

THE FALSE ATTACKS ON THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

By John K. Wilson

Are elite colleges responsible for the “Death of the Liberal Arts?” That’s the title of a new report from the conservative, anti-feminist Independent Women’s Forum (www.iwf.org). IWF’s Oct 27, 2003 press release declares: “Parents who send their children to the top 10 liberal arts colleges in the country will be surprised to learn that at most of these schools political correctness has killed liberal arts.” The report, written by IWF Senior Fellow Melana Zyla Vickers, proclaims that it is now “impossible” to get an education in the “fundamentals” at the top-ranked liberal arts colleges.

The IWF report begins with four assertions, which apparently reflect the most scandalous information learned by the group:

“•A freshman at Bowdoin cannot take a course in Shakespeare.”

“•A freshman at Amherst isn’t offered a single overview of European or American history.”

“•A freshman at Williams will find that what few courses review U.S. or European history focus on ‘race, ethnicity and gender,’ rather than the given period’s main developments.”

“•A freshman at Wellesley will find that the few broad English courses offered to freshmen focus on gender and not the books’ themes and styles.”

None of these four claims are true, and a close inspection of the ten departments denounced as failing in the IWF report shows that all of them actually offer survey courses to freshmen.

The IWF report is full of dubious facts and questionable conclusions, such as, “At least one college requires that students focus as much coursework on the writings of the last 100 years as they do on all past centuries combined.” The IWF doesn’t identify this college, but the assertion itself is untenable. How could any college “require” students to make equal balance of twentieth century history and literature with previous centuries, when students determine most of the courses they choose to take?

IWF’s idealized view of a survey course seems alien to any reality in higher education, past or present. According to the IWF report, “a core English course would typically review the traditional English and American literary canon.” *The idea* of a single class covering the entirety of English and American literature is staggering *to demand*. The IWF report adds, “A core history course might trace the evolution of Western Civilization from the Greeks and Romans to the modern United States.” It would be hard to find any college in the country which offers a single history course spanning nearly all of human history from ancient Greece to Europe and the United States today. It would be difficult to find a historian qualified to teach every historical period in such a vast area, or one who would want to do it, since it means covering

almost 200 years of history every week in a standard semester. While incredibly broad survey classes can be done well by uniquely talented professors (although few could claim to offer a comprehensive review of everything), to demand that every college teach this way is irrational.

English Under Fire

The IWF gives failing grades in English to Bowdoin, Wellesley, Williams, and Swarthmore. But many of its claims don't hold up under examination. According to the IWF report, "A freshman at Bowdoin cannot take a course in Shakespeare." This is false. Far from being anti-Shakespeare, Bowdoin College's small English Department offers a Shakespeare class every semester, and often teaches Shakespeare as a freshman seminar. For example, in Spring 2003, Bowdoin offered English 024, "Shakespeare at Sonnets," which was a "systematic close reading of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets." Also in Spring 2003 (and open to freshmen who had taken one English class) was English 211, "Shakespeare's Tragedies and Roman Plays." And English majors are required to take three out of their ten courses in British and Irish literature before 1800.

Wellesley's English Department gets a failing grade from IWF because "only four courses open to freshmen could be considered overviews within the field." Only four? How many courses does a first-year student need to have in order to satisfy the IWF? According to the IWF report, "A freshman at Wellesley will find that the few broad English courses offered to freshmen focus on gender and not the books' themes and styles." In fact, the broad survey class, "Novels, Plays, Poems" is taught by three different professors, with no indication that gender is the exclusive focus. (Of course, some novels plainly include gender among their themes, so it's not clear if the IWF wants to ban all discussion of gender in, say, Jane Austen's novels.)

