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## CLASSIC COMEBACK AT WRIGHT COLLEGE

### GREAT BOOKS COURSE HAS GIVEN STUDENTS A LOT TO THINK ABOUT

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Following a pivotal moment in a film production of Shakespeare's "Henry V," students in Perry Buckley's Great Books class are still taking it all in when Buckley's questions start streaming in.

What is honor, after all, in the view of Henry V and of Falstaff, a leading character in the play?

What can be said about the quest for power from Shakespeare's monarchs, who spend their lifetimes seeking prominence and glory, yet inevitably complain about the burdens it brings?

The questions from this recent lecture are posed to a somewhat unlikely crowd: students at Wright College in the Chicago City Colleges system, many of whom had never dreamed of studying Shakespeare with such precision before they enrolled in Buckley's class.

Certainly, City Colleges students have the intellectual might to tackle the subject, but many are immigrants or first-generation college students who had long been intimidated by such works. A good number arrive in the Great Books course shortly after completing a remedial English or writing class and may still be struggling to master the language, much less tackle some of literature's most celebrated and complicated works.

But Wright is now at the forefront of a growing movement to revive the so-called Great Books curriculum, which highlights the classics of Western civilization, including literary landmarks by Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, Descartes, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Shakespeare, plus a range of other works designed to provoke discussion of timeless intellectual ideas. Most of the Great Books are drawn from a list compiled by Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Until recently, the trend in higher education had been to reject many such books by dead white men as largely irrelevant in a modern, multicultural society. The so-called politically correct movement has held that more room needs to be made for modern writers, women and minorities whose works have an equally powerful message.

But now a backlash has emerged, with some scholars arguing that the classics need to be revived because students are being deprived of some of the Western world's best literature. And in some cases, the push is being waged in surprising places--not at bastions of intellectual thought such as Harvard and the University of Chicago, but at the community college level, including City Colleges. There, the majority of students are the very minorities the politically correct movement was designed to reach.

Wright is among at least a dozen schools that have introduced Great Books programs over the last four years. Like many of the other schools' officials, Wright's leaders did so at the urging of the National Association of Scholars, a Princeton, N.J.-based group that has long been urging a return to the classic liberal tradition.

"These programs are one way of providing, among the great mass of courses that has now proliferated, a very distinct product of a special type--the type that gives you a challenging liberal education," said Stephen Balch, the association's president. "It's significant because no one has been trying to do this in a long, long time. We're the first people in a long while to launch an organized effort to let as many institutions as possible know about this."

Wright College's program was founded by English teacher Bruce Gans, a veteran of City Colleges.

"When I got here, what was being done is what's being done across the country," Gans said. "You ask the kids to choose a topic and come up with a thesis. But the problem is we have kids who are 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."

At first, some faculty members were strongly opposed. In addition to concerns that minority and contemporary writers would be unfairly ignored, some argued that the largely minority, working-class student body in the City Colleges wasn't up to the tough coursework that a Great Books curriculum entails.

"People on my own faculty will say, 'Why are you teaching these kids this? These kids don't have the skills to appreciate it.' I get that very frequently," Gans said. "It's all part of the resistance, the idea that 'Let's

teach easier things, things in their immediate environment.' "

Gans won the debate by conceding on some of his original plans. At first, he envisioned that at least 80 percent of the works would be from the Encyclopaedia Britannica's list. But he later agreed to take only half of them from the list and have the rest chosen by the professor. That let the staff pick more modern authors, such as Toni Morrison and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Students pursuing an associate's degree in any subject area must complete at least four courses in the Great Books to earn a special certificate in the classics.

Gans has won some important supporters, including City Colleges Chancellor Wayne Watson, who recently drafted a letter to City Colleges presidents urging them to follow Gans' lead.

Still, there are lingering concerns. Fewer than half of the faculty in the English Department have agreed to teach the Great Books, along with a smattering of teachers from the humanities, social sciences and science departments, Gans said.

Though she was pleased to see the adjustments to the original proposal, Romell Murden, dean of student services, is worried that the emphasis on Great Books authors will be overblown.

"I think balance is always key," she said. "Do you have to be dead and do you have to be white and do you have to be male to be called a classic? It's ridiculous."

On the other hand, some of the roughly 1,500 students who have taken Wright's Great Books courses say the race or sex of the authors is inconsequential.

"There's a whole bunch of issues in the Great Books that really need to be applied to today, like family, God and citizenship," said Juan Santiago, a student in Buckley's Shakespeare course. "Even though they were written by white authors, they still have something to say. I believe we should not look at the race, but rather the ideas behind them."

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