famous University of Chicago program established in the 1930s and 1940s by Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins. We read the classics, which philosopher David Hume defined as books that have withstood the test of time. Probing insights of these seminal texts, we discovered that they have endured because they have raised the most profound questions about the human condition and offered the most eloquent answers

Today, unfortunately, a classical liberal education is no longer available to most American students. A variety of forces—most obviously the rise of an aggressive academic "multiculturalism —have pushed the classics from center stage to the corners of the academic world. But in

the face of this disturbing trend, there is also good news. In the last few years, a growing number of colleges and universities have begun to establish new Great Books programs, or dust off and revive old ones. Some of these programs focus exclusively on the Western intellectual tradition, while others include the study of great non-Western texts. Scholarly organizations committed to liberal learning have sprung up to spearhead this effort.

Equally heartening is the nascent movement to bring classical liberal education to low-income and minority Americans. Today, thanks to the efforts of visionary educators, an unlikely array of students is beginning to encounter—and embrace—the classics. Among them are black and Hispanic community college students in Chicago; Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma; Yup'ik Eskimos in Alaska: and homeless men and women in South Bend, Indiana.

The rise of liberal education opportunities for Americans like these marks a welcome reversal of a contemporary
trend. For in recent years, this country's academic establishment has generally failed to promote education of substance for low-income and minority citizens. In inner cities, elementary and secondary schools have tolerated abysmally low standards of academic performance. At the same time, state and local governments have resisted school choice legislation that would give floundering students the opportunity to enroll in private schools. In many urban areas, schools have adopted heavily politicized, anti-intellectual "Afrocentric" curricula. Some have even promoted "Black English,' or ghetto dialect, as black students' "authentic" mode of expression. At the college level, minority students often fare little better. Generally, university "ethnic studies" programs emphasize second-rate writers with an ideological ax to grind, instead of acquainting students with challenging works of real cultural significance.

Many policy makers have attempted to justify this kind of education on grounds of its alleged racial and ethnic "sensitivity." In fact, however, this approach to schooling is patronizing and condescending, for it fails to prepare low-income and minority students either for informed citizenship or for social integration. If students are to grasp their true potential as human beings and citizens, they must know something of the great intellectual monuments of their civilization.

American history is replete with examples of the liberating power of classical education for poor and disenfranchised individuals. For example, before the Civil War, slaves were led to contemplate their potential claims to freedom by studying the Bible. Eloquent black leaders like Frederick Douglass and W E. B. Du Bois credited classical philosophical and literary texts with stimulating their understanding of justice and cultivating their oratorical skills. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, the story was similar. There, the laboring classes—so long denied education—strove mightily to appropriate for themselves the very books that had fitted the students at Eton and Cambridge for their ruling

role. Like Douglass and Du Bois, the leaders of the groups that did most to dismantle England's class system and extend the franchise were the products of classical liberal education. Over and over, history has demonstrated that, as the University of Chicago's Robert Hutchins put it, "the best education for the best is the best education for all."

The Demise of the Canon

To understand the burgeoning revival of classical liberal education, it is necessary to examine the reasons for the Western canon's demise in American universities. Over the past forty years, the classics have fallen under a three-pronged attack. First, the postwar focus on vocational and professional education has taken a serious toll on the prestige of, and demand for, classical liberal learning. Second, the increasing emphasis on faculty specialization and research has led professors to avoid broad-based humanities courses in favor of teaching a seminar "on their next book."

Finally, since the 1960s, academic critics have consistently maligned the Great Books as Eurocentric, portraying them as the racist, sexist legacy of "dead white males." As an alternative these critics have promoted a multicultural agenda. They insist that students benefit most from books that are "relevant to their experience—books whose authors share the students' secondary characteristics of race, sex, or ethnicity. In response to multicultural advocacy, colleges across the country have increasingly moved to replace Homer with black novelist Toni Morrison, and Shakespeare with Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros.

The Revival of the Canon

The Forces at Work

In the past decade, the worst excesses of the 1 1960s have come under scrutiny. In some quarters, this has led to a renewed interest in the benefits of classical liberal education. As a result, a number of colleges and universities have either initiated courses of study that focus on the Great Books or have renovated and expanded older programs. Some of these are one- or two-year courses that provide an alternative way for freshmen and sophomores to fulfill general education distribution requirements, while others are minors or honors programs. Boston University, for example, now offers an alternative track core curriculum based on classic texts, and Baylor University in Waco, Texas, has a similar program. Other new programs include those at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, and Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. Most of these new programs probably would have been unthinkable fifteen years ago, when the Western canon was under severe attack. But in recent years, the proliferation of minors and certificate programs in women's studies, black and Chicano studies, and gay studies has created an opportunity for those who believe that the classics have been slighted. 'Today, when you make a focus on the classics a matter of choice," points out one university observer, "it's hard for administrators to argue

against it."

