



## Saving Remnants: Where Western Civ Thrives

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Western civilization, University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins believed, was significantly different from other civilizations. “The tradition of the West,” he wrote in his 1952 introduction to the *Great Books of the Western World*,

is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and continues to the present day . . . No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort . . . The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the *Logos*. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race.

Similar to the *Harvard Classics* series published in 1910 under the editorship of longtime Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, *Great Books of the Western World* was intended for non-academic readers. But whereas Eliot’s famous “five-foot-shelf of books” aimed to provide a complete college education for those unable to pursue a bachelor’s degree, Hutchins’s Great Conversation was designed to counter the creeping vocationalism which he thought left many college graduates—especially those in business or the professions—unfamiliar with the seminal texts and ideas of the Great Conversation, the Western intellectual and cultural tradition. *Great Books*,

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Hutchins stressed, would provide the means of closing the glaring gaps in a baccalaureate experience that increasingly imparted narrow specialized training, and marginalized liberal education.

The fifty-four volume set comprising the “best that had been thought and written” was introduced with great fanfare by Hutchins and his co-editor Mortimer J. Adler in April 1952, with the initial two sets presented to President Harry Truman and Queen Elizabeth II. Sales were initially meager, however, and picked up significantly only after the publisher, Encyclopedia Britannica, overrode Hutchins’s objections and adopted a more conventional marketing strategy. Britannica’s profits swelled as a record number of sets was eventually sold; whether the books were actually read, as Hutchins intended, or simply garnished the décor of business suites and law offices is impossible to determine.

But notwithstanding Hutchins’s lament, Western civilization in some manifestation was a staple in many undergraduate curricula at the time. Irrespective of their major fields or career aspirations, most students could expect a required encounter with the “Conversation,” typically through the familiar first year historical survey, which introduced them to the legacy of classical Greece, Rome, Medieval civilization, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the rise of modern science, the Enlightenment, French Revolution, and onward. A full-year freshmen survey of Western civilization at the University of Chicago, introduced during Hutchins’s presidency, and required of all undergraduates, was widely imitated. Other common core requirements frequently included a two semester survey of English literature with possibly a course in philosophy, classical music appreciation, or the fine arts added to the mix. Often enough, the Great Conversation in substantial measure was integral to the experience of most undergraduates.

That is no longer the case. In 2011, National Association of Scholars (NAS) published *The Vanishing West*, a comparative survey of the presence of Western civilization courses in the undergraduate core curricula at fifty of the nation’s most select schools in 2010, as opposed to the benchmark year of 1964. As its title indicates, the report’s findings confirmed that by 2010, the once standard Western civilization courses had all but disappeared from the undergraduate core requirements of the schools in our base cohort. Indeed, they were not even required of history majors, and were often not available at all, even as electives. The same pattern proved true for the seventy-five public institutions we added to our sample for 2010. What liberal arts requirements remained usually consisted of elastic distribution categories which students fulfilled by selecting from a bewildering range of specialty and niche courses, often focused on contemporary social and political issues, or reflecting the narrow research interests of individual

instructors. Students were now far more likely to ponder the intricacies of “medieval sexualities” (no irony intended) than they were the significance of the *Magna Carta*, or the rise of Elvis Presley and rock music in the 1950’s, but not the Cold War (except perhaps to note recurrent Red Scares, McCarthyism, and other “overreactions” to the “imaginary” Communist threat). The same holds true of the Common Book selections that many schools now require of incoming freshmen. Overall, contemporary liberal arts education is substantially present tense, and heavily overlaid with progressive ideology.

Yet Western civilization curricula, while indeed rare, are also not wholly defunct: An inquiring traditionalist can find programs, divisions and entire schools where the Western heritage is preserved and even thrives, especially at small religious colleges. The following list is not exhaustive, but illustrates the variety of programs currently available, ranging from optional certificate programs, to traditional core requirements, to a wholly prescribed baccalaureate curriculum.