The English Department at Williams College is condemned as a failure because of its seminars for freshmen, of which only "two could be considered overviews": "Shakespeare's Warriors and Politicians" and "The Nature of Narrative" (which is dismissed because "it studies only narrative techniques"). The IWF report goes on to *denounce* the English Department merely for offering courses with the titles "Green World" and "Literature and Social Change." The report, naturally, doesn't mention the more advanced survey classes (open to freshmen who have taken one English course) on "Shakespeare's Major Plays," "American Literature: Origins to 1865," "British Literature: Middle Ages Through the Renaissance," and "Shakespearean Comedy."

Swarthmore College is *failed* by the IWF because "Swarthmore requires as much study of those authors who have written in the last 173 years as of the previous 1,730 years combined." According to the IWF report, "Swarthmore gives contemporary academic fashion a further boost over the traditional literary canon by requiring English majors to take three courses on post-1830 writing and three on pre-1830." (In this odd reasoning, nineteenth century authors like Melville and Twain are deemed by the IWF to be "contemporary academic fashion" rather than part of the literary canon.) Of course, Swarthmore English majors are free to take most of their courses on early English literature. But the IWF report advocates a kind of literary relativism, seemingly demanding some type of quota to teach an equal number of ninth century English authors compared to all nineteenth century English and American authors.

According to the IWF report on Swarthmore, "Not one of the courses listed for freshmen in the 2003 course guide could be considered an overview of a literary period." This isn't true. In addition to the introductory seminars, among the classes "open to freshmen and sophomores who have successfully completed an introductory course" in 2003-04 are "Survey I: Beowulf to Milton," "Survey II: Neo-Classical to Post-Colonial" ("A historical and critical survey of poetry, prose, and drama from Pope to Rushdie"), "Chaucer," "Shakespeare," "Milton," "American Poetry," and many more.

Don't Know Much About History: The IWF's Distortions

In addition to criticizing English departments, the IWF report attacks the history departments at Williams, Wellesley, Bowdoin, Amherst, Swarthmore, and Carleton, claiming that none of them offer survey classes on Western culture or American history to freshmen students (survey classes on other cultures, which are common at these colleges, are considered unimportant by the IWF).

Williams College gets a failing mark for its history department, even though 2003-04 classes offered at Williams include "Greek History," "Roman History," "Europe from Reformation to Revolution: 1500-1815," "Europe's Long Nineteenth Century," "Europe in the Twentieth Century," "British Colonial America and the United States to 1877," "America from San Gabriel to Gettysburg, 1492-1865," and "The United States from Appomattox to AOL, 1865-Present."

The IWF report admits that three classes appear to offer "quite solid overviews" but then dismisses the early American history class because "readings emphasize three themes considered to be of major

importance in order to better understand the period surveyed: gender, slavery, and Indian America.” Most people might think that gender, slavery, and Indian encounters could be considered important in American history (there was that Civil War thing, remember), but for the IWF the mere mention of a point of emphasis deemed too PC is enough to earn a failing grade, without even a glance at what the readings are or what is taught in the course. A European history survey class with a description that mentions studying history “with an eye toward exploring the origins of today’s complex attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and gender” is condemned by the IWF for a “narrow outlook” and leads to the unsupported conclusion that “the department cannot be said to offer a comprehensive education in history.”

According to the IWF report, “A freshman at Williams will find that what few courses review U.S. or European history focus on ‘race, ethnicity and gender,’ rather than the given period’s main developments.” That’s not true. Consider this description of “Europe from Reformation to Revolution: 1500-1815”: “This course introduces students to the major historical developments in Western Europe during the early modern period—such pan-European phenomena as the Reformation, the Witch Craze, the Military Revolution, the rise of absolutist states, the seventeenth-century crisis in government and society, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and Napoleon, and the establishment of European influence around the world.” Or this description of “The United States from Appomattox to AOL, 1865-Present”: “This course will survey the history of the United States from its struggles over Reconstruction and westward expansion through the challenges of industrialization and immigration to the nation’s increasingly global role in the post-World War II period. We will pay special attention to how Americans defined both themselves as citizens and the nation at-large, particularly as they faced the profound economic and political crises that mark this period.” Several other course descriptions of survey classes could be added to show how wrong the IWF is.