Organizations Supporting Liberal Education Programs

Several organizations have played an important role in encouraging colleges and universities to make a renewed commitment to classical liberal education. The American Academy for Liberal Education, which accredits both programs and institutions, has encouraged the establishment of Great Books programs, as well as other strong liberal arts curricula, Another significant actor has been the Association of Core Texts and Courses (ACTC), founded in 1994 and headquartered at Temple University in Philadelphia. The ACTC promotes the integrated and common study of world classics and other texts of major cultural significance, usually with a prescribed series of courses in an interdisciplinary setting. In addition, the organization works to expose both the shortcomings of "education as training" and the incoherence that can result when students have unlimited curricular choice. The ACTC hosts annual conferences, produces publications, and facilitates networking by faculty and institutions interested in liberal education. It also offers program review consulting services.

Perhaps the organization most actively engaged in the revival of classical liberal education is the National Association of Scholars (NAS), Headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey, the NAS is a group of professors, graduate students, and college administrators who are dedicated to restoring scholarly integrity in the academy and minimizing the influence of ideological scholarship. In its mission statement, the NAS asserts that "only through an informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage... can citizen and scholar be equipped to sustain our civilization's achievements."

The NAS might be said to have launched the current classical liberal education revival with a report entitled "The Dissolution of General Education: 1914—1993." Published in 1996, this document vividly demonstrated the need for broad-based curricular reform in the humanities. The report surveyed the general education requirements at fifty elite colleges and universities over the course of the twentieth century. It found a precipitous decline in mandated survey courses and revealed that students increasingly lack basic knowledge about their civilization's history, philosophic traditions, and literary and artistic legacies. As a result, the report warned, "we are in danger of losing the common frame of cultural reference that for many generations has sustained our liberal, democratic society."

In 1997 the NAS began to explore practical strategies for rebuilding classical liberal education. The organization sponsored a conference at Lake Tahoe that contributed to the establishment of a number of new programs. Five of these programs offer a minor in the Great Books or in Western culture. A program at Mississippi's Delta State University, for example, includes four courses: the classical tradition (Herodotus, Euripides): the Judeo-Christian

tradition (St. Augustine, Chaucer): the early modern world (Hume, Jane Austen): and the modern world (Freud, Darwin). Three of the new programs offer certificates. Others involve a yearlong survey course for freshmen, a Great Books core curriculum, and an online master's program for schoolteachers.

In November 2000 the NAS followed up with a conference that focused on restoring Great Books to the college curriculum through programs designed to reach nontraditional students. Conference participants representing a variety of institutions included academics, legislators, and staff from nonprofits and state humanities commissions, Following the conference, the NAS began to distribute its "how-to" guide for starting new 'Great Books programs, titled "Rebuilding the Liberal Arts Curriculum: A Handbook for Faculty and Administrators,"

New Programs for Underserved Groups

College students' enthusiastic response to the liberal education revival confirms that many young people today are hungry for educational substance. At Davidson College in North Carolina, for example, approximately one-fifth of the freshman class participates in a two-year humanities sequence based on classic texts, At St. Olaf College in Minnesota, students must compete for admission to a Great Books curriculum called the Great Conversation. Originally underwritten by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, this program is an optional two-year sequence that fulfills seven general education requirements. (Students take one Great Conversation course per semester, and freshmen take an interim course as well.) Beginning with the study of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, the curriculum covers the evolution of literary and artistic expression, philosophic thought, religious belief, and the sciences of human behavior into the modern world.

But young people at four-year institutions are not alone in their newfound interest in liberal learning. Students from working-class and low-income backgrounds are also embracing the classics with zeal. In fact, the success of several innovative programs aimed at these groups suggests that nontraditional students constitute a huge, untapped market for programs that promote classical liberal education.

The Great Books at Wilbur Wright College

Origin of the Great Books Curriculum

The premier example of a successful Great Books program for nontraditional students is the Great Books Curriculum (GBC) at Wilbur Wright College in Chicago. Wright's experience illustrates how a well-planned humanities program can revitalize intellectual life on a campus where low academic expectations have been the norm. With 16,000 students, Wright is part of the City Colleges of Chicago, the second-largest community college system in

the nation. Its students are generally poorly prepared academically, and more than half are minorities or recent immigrants. These students, of course, are precisely those for whom a multicultural curriculum is often said to yield most benefit.

Wright English professor Bruce Gans started the GBC in 1996. Gans, who teaches composition courses, explains that he was tired of reading student papers on abortion and handguns. As he told the *Chicago* Tribune:

> When I got here, what was being done was what's being done across the country. You ask the kids to choose a topic and come up with a thesis. But the problem is we have kids who are almost culturally illiterate. When they walk into these classes, they don't say, "Let's write about Socrates." Instead, they say, "Should I write about the Ricky Martin phenomenon?" They'll just do what they know.