- 1) St. John’s College, Annapolis/Santa Fe—has a prescribed curriculum for the entire four years, read by all students. Adopted in 1937 and modified periodically, the program is devoted specifically to the Great Books of Western Civilization. Students are required to master the rudiments of classical Greek and French, in both instances to acquire sufficient competence to begin translating original texts by the beginning of the junior year. A prescribed reading list of Great Books spanning the Western heritage is divided among six subject areas: History, Politics, Law and Economics; Literature; Mathematics; Music and the Arts; the Natural Sciences; Philosophy, Theology and Psychology. The Music and Arts component comprises more than simply reading: Students sing Renaissance polyphony, sketch landscapes and analyze the relationship between music and text in J.S. Bach’s cantatas. In addition, each student must write a senior essay under the supervision of a college tutor. The essay is based on a close reading of a single book, and is focused on “the extended pursuit of a difficult question in dialogue with a great author.” Upon completion of the essay, each student then undergoes a public oral examination with three faculty tutors and the rest of the student body.
- 2) Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula California—TAC offers a single bachelor’s degree based on a uniform syllabus of “great books,” read within an overarching framework of traditional Catholic theology. In the college’s description, students read these texts “because, more than any other works, when studied under the light of the teaching Church, they can open up the truth about reality.” Not surprisingly, the reading list includes the entire

Bible, the major works of Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas and other seminal authors in Catholicism's theological pantheon. But the syllabus also includes most of the canonical works of English literature, the Greco-Roman heritage, the principal works of Western philosophy, the founding texts of modern science and mathematics, major specimens of continental literature and representative modern writings, including Darwin, most of Marx's oeuvre, Nietzsche and Heidegger. All students must attain reading proficiency in Latin, and are also immersed in at least one modern foreign language through residence in theme houses. Music appreciation and physical activities are also integral to the college's program, and a senior thesis is required of all students.

- 3) Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan—maintains a genuine core curriculum required of all students. Fourteen courses spanning four topical units are mandatory for all undergraduates, irrespective of their major fields. These include Western Heritage to 1600, American Heritage, the Western Theological tradition, the Western philosophical tradition, Classical Rhetoric and Logic, Great Books of the British and American traditions, Great Books of the Western tradition, the United States Constitution, core courses in the principles of biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics, physical education, and a senior capstone project. In addition, students must also select one course each from options in Fine Arts, Social Sciences, Western Literature and foreign languages. Major subject fields include the typical range of choices, but the core is mandatory for all students.
- 4) Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania—was founded as a non-denominational, non-sectarian evangelical Christian school open to all faiths. The general ethos at the college emphasizes the unique and positive place of American history, culture, and religious freedom as developments rising from the heritage of Western civilization. Undergraduate pre-major requirements span a total of 45 credits that include quantitative reasoning and logic, a writing intensive course, a seminar devoted to the examination of Science, Faith and Technology, a foreign language, a laboratory science, and physical education. The largest single component in the core, however, is the five-course Civilization series, which comprehends the Western heritage with special emphasis on its Christian aspects. The courses include Civilization and the Biblical Revelation; Western Civilization: Historical and Intellectual Foundations; Civilization and Literature; Civilization and the Arts; Christianity and Civilization: Modern and Postmodern Challenges. While the other required categories allow students to choose one course

from among a limited number of options, the Civilization series is mandatory for everyone.

- 5) Texas Tech University, Institute for the Study of Western Civilization—established in 2012 by NAS founding president Steve Balch. Dr. Balch has designed a Western Civilization concentration within TTU’s Honors College Arts and Letters degree. The program spans four years, and comprises much of a participating student’s undergraduate degree. Program requirements include a two-semester historical survey of Western civilization, two semesters of the Western Intellectual Tradition, and one course in European fine arts. Students are strongly encouraged to study one semester abroad if possible, and must also complete at least two years of study in a foreign language. Beyond the basic requirements, the program requires all students to select at least five additional courses relevant to Western civilization from an approved list of electives. Possible choices include Ancient Civilization, I & II, the French Revolution and Napoleon, Women in European Civilization, the Bible as Literature and Classical Greek Philosophy. A senior thesis is also required of all students.
- 6) University of Dallas—a prescribed core curriculum is required of all students, and is regarded as a unifying factor, irrespective of a student’s individual interests. It embraces a distinctly Catholic ethos, but integrates the philosophical, literary, theological, and historical aspects of Western civilization. “Our core curriculum,” the UD web page emphasizes, “informs all of our undergraduate programs, whether you major in biology, business or theology.” An especially distinctive feature of the program provides for a semester at the school’s campus in Rome, the wellspring of Western civilization. All students must complete four semesters devoted to the Literary Tradition, spanning Greek tragedy to the modern novel. The third semester is typically taken during the student’s semester at the university campus in Rome. History education is extensive, and includes two semesters each of Western civilization and American history. The second semester of Western civilization is also usually completed in Rome. In addition, the core requires three courses in philosophy and two in theology, one each taken during the Roman semester. The five courses comprehend the major Western and Catholic theologians, as well as a semester focused on the Christian biblical tradition. One course each in the fundamentals of economics and the American political system round out the fifteen prescribed core elements. Finally, all students must complete an additional four courses in the natural sciences, mathematics, fine arts, and foreign languages.