At Bowdoin College, the history department is failed by the IWF grader: “Of the history courses theoretically open to freshmen this fall, two might be considered mainstream overviews, albeit with short horizons: ‘The Making of Modern Europe 1848-1918’ and ‘The United States in the Nineteenth Century.’” Bowdoin also teaches “Medieval Europe,” but once again it’s not clear why these survey courses are deemed insufficient.

Amherst College’s History Department fails according to the IWF report because “a freshman at Amherst isn’t offered a single overview of European or American history.” In fact, Amherst does offer a class in Fall 2003 on “19th Century America.” In Spring 2004, freshmen can take a European history survey, “From Roman Mediterranean to Old Europe,” as well as a U.S. survey class, “History from Reconstruction to the Present.”

Swarthmore’s history department is given a failing grade because “there is only one basic course offered to freshmen—‘The U.S. to 1877.’” (Actually Swarthmore also offered a class on “Medieval Europe,” but apparently one or two survey classes are not enough to satisfy the IWF, although the criteria for “failing” are never defined and seem completely idiosyncratic.)

The IWF report fails Carleton College because “Carleton’s history department offers freshmen only one course that could be considered an overview. It’s called ‘History of Modern Europe 1789-1900.’” Because Carleton prefers to offer small seminars for freshman called “Introduction to Historical Inquiry,” it is denounced by IWF, even though survey classes are available to first-year students. In Fall 2003, Carleton offered “Foundations of Modern Europe,” which is “a narrative and survey of the early modern period (fifteenth-eighteenth centuries). General areas to be covered: economy and society of pre-industrial Europe; the Reformation Age; the rise of the secular state; the scientific revolution; the culture of the Renaissance and the Baroque.”

At Wellesley’s history department, the IWF reports, “Only one course open to freshmen could be considered an overview within the field. It is ‘History of the United States, 1607 to 1877.’ It does not, however, profess to give a comprehensive review of the period but stresses ‘special attention to recurrent themes in the pattern of America’s past: immigration, racial and cultural conflict, urbanization, reform.’” But a survey course that fails to give special attention to “immigration, racial and cultural conflict, urbanization, reform” would itself be guilty of failing to offer a “comprehensive review.”

Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka, chair of the History Department at Wellesley College, argues that the report on his department “seems to contain a number of mistaken perceptions, if not misrepresentations, and does not seem to have entailed a serious examination of our curriculum.”

Matsusaka points out that Wellesley offers History 200, “Roots of the Western Tradition. According to Matsusaka, this is a class “starting with the origins of civilization in Mesopotamia through the Islamic invasions of the 7th century CE, and is aimed at first year students as well as others seeking an introduction to the origins of Western civilization.”

One reason why the broad survey classes favored by conservatives have faded is due to lack of student interest. Wellesley used to offer a survey class called “Western Civilization” but Matsusaka reports that it “failed to attract significant numbers of students because incoming first-year students felt it was something they had already covered in high school.” Matsusaka adds, “The US history course, for example, stresses a thematic approach because most of our students do have strong background preparation; a general survey would not attract many students for this reason.”

Matsusaka’s critique suggests a deeper problem with the IWF report, beyond its numerous errors and distortions. The IWF’s devotion to survey courses is never explained or defended. If elite liberal arts colleges offered more broad survey courses, most students would simply avoid them (or place out of them) after taking high school (and A.P.) courses that cover similar material. (By contrast, the IWF study gives a passing grade to all political science departments for having survey classes, since the same material is rarely taught in high school.) The ignorance of American students about history cited in studies by conservative think tanks can be blamed more on the survey class model than on its alleged absence at elite colleges. Survey classes on American and world history are taken by virtually every high school graduate, while relatively few undergrads take more specialized history courses in college. If survey classes effectively taught high school students about literature and history, then we wouldn’t ever need to repeat the same survey classes in college. Therefore, it should be logical for critics to denounce survey courses for failing to educate our students, and to urge more of the intellectually exciting courses offered by professors which provide a unique perspective on history and literature.