Gans believed that Wright students were capable of much more. He proposed to raise the academic bar at Wright by establishing a certificate program in the Great Books. A student who took at least four courses—twelve credits—in the program would get a special certificate on his or her transcript, serving as a mark of distinction for those who later applied to four-year institutions. Gans envisioned the GBC as an integrated introduction to the humanities. He anticipated that each semester, GBC courses would share a common theme, such as the pursuit of happiness or questions of good and evil. To keep expense and red tape to a minimum, Gans endorsed using existing Wright courses, but transforming their reading lists. From the beginning, he insisted that the program be open to all, rather than limited to honors students.

Predictably, a number of Wright faculty members objected. Some asserted that community college students were incapable of understanding the classics, while others branded the program Eurocentric. Gans compromised. He agreed that a course would qualify for GBC credit if at least half of the readings were drawn from a guide to classic Western texts published by the Encyclopedia Britannica. This volume, entitled The Great Conversation: *A* Reader's Guide *to Great Books of the* Western World, includes titles by about130 authors.

Initially, a committee of twelve Wright faculty members representing the English and humanities departments volunteered for the program. Today, nineteen faculty members are involved, and the departments represented include physical science, social science, and biology. From the outset, student interest in the GBC was high and the program grew quickly. The program now has about 900 students, and some classes are oversubscribed.

Why were so many students drawn to the GBC, whose courses are so much more demanding than most others at Wright? Gans let Wright students in on a secret that few had heard. He told them that education is about much more than getting a job: it is about becoming a thinking person. Gans produced a promotional brochure that depicts the world's most profound books as accessible to Wright students. Indeed,

the brochure suggests that acquaintance with Great Books is Wright students' birthright:

> The GBC will have you reading and thinking about the same books that people like Shakespeare and Einstein did when they were in your position. You will be shaped by these books just as they were. And you will be amazed at how your life will be expanded and enriched because you have entered into "conversations" with GB authors.

Of course, most GBC students don't begin Wright's program with a ready appreciation for the classics. Moans and groans are frequent. New students are often oppressed by the workload and overwhelmed by the complexity of the books' unfamiliar or arcane language. But GBC teachers work with students patiently, often explicating texts line by line. They introduce students to hitherto foreign concepts, like allegory and irony, and demonstrate the importance of supporting one's interpretations with references to the text.

Slowly, as GBC students grow in knowledge and confidence, they come to see that they are capable of grappling with our civilization's greatest works of literature and philosophy. Gans gives the following example. Recently, he taught a course on Jonathan Swift's masterpiece. Gulliver's *Travels.* The work, a political allegory, is divided into four books. As Gans's students read the first book, they grumbled, "Why are we reading this? It makes no sense." By the time they reached the last book, however, the students were conducting the discussion themselves, eagerly disputing about matters of politics, justice, and good and evil, Had Swift written the fourth book in a more accessible style? Gans asked. Yes, the students replied. With emotion, Gans responded, "It's not Swift who's changed: it's you.

Benefits of the Great Books Curriculum

The Great Books Curriculum has brought myriad benefits to Wright students. First and foremost, it has changed the way that students view themselves. Reading Plutarch, Ibsen, and Dostoevsky they begin to believe—for the first time—that they are capable of serious thought. GBC students report that, in subsequent courses at Wright, their GBC background gives them a tremendous advantage over their peers. Likewise, students who transfer to four-year institutions indicate that their GBC courses prepared them well for the more demanding and difficult workload they find elsewhere. Not surprisingly, GBC students graduate at a substantially higher rate than other Wright students, In fact, in each of the last two years, the graduation rate of GBC students has doubled. Today, GBC 'certificate completers"—who make up less than 6 percent of Wright's student body—constitute approximately 30 percent of the students who graduate.

According to Gans, another academic benefit of the GBC is the dramatic progress that GBC students make in writing skills. "There is not a semester that goes by," he says, "where I do not pause... because I am

overtaken by a quiet joy over how knowledgeably my students have come to handle Thucydides, Schopenhauer, Aristophanes, and Swift." It's not that most papers are novel or profound, Gans adds. "The crucial point is that every student has mastered some rudiments of some basic element of history and high culture and has adequately contemplated some problem of lasting importance."

Finally, the GBC helps students understand that their common humanity transcends the secondary characteristics of sex, ethnicity, and sexual preference that seem to divide them. The program creates a community of shared inquiry in which individual merit is all that matters. Students find this captivating, and many begin outspokenly to reject the usual "multicultural" pigeonholes.

