

Study's findings show

Humanities are neglected in nation's universities

By Marianne Chin
Of the Emerald

"Most of our college graduates remain shortchanged in the humanities," said recently nominated U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett in a report on the humanities in higher education.

The report entitled "To Reclaim A Legacy" was released last fall by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The humanities include such disciplines as literature, history, philosophy and foreign languages.

According to the report, a student can obtain a bachelor's degree from 75 percent of all American colleges and universities without having studied European history; from 72 percent without having studied American literature or history; and from 86 percent without having studied the civilizations of classical Greece and Rome.

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Bennett's report on the state of humanities was based on the findings of a study group of 31 teachers, scholars, administrators and authorities on higher education. They met with Bennett, then-chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in Washington, D.C., last March.

"We talked about the problems of education in the humanities at the undergraduate level in universities and colleges today," said Robert Berdahl, dean of the University's College of Arts and Sciences, who served as a member of the study group.

"It's sad and lamentable that the thrust of education has shifted so heavily into pragmatic kinds of education," Berdahl said, referring to the current emphasis in higher education placed on careers and disciplines such as high technology.

The best kind of education for any person includes a broad background in liberal arts, he said. "It makes a much more flexible person. Life is a good deal more than a career."

In addition to the statistics indicating an absence of humanities studies behind college degrees, the study also described the national

decline in the number of students majoring in the humanities.

Since 1970, the number of English majors has declined 57 percent, philosophy majors 41 percent, history majors 62 percent and modern language majors 50 percent, according to the report.

Our culture does not reward students for studying the humanities, Berdahl said.

"You don't have to know English literature to be an accountant," he added.

Good teaching is essential to the humanities, especially since many students are first exposed to such courses in their first years in college, the study group asserted. Often this first impression becomes their only exposure to the field because students are sometimes turned off by the subjects if they aren't presented attractively, according to the report.

A controversy exists in that educators do not agree on what types of material university graduates should read, Berdahl said.

The University has done a good job of teaching humanities, thanks to a good faculty that is committed to teaching humanities courses, Berdahl said. The change in cluster requirements for University students that was implemented in 1980 reflected a concern that students have some exposure to the humanities, he said. The University also has tried to improve its humanities programs by obtaining grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and by decreasing the number of students in each class.

One of the study group's recommendations for reversing the decline of interest and learning in the humanities is that colleges and universities "reshape their undergraduate curricula based on a clear vision of what constitutes an educated person."

"There's a good deal of concern about the fact that students want to go through college taking very practical things like accounting, things that will produce good jobs," Berdahl said. But these are not the kinds of educational experiences essential to their becoming educated men and women, he added.

The report also states that college and university presidents should take responsibility for the educational needs of all students by defining what the institution regards as essential to a good education.

Schools must also reward excellent teaching, bring faculty members and administrators together to plan a challenging curriculum, and place the study of humanities and Western civilization "at the heart of the college curriculum."

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