Ideology, not pedagogy, is behind these attacks from the right. Absolutely no evidence exists that survey classes are inherently superior at educating students, even when it comes to learning basic facts (as with everything else, it all depends on how they are taught). Small seminars, considered a valuable way to educate freshmen, are denounced by the IWF as being worse than larger survey classes. Because survey classes are “traditional,” they are deemed by the far right to be safer in protecting our children from alien ideas like race, gender, and class, ideas that the conservatives regard as too dangerous to permit. That’s why the IWF report makes a special effort to denounce every single course that mentions issues of race, gender, or the environment, and disqualifies survey courses as “too narrow” if a word about race appears in a course description. *The IWF report does not accurately examine* whether students have the opportunity to take survey classes (they do, without exception). Instead, the IWF report denounces colleges for daring to discuss race and similar issues with impressionable students.

The Myth of Survey Classes

Beyond the small lies told in the IWF report, there is a bigger lie: the assertion that broad survey courses are always better for students than more “specialized” courses. But why is this? There is not the slightest piece of evidence ever offered to support this position. In fact, no one has scientifically studied the issue, nor is it truly possible to study it in a reliable way. There is no neutral mechanism for testing whether one course is better than another, particularly when they focus on different topics.

Is it better to learn a little about a lot of things, or to learn a lot about a few things? Is it better to cover the traditional topics of a broad span in history, or to look at a broad timeline from a particular perspective to understand it better? Who can answer such a question?

As Allan Bloom observed in *The Closing of the American Mind*, “[A] very small, detailed problem can be the best way, if it is framed so as to open out on the whole.” But Bloom also noted about general education classes, “Everything, of course, depends upon who plans them and who teaches them.”

And that’s the fundamental problem with the IWF report. It fails to recognize that a survey class can be taught badly, and a specialized class can actually teach more if done correctly. A student could learn more about American history from a class on African-American history than from a traditional survey course. Everything depends on the teacher. And the IWF has no idea what is actually taught in these courses, beyond the title given and a short description.

For that reason, the IWF report warning students and their parents to be wary of colleges supposedly without survey courses is just silly. The stout defense of traditional survey classes has more to do with conservative politics than pedagogy.

The IWF report is not the only example of the right’s attack on the college curriculum. On July 31, 2003, Senator Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) introduced the Higher Education for Freedom Act (S.1515), which asks the Senate to “establish and strengthen postsecondary programs and courses in the subjects of traditional American history, free institutions, and Western civilization, available to students preparing to teach these subjects, and to other students.” Gregg proclaimed, “Today, more than ever, it is important to preserve and defend our common heritage of freedom and civilization, and to ensure that future generations of

Americans understand the importance of traditional American history and the principles of free government on which this Nation was founded.” Gregg added, “[C]ollege students’ lack of historical literacy is quite startling, and too few of today’s colleges and universities are focused on the task of imparting this crucial knowledge to the next generation.” To Gregg and other conservatives, history is about “literacy” and “imparting” the positive “facts” of American history on students for multiple-choice exams and polls.

This legislative intrusion into the curriculum is a threat to academic freedom. Gregg’s bill essentially demands the teaching of a Republican view of “traditional American history” and “Western civilization” as “free institutions,” using federal funding as the tool for this indoctrination.

The Senate bill for teaching traditional history is not the only effort at ideological control of higher education. The IWF Report was released just before the Oct. 29, 2003 Senate committee hearings on “intellectual diversity” at American colleges and universities, where four speakers aligned with conservative groups announced their uniform agreement that something needs to be done to control left-wingers on college campuses.

While the IWF report offers “dubious achievement awards” to these elite colleges for murdering the liberal arts, the award ought to be given instead to the IWF for the dubious achievement of a report full of errors and misrepresentations that unfairly criticizes liberal arts colleges.