Journalists who have written about the GBC have often been struck by students' rejection of multicultural ideology. One young man responded this way to a reporter's query about the GBC's lack of "authors of color": "To me as a black man, you have to get past your color and just appreciate what's being written. Professor Gans chooses really good titles." A Hispanic student told a reporter, "If I wanted to learn more about black writers, Hispanic writers, minority writers, I'd take a course in Aztec culture or Mexican culture. I'm here to make myself a more intellectual person, regardless of my race, regardless of my background." A third student put it this way: "I believe we should not look at the race [of books' authors, but rather the ideas behind them."

For Gans, the most memorable outcome of the Great Books Curriculum has been the advent of a diverse and cohesive intellectual community at Wright:

> Perhaps **it** is true that you can share some of your deepest insights into life and your most moving esthetic experiences only with people who are immersed in the same materials at the same time. If that is true then I and my students—a group that is usually minimally educated, almost culturally illiterate, in many cases from dysfunctional households, a group in many ways as different from each other as they are from me—through the Great Books, have shared things we cannot share with anyone else.

The GBC's Campus wide Influence

At Wilbur Wright, the GBC's influence has spread far beyond the program's classrooms and invigorated intellectual life across the entire campus. Gans and his colleagues have worked hard to create both opportunities and incentives for extracurricular learning. For example, Wright boasts what is apparently the nation's only student-written scholarly journal, called *Symposium,* which publishes articles on Great Books—related topics. Students vie for the honor of seeing their work in *Symposium's* pages, and they contribute essays with titles like "Cervantes on the Nature of Individuality" and "Cicero's Critique of God."

After the *Wall* Street *Journal* published a short piece about the creation of *Symposium,* Gans received subscription orders from

institutions across the country.

More and more Wright students are becoming involved, and staying involved, with the Great Books. The college has a Great Books discussion group that boasts approximately a hundred members. In addition, Wright sponsors two college wide colloquia every year on Great Books themes. Faculty lead the fall colloquium, and students the spring session. GBC students sometimes have an opportunity to share their perspectives with the larger community. After September 11, for example, Milton Rosenberg—host of WGN Radio's "Extension 720" talk show—invited a panel of GBC faculty members and students to discuss the classics and their relevance to the attack on the World Trade Center.

Gans is particularly proud of the partnership he has forged between Wright and the prestigious Chicago Humanities Festival, which hosts prominent speakers and scholars, and draws an audience of thousands. In 2003, Gans hopes to hold at least one festival event on the Wright campus. He is planning to involve Wright students directly in festival activities.

Gans is tireless in his efforts to support and reward GBC students' academic efforts. He has raised the money to provide a number of modest scholarships for students whose work is good enough to be nominated for *Symposium*. He has also established a Web site to facilitate student research. The site has links to Internet research sites, and to museums, libraries, and classical radio stations. Students can download assigned readings that are in the public domain, like Aeschylus's *The Persians* and James Joyce stories. Without this opportunity, Wright faculty would be limited in the primary texts they could assign, since most GBC students have very slim budgets for buying books.

Gans is now "going national" with the GBC's formula for success. He is launching a new organization, the National Great Books Institute, whose honorary chair will be Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley. The institute will offer consulting services, and will provide sample course syllabi and reading lists to interested faculty members and institutions across the country. It will also help colleges with faculty recruitment and development, operate a Web site, and coordinate conferences and programs for faculty members who wish to exchange information with like-minded colleagues.

Great Books Programs at Other Community Colleges

Gans's work with the GBC is already beginning to inspire similar programs at other institutions. For example, a Great Books program is in the works at El Centro, a satellite campus of Chicago's Northeastern Illinois University. El Centro was established in 1968 to meet the educational needs of the Latin American population of Chicago's north side. The majority of its students are Hispanic, and the campus is located in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. El Centro offers night

classes for students who work during the day and provides them with an opportunity to prepare for eventual transfer to Northeastern's four-year campus. Sociology professor Caleb Rosado is the force behind El Centro's new Great Books program.

Norwalk Community College in Norwalk, Connecticut, is also launching a Great Books curriculum. Professor William O'Connell, chair of Norwalk's English department, conceived of the program after reading a *New York Times* article about Wilbur Wright's GBC, Norwalk's Great Books program will serve as an alternative to the school's current interdisciplinary core requirement. Great Books classes will be structured as small seminars that employ the Socratic method and focus on four or five texts every semester.

In order to foster a truly interdisciplinary flavor, all of Norwalk's Great Books courses will integrate two disciplines. Courses will cover four general subject areas: mathematics/science, history/politics, religion/philosophy, and literature/arts. To receive a Great Books honors degree, students will be required to take at least four Great Books courses in addition to an introductory Great Books course called "The Socratic Method." This introductory course will not be limited to honors students, but will be open to all students who wish to encounter Great Books texts and methodologies.

Great Books for People in Poverty

The Bard Clemente Course

About the time that Bruce Gans was launching the GBC at Wright, an even more unusual Great Books project was in the works. In 1995, Earl Shorris, a University of Chicago alumnus and Harper's magazine editor, conceived the idea of a seminar course in the humanities for people trapped in poverty.