- 7) Wright Community College—a program established by a longtime NAS member, English professor Bruce Gans. The program, situated at Wright College in inner city Chicago, attracted national media attention and astonishment from academic quarters: How could a program so lacking “diversity” in its reading list nevertheless appeal to so many minority students? Evidently, they shared Gans’s commonsense belief that significant ideas usually transcend the accidents of ethnicity, sex, or race. Gans has recently retired, but Great Books continues in Wright’s English department as a certificate program. Currently, it maintains a master list of 275 core authors, and includes most of the canonical authors in English literature, the classics of Greece and Rome along with major philosophical works by Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, and Kant, among others. Students in the program must complete at least four courses from a designated core of offerings in English, Humanities, Political Science, Philosophy, History, Theater, and Religious Studies. In each course, at least 50 percent of the readings must be selected from the list of authors approved for the program. Students who earn a grade of “B” or better in these courses receive a special certificate with their college transcripts when transferring to other institutions. The program also sponsors a Great Books Student Society devoted to reading and discussing classic works and publishes outstanding student essays in the *Wright Great Books Symposium Journal*, entirely selected and edited by students in the Great Books program.
- 8) James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, Princeton University—founded in 2000 by Princeton politics Professor Robert George, the program is housed in the university’s Politics Department, and focuses its research and activity on American constitutional law and its place in the tradition of Western political thought. In the program’s mission statement:

What conditions are necessary to sustain America's experiment in ordered liberty? What is the proper relationship between government and civil society? What influence, if any, ought religion to have in public life? Are there objective principles of justice or other moral standards by which the decisions of public officials and citizens alike can be evaluated? What structures of government are most conducive to promoting the ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence? Is there a relationship between economic freedom and civil liberty? What is the proper role of the judiciary in a democratic republic?

In pursuit of these mission goals, the program offers undergraduate courses in various departments, sponsors academic year visiting fellowships for scholars and professors, summer seminars and guest lectures during the academic year. Recent workshop themes have included “Augustine and Political Theory,” “Religious Traditions and the Law,” “Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson,” and “The Politics of the Middle Class: Aristotle and the American Founding.”

- 9) King’s College, New York City—is a non-denominational evangelical Christian institution with a prescribed core that comprises fully half of the undergraduate requirements. Moreover, students complete the core requirements during the course of their four years at King’s, rather than in the first two years. Central to the core is a two-semester survey of Western Civilization, the first course of which “serves as a framework for the integration and understanding of all other liberal arts.” Other components in the nineteen-course core include a two semester sequence covering the history and political system of the United States, two semesters of Bible studies, three courses on writing and rhetoric, two in economics, and one each in historical theology and in the foundations of politics. Students must also complete courses, respectively, in quantitative reasoning and scientific reasoning. A relatively small range of nine major fields is offered, along with fifteen minors, all of which are strongly reflective of the Western intellectual and Christian traditions.
- 10) Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin—is an Evangelical Lutheran school, although its promotional literature seems to emphasize its liberal arts curriculum and “experiential learning” approach, on an equal footing with its Christian underpinnings. All students as freshmen must take two semester seminar courses covering the Western Heritage, which are described as “the foundation of the Carthage experience: a journey of rigorous thinking, questioning and imagining that ultimately leads to self-discovery and self-expression in theological, philosophical, literary and historical foundations.” The college also offers both a major and minor in Great Ideas which is devoted to an in-depth survey of Western literature, philosophy, theology, and culture: “Students and faculty in the Great Ideas program study the works of some of the greatest minds in the Western Tradition such as Homer, Plato, Virgil, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, and Austen.” Students selecting the major must take a core of five courses, which include two semesters covering the Foundations of Western Thought, and another course