Shorris came up with the idea while he was doing research for his book New *American* Blues: *A Journey* **through** *Poverty to Democracy.* Through conversations with low-income people, he became convinced that the poor often succumb to a "surround of force"—a constant press of demands that require immediate reaction and seem to preclude rational reflection. Shorris concluded that government antipoverty programs are unlikely to be effective, since they do not change poverty's fundamental dynamic. He reasoned that if the poor are to escape poverty, they must develop the habits of reflection and responsible behavior that citizenship requires. In short, the poor must become "autonomous," that is, capable of reasoned moral action and self-control. In Shorris's own experience, the most effective way to encourage reflection (and thus the capacity to participate in political life) is through study of the humanities.

Shorris mentioned his idea to Dr. Jaime Inclan, founder of the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in New York City. Shorris told Inclan that he aspired to establish a free twenty-eight-week humanities seminar for people in poverty. The course would consist of readings in

philosophy, poetry, American history, logic, rhetoric, and art history. Intrigued, Inclan quickly offered the Clemente Center as a class site, and Shorris prevailed on various qualified friends—an eminent novelist, an art critic, a historian—to donate their time as teachers. With the help of social service agencies, he recruited thirty-one students. Most of them were minorities, some were on welfare, others had been in prison, and many had not completed high school.

Shorris required Clemente students to be between eighteen and thirty-five, with a household income less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level. At the time, the poverty level was $16,000 for a single person and $32,000 for a family of four, (Subsequently, Shorris dropped the income requirement. "People know when they are poor," he now says.) Potential students also had to demonstrate their ability to read a tabloid newspaper. (Later, the entrance
requirement changed to reading a page of Plato.) Finally, students had to express an intent to finish the course. Those who were accepted into the program received child care, books, a snack or dinner, and transportation costs.

Shorris describes the ups and downs of the first Clemente course in his 2000 book, *Riches for the* Poor: *The Clemente Course in* the *Humanities.* He began the first session by asking students, "Will the humanities make you rich?" The answer, Shorris explained, was: "Yes, absolutely But not in terms of money. In terms of life."Shorris's plan was to have students read the classics and discuss them by means of the Socratic method. He viewed this format as vital. As a "midwife of ideas," Shorris noted, Socrates had prompted his listeners to reflect on the nature of concepts like justice, piety, courage, and friendship. Later, the insights they had acquired in these dialogues helped them to make wise decisions in their own lives. Shorris was convinced that Clemente students would respond to one of Socrates' fundamental messages: that the truth was already inside them, merely waiting to be brought out by dialogue. He believed that Socrates' approach to enhancing reflective citizenship, which had been so effective in ancient Athens, would also be effective in modern-day New York City.

The Clemente course began with the study of ethics. Students read the Allegory of the Cave from Plato's Republic and quickly realized that the cave could serve as a metaphor for their poverty. Next, they read selections from other Platonic dialogues and Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics,* along with Sophocles' *Antigone* and Pericles' Funeral Oration from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War.* They also studied poetry, beginning with short poems in the form of jokes or puns, and moving on to Blake and D. H. Lawrence. Seminar participants probed the founding principles of American history. In addition, they studied Egyptian and Greek art, and toured the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Throughout the course, Shorris strove to maintain an atmosphere of dignity and reinforced it by requiring professors and students to address

one another as Mr. and *Miss.* He also insisted on academic rigor. Students were required to write several papers and to take a challenging final exam on each of the five sections of the course.

Fourteen of the first Clemente students eventually dropped out. ("Along the way," writes Shorris, "one died of AIDS, three became pregnant, two seriously ill.") But the effect on the seventeen students who finished was just what Shorris had hoped. He illustrates with this story. One Saturday afternoon halfway through the course, a twenty-six-year-old student phoned Shorris, There had been trouble at his job, he reported, He had become so angry that he had wanted to "smack his supervisor up against the wall." "I tried to talk to some friends to calm myself down," he explained, "but nobody was around." Shorris feared that the man was calling from jail. "What did you do?" he queried anxiously. "Mr. Shorris," replied the student, "I asked myself, 'What would Socrates do?'" For Shorris, this was the first example of the Clemente course's power to change the way that students think and act, Subsequently, Shorris saw many such examples. For most of the original Clemente students, he wrote, "the humanities became a mirror in which they saw their human worth, and like all lovers, they were transformed by love."

The Clemente Course Today

From the first days of the Clemente course, Leon Botstein—president of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York—had watched Shorris's project with great interest. Once the rigor of the course became clear, the executive committee of Bard's faculty agreed to award six hours of Bard college credit to Clemente graduates who wrote a satisfactory final paper and passed the final exam. Fourteen of the first graduates earned six credits from Bard. Of those students, eleven enrolled in a four-year college, with five choosing to attend Bard. Six months after graduation, only one graduate was not enrolled in an accredited college, working full time, or both.

After the Clemente course's second year, organizations around the country—both educational institutions and social service agencies—began to show interest in the Clemente concept. Linda Capell, then director of the Federation of State Humanities Commissions, was especially instrumental in generating interest and support. When proposals for other courses began to crop up around the country, Shorris hired philosopher Martin Kempner as the Clemente course's national director. Today, Kempner helps to coordinate nineteen courses in twelve states, pushing their academic level up and their attrition rates down. Some of these sites now sponsor "bridge" courses, which keep students engaged between the end of their Clemente studies and their enrollment in college.

The results of the Clemente course's first five years have been impressive. Nationally, 56 percent of students who have enrolled have

completed the course. Of them, 71 percent have either moved on to college or reported plans to do so in the near future. On December 20, 2000, President Clinton awarded Earl Shorris a National Humanities Medal, saying: 'Using the humanities to inspire intellectual freedom and political power, [Shorris] moves people to think critically, act ethically, and live freely."

In the last few years, the Clemente course has expanded beyond the Bard program and has taken new and varied forms. Today, there are about thirteen Clemente-type courses in which students do not receive Bard credit. In 2000, for example, the federal government's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) awarded Bard a grant to establish Clemente-style courses under the sponsorship of five other colleges: Northeastern College in Massachusetts, Reed College in Oregon, Trinity College in Connecticut, Bloorafield College in New Jersey, and the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. These institutions will award their own college credits to students who pass their course.

Today, Clemente or Clemente inspired courses serve an extraordinarily broad array of students. Some programs are conducted in prisons. Another is run by a Florida senior center, which caters to elderly black women who are either illiterate or blind. Since the women can't read, the teacher reads the books aloud and participants discuss them.

Indian tribes have shown a special interest in the Clemente concept. Alaska's Yup'ik Eskimos were the first indigenous people to request a Clemente program. (The Yup'ik also started the nation's first and only Clemente course for K-12 teachers.) In Oklahoma—home to the Clemente inspired Pan American Indian Humanities Center—there are special courses for three tribes: the Kiowas, Cherokees, and Chickasaws. In 2003 the Comanche tribe will also have its own course. Generally, courses for indigenous people are bicultural, though a few are entirely indigenous in content. Bicultural courses devote half of class time to Western humanities classics and half to the tribe's own humanities tradition, Many courses incorporate tribal elders, who convey the tribe's oral tradition of stories, art, and philosophy, and lead related discussions. Elders' words are taped, so that the tribe can build a library of these presentations.

To date, there are four international Clemente courses, three of which serve indigenous people. One course, in Milpa Alta, Mexico, is conducted in the Nahuat language. A course in the Yucatan is conducted in the Mayan language. The Yucatan Clemente faculty plans to build a small college to train teachers to conduct humanities classes in outlying villages. Canada also hosts two Clemente courses: one that is conducted on the Musqueam Reservation near Vancouver and another, sponsored by the University of British Columbia that serves low-income people in Vancouver.

A Clemente Course for the Homeless

One of the most unusual

Clemente type courses serves people from a homeless shelter in South Bend, Indiana. The University of Notre Dame sponsors the program, which is called the Community Extension World Masterpieces Seminar. The seminar is the brainchild of Professors Clark Power and Steve Fallon, both of whom teach in Notre Dame's Program of Liberal Studies (PLS). Power and Fallon operate the program with the assistance of South Bend's Center for the Homeless, an innovative residential facility that assists homeless individuals to achieve employment and stability. The center has about a hundred residents.

The Community Extension seminar consists of three eight-week courses, each of which involves one ninety-minute class per week, Students who complete reading assignments and write a paper receive one unit of Notre Dame college credit for each session they finish.

Power and Fallon have devised a novel and highly successful approach for recruiting Community Extension students. Before every eight-week session, the two professors address the center's weekly meeting. which all residents attend. The professors show a film of a scene from Sophocles' ***Antigone.*** They stop the action at a highly dramatic point and ask a probing question, like "Should Antigone defy the ruler Creon and bury her brother?" This question invariably sparks a lively debate. Residents discuss the issue for fifteen or twenty minutes, and generally stop with great reluctance. Then Power and Fallon invite them to sign up for the seminar, noting that the only requirement is that students do the assigned reading every week and come to class prepared to discuss it.

Power and Fallon say that they have learned a good deal from teaching classic works to students who are intimately acquainted with life's underside. ("It may sound odd, but I feel grateful to have the chance to look at these texts through their eyes," says Power, a developmental psychologist.) Seminar participants often read their assignments carefully and come to class with many underlined passages. Frequently, their own lives reflect elements of tragedy: abuse, addiction, economic disaster. Because of this, the professors say, the students tend to develop a deeply personal relationship with the texts. According to Power, "Books become a means for them to interpret their own past lives and help them look to the future."