- similarly focused on the Foundations of American Thought. The remaining two courses examine the foundations of mathematics and the natural sciences. Carthage awards Western heritage scholarships for students who have performed meritoriously as freshmen in the required sequence. Core requirements complement the Western Heritage survey with a comparable Global Heritage series focused on non-Western equivalents.
- 11) St. Olaf's College, Northfield Minnesota—is also affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church. All students must take a prescribed undergraduate core curriculum irrespective of their major field. The core requirements include two courses in the History of Western culture. These focus on “the important texts and contexts in the social, political, economic, cultural, artistic, or intellectual heritage of the West.” Core Studies also include Biblical and Theological Studies, the natural sciences and psychology. Somewhat surprisingly, the core also requires two courses in Multicultural Studies, both domestic and global. These courses address the familiar topics that usually fall under this rubric: race, ethnicity, power, and inequality. For students seeking a more thorough immersion, St. Olaf's offers The Great Conversation—the “Great Con” (something of an unfortunate nickname)—a certificate program established in 1981 with the assistance of an NEH grant. It is one of four elective “conversations,” the others being American Conversations, Asian Conversations, and the Science Conversation. The five core courses of the Great Con include: The Tradition Beginning: The Greeks and the Hebrews; The Tradition Continuing: The Romans and the Christians; The Tradition Redefined: The Medieval Synthesis; The Tradition Renewed: The New Forces of Secularism; The Tradition in Crisis: Dissenters and Defenders.
  - 12) Mercer University, Macon Georgia—The Great Books Certificate program, is an eight-course “track,” one of two through which students may fulfill their general education requirements in the College of Liberal Arts. It receives regular support from the Sophie Oxley Clark Williams Great Books Endowed Fund. The program is also available to engineering and education students. The eight required courses, which center on “foundational texts in the Western tradition,” are conducted as writing-intensive seminars and Socratic dialogues. They include Among Gods and Heroes; Classical Cultures; The Hebrew and Christian Traditions; Order and Ingenuity; The Modern Worldview; Reason and Revolution; The Age of Ambivalence. A special topics seminar is also available for students seeking to explore readings or themes not included



- in the eight regular courses. Faculty for the program are drawn from all of the major departments in the College of Liberal Arts, and must undergo special preparation to acclimate themselves to the GBC's pedagogical methods.
- 13) Gutenberg College—a tiny Eugene, Oregon school founded in 1994, with a view to imparting “an outstanding broad-based liberal arts education in an environment respectful of biblical Christianity.” Within this theological backdrop, which the college describes as “Christian. Not dogmatic, not squishy,” students are engaged by a largely prescribed “great books” curriculum similar to those at St. John's and Thomas Aquinas College. Freshman and sophomore years are devoted to six courses surveying the experience and accomplishments of Western civilization from its origins into the twentieth century. Two years each of classical Greek and German are also required, along with writing seminars. In their junior and senior years, six courses comprising the Great Conversation requirement examine the intellectual and cultural heritage of the West in depth, with particular emphasis on its philosophical and theological traditions. In “Microexigesis” (a unique curricular category) students focus on the interpretation of philosophical and theological texts selected for their density and difficulty, in conjunction with biblical hermeneutics. Ancient and modern mathematics and the natural sciences are also mandatory, and a senior Contemporary Issues seminar incorporates the Great Conversation with present-day controversies. A required senior thesis completes the baccalaureate degree.
  - 14) Monterey Peninsula College—founded by NAS member and now retired English professor David Clemens, the only such program in California's 113 community college system. Clemens gained earlier public notice by refusing to recite a mandatory multicultural “loyalty oath” at MPC, which was appropriately shamed and embarrassed by the episode. His immediate motivation for instituting the program was the steadily encroaching job-training focus of MPC's curriculum and the elimination of literature courses by the administration. All students in the program register for English 5, Introduction to the Great Books, and then select four other courses from current offerings. These include, but are not limited to, Shakespeare, The Bible as Literature, Western Civilization I, a history course, Introduction to Philosophy, and Survey of British Literature. The program was featured in *First Things* in 2016, where senior editor Mark Bauerlein admiringly described participating students as “Dissenters from Disenchantment.” The program has

received generous external support from the Apgar Foundation, which has underwritten two colloquia, provided funding for visiting scholars and authors, and also sponsored a high school essay writing contest.

As noted, this list is not exhaustive, and other programs can be found in schools similar to those included here. Some, as we have seen, have also managed to secure independent funding, which gains a measure of public recognition and probably affords some security against hesitant or hostile administrations—money talks, as always. Unfortunately, they are far from typical. With precious few exceptions, most contemporary college students will never encounter even the names of the works comprising the core of these programs, much less ascend to the more demanding level of reading comprehension and intellectual rigor necessary to master them. Instead, they will most likely come to college already steeped in multicultural pieties and social justice imperatives. These will certainly be reinforced, but not even minimally challenged. Only a tiny, self-selecting subset of students will seek the type of small, largely anonymous, traditional religious institutions cited here, or randomly find themselves at one of the handful of private or public institutions where a few staunchly resolute individuals have surmounted entrenched administrative resistance and vehement hostility from faculty colleagues. Western civilization has sadly all but vanished from undergraduate curricula. But who knows: Perhaps the odd browser in remote corners of the public library will happen upon a dusty set of the *Harvard Classics* or *Great Books of the Western World* and take a volume back to the reading room.