For seminar student Michael Newton, a former drug addict, Plato's works are particularly meaningful. "Those of us in the grip of addiction use this process to rethink our lives." he says."Socrates makes clear that you have to have the courage to examine yourself and to stand up for something. A lot of us have justified our weaknesses for too long a time," Carmen Ware, another former addict, finds the story of Job especially moving: "I remember sleeping on a sidewalk, with the lining of a trash can cover me and rain coming down. But I ain't been through nothing

compared **to** what Job has gone through. It inspires you to come home."

Denis Kazmierczak, a former actor, discovered through Community Extension seminar texts that he has much in common with middle-class Americans. "It is hard to find beauty when you are in the situation we are in," he notes. "But I have come to realize through the reading that, in some ways, everybody is homeless. You can be sitting in your fancy penthouse apartment looking out at the world but your life can be hollow. Now my mind is active, I have picked up a lost thread."

In addition to introducing students to the Great Books, the Community Extension seminar exposes them to music and theater. Notre Dame has donated tickets for seminar participants to hear Handel's *Messiah,* while St. Mary's College has underwritten their attendance at Shakespeare's The *Comedy of Errors.* Actors from a visiting British troupe have met with students to talk about Shakespeare and conduct acting exercises in which students participate. Notre Dame professors from several departments have also addressed seminar participants, sharing their scholarly expertise and love of learning. To date, about thirty colleges and universities have expressed interest in duplicating the Program of Liberal Studies' Community Extension seminar. South Bend already has several spin-offs. In January 2001 PLS began offering a seminar at the YWCA, which serves as a shelter for abused women and houses a halfway residence for women in various recovery or job assistance programs. PLS students have been eager to help, providing child care and assisting in other ways. (This program was recently placed on hold with the departure of the faculty member who initiated it.) At Hamilton High, South Bend's alternative high school, PLS students now conduct a Junior Great Books program and oversee similar programs in a number of South Bend public and parochial schools. Generally, students design a unique curriculum for each school, based on the skill level and interests of students there.

The Liberating Power of Great Books

The success of Wright College's Great Books Curriculum and of the Clemente course in its various manifestations makes clear that study of the classics can have a strong appeal for individuals on the lower rungs of the social ladder. Most commentators have found this surprising, and newspapers like the *New* **York** Times and the Chicago Tribune have treated the matter as front page news. In fact, however, the liberating power of the Great Books is an old story Wright and Clemente students are merely the latest in a long line of individuals whose lives have been transformed by the classics, and who have transformed their societies as a result.

The Great Books in Black America

Earl Shorris has written eloquently about how the humanities have

helped to integrate black Americans into their nation's political life. The process, he notes, began over 150 years ago:

> Even before manumission, the study of the humanities went on in slave quarters. There was one text, but there were many different courses, ontology, ethics, literature, rhetoric, and epistemology among them. The text, of course, was the King James Version of the Bible. . . . With nothing more . . . the descendants of slaves reinvented themselves through the humanities, preparing themselves for the political life.

Frederick Douglass, the great orator and advocate of racial equality, was one slave whose life was transformed by the humanities. Douglass's white mistress taught him **to** read when he was eight, though to teach a slave to read was a crime, As a result, Douglass wrote later, he grasped even as a child that "education and slavery were incompatible with each other."

Douglass loathed slavery, but was uncertain of the justice of slaves' demand for freedom. At twelve, he obtained a copy of *The Columbian Orator*, a compendium of great historical speeches. The book included one of playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan's powerful speeches to Parliament on behalf of Catholic emancipation in the British Isles. The words of this speech electrified the young Douglass, beginning his intellectual liberation, Later, Douglass wrote that Sheridan's mighty speech, and other great works of literature, gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance..... What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery.

Douglass's pursuit of liberal education lasted throughout his life. His acquaintance with great literature underlay the power and eloquence of his own extraordinary oratory on behalf of the antislavery cause. According to one observer, when Douglass spoke about slavery, "Flinty hearts were pierced and cold ones melted by his eloquence."

W E. B. Du Bois was another great African American who saw liberal education as central to the crusade for black freedom. In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois wrote that education was the key to elevating the black race and dispelling the unreasoning prejudice of whites. Du Bois insisted that, if black Americans were to rise above their condition, they must have access to an education "that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning." Du Bois looked to newly established Negro colleges, like Atlanta University and Fisk University, to provide the sort of education that he saw as crucial to the cause of black freedom. "The foundations of knowledge in this race," he wrote, "must be sunk deep in the college and university.' When it came to problems of black social advance, Du Bois

asked, "Can there be any possible solution other than by study and thought and an appeal to the rich experience of the past?" He answered his own question in ringing words, among the most eloquent he ever wrote:

> **I sit with** Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas. where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil Is this the life you grudge us, 0 knightly America?

The Great Books in England

In England, the intellectual predecessors of Wright and Clemente students were the miners, weavers, and milkmaids of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These ordinary folk achieved personal and political liberation by reading the classics, Historian Jonathan Rose tells their story in a fascinating 2001 book,

The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class.

According to Rose, in the 1500s, English law barred common people from reading even the Bible. England's rigid class system was grounded in the conviction that commoners were incompetent to think for themselves. The upper classes maintained a closely guarded monopoly on the knowledge required to interpret law, politics, and religion for the lower orders.

But as literacy grew, many working people began to yearn for intellectual independence. To guide their quest, they chose the very books that the elite had appropriated as their own: Homer, Virgil, Plutarch, Bacon.

As a result, in the 1800's English weavers often read Shakespeare as they worked at their looms. According to Rose, shepherds "maintained a kind of circulating library, leaving books they had read in designated crannies in boundary walls." In mines and factory towns, informal discussion groups sprang up. Many aspiring readers paid a serious price for their uppity ways. Francis Place, a tailor, lost most of his upper-class customers when they discovered, with horror, that he owned a library of more than a thousand volumes.

What did England's common people find in the classics? Like Wright and Clemente students, they found the tools they needed to begin to answer what Kant identified as the four great questions of human life: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for? What is man?

Less-than-great books can't perform this function. Ordinary works of fiction, for example, tend to follow stereotyped formulas that limit their value. But the classics, in Rose's words, "offer a hundred ways of understanding the world, and a hundred plans for changing it." Over time, British workers who read Milton and Locke began to grasp that they deserved educational and political equality. Eventually, they demanded—and got—both.

Problems of Great Books Programs

The success of Wright's Great Books Curriculum and the Clemente course suggests that our nation needs many similar programs, designed to serve students from a wide range of backgrounds. But new Great Books programs are likely to encounter a serious problem. Generally, it is difficult to find college faculty members who are willing to participate. In part, this is because most colleges do not encourage or reward the teaching of broad-based humanities courses. In addition, faculty members are frequently so specialized that they do not feel competent to conduct seminars that focus on "the big questions."

For some years, the Institute of Philosophic Studies at the University of Dallas has worked to change this. The institute sponsors a Great Books disciplinary Ph.D. program, in which students concentrate on a broad array of classic texts but receive a Ph.D. in a particular discipline: literature, politics, or philosophy In recent years, institute graduates have helped to found two new Great Books colleges, the College of St. Thomas More in Texas and Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in New Hampshire.

Mary Nichols, a political science professor at Fordham University, is also making an effort to increase the number of faculty members who are prepared to teach Great Books courses. Nichols has been instrumental in creating Fordham's unique political science Ph.D. program, which incorporates both literature and political theory. In addition, she has secured grants that enable some of her students to work as visiting professors in undergraduate Great Books programs at other institutions. These institutions benefit by obtaining part-time, broadly educated faculty members whose salaries are subsidized, while the Fordham students gain invaluable Great Books teaching experience and also have an opportunity to finish their dissertations. Currently. Nichols is working to establish a new Ph.D. program that will train scholars who wish to specialize exclusively in Great Books education.

The *Stakes*

After decades of decline, classical liberal education is beginning to revive in America. Why should Americans care about the success of this revival? As Earl Shorris notes, history demonstrates that liberal learning is vital to democracy. The real question, he writes," is whether or not a democracy... can exist in full without the humanities. How long a society that forsakes the ethical and intellectual strength of reflective thinking can continue to prosper is open to question. Whether such a nation can maintain a position of leadership is doubtful."

And what of the oft-heard charge that the Great Books hold little interest for women and minorities because the authors are largely white and male? Again, Shorris, a self-described man of the left, has a fitting response:

> The humanities will always be heavily influenced by the work of the dead white men of Europe, for they have been history's troublemakers, the fomenters of revolutions and inventions, the

impetus of change, the implacable enemies of the silence in which humanity perishes. No other great body of work invites criticism or denies loneliness to the same extent, and no other body of work in all the history of the world led to politics, with its still astonishing notion of autonomy. The graduates of Wright's Great Books Curriculum and the Clemente course have learned for themselves that a classical liberal education can open the minds of all. Indeed, in an increasingly globalized world, we need classical liberal education more than ever. In its mission statement, the Association of Core Texts and Courses points out that the classics can help students develop the ability to exercise critical judgment in order to free themselves from "instant truths and local passions." At the same time, these books lead their readers to ponder universal questions, both timeless in their philosophical significance and timely in their relevance to us. Perhaps the words carved over the entrance of the University of Wisconsin library in Madison express it best: "We are all mentioned in the wills of Homer and Shakespeare."