

# UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF GENERAL HUMANITIES

by  
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For a long time we have known the value of the kind of knowledge that exists in the humanities and the wisdom that knowledge can bring. We have known the loss to individuals incapable of leading an examined life, and we've known the danger a culture faces when it loses the value of its past from which to examine its present and plan its future. But a survey conducted this year at St. Cloud State University is another of a growing number of indicators that current students have an extremely limited intellectual context from which to understand themselves and their culture. To use E. D. Hirsch's phrase, our students possess a dangerous cultural illiteracy.

At SCSU we prepared a list of ninety-eight representative names and phrases from *history* (Julius Caesar, the Spanish Armada, Bunker Hill, etc.), *literature* (Keats, Emily Dickinson, Hemingway, etc.), *philosophy* (Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Sartre, etc.), *religion* (Islam, Ezekiel, Martin Luther, etc.), *science* (Euclid, Newton, Einstein, etc.), *art* (Van Gogh, da Vinci, Picasso, etc.), and *geography* (Bolivia, the Nile, Thailand, etc.). We gave the list to 492 students in English composition courses and asked them to identify each term as fully as possible in a short phrase. (A copy of our list of names together with the number and percentage of students who correctly identified each term follows this paper.)

In evaluating the results we asked only that the students give a *faint* indication that they recognized terms: our normal requirement for a correct answer was to have the term placed within a category (i.e. to say that Bolivia is a country, Eisenhower was a president or general, and Hemingway was a writer) and then to add one feature that differentiated the term from others in the category (i.e. with Eisenhower to mention World War II, or Normandy, or the decade of his presidency, or Richard Nixon as Vice President; with Bolivia to place it in South America, or even Central America; with Hemingway to mention the titles of any of his works, or the general period in which he wrote, or any significant themes or elements of style.) With some figures even this seemed too demanding, and we reduced the requirement to, for instance, saying Dante was a writer or poet, Bach a musician or composer, Picasso an artist or painter, and Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria were English queens.

The students did well on some of the terms. The term most recognized was Hitler (84%) followed by Freud (75%), Martin Luther King, Jr. (74%), Bach (68%), and Richard Nixon (67%); 60% knew Zeus was some sort of ancient God; 59% knew the Nile was a river; 53% recognized Auschwitz, and 50% knew of Mark Twain. But such results were an exception; on other terms students didn't do nearly so well: only 8% could identify William Faulkner, Hippocrates, J. Edgar Hoover, Keats or Nat Turner; 7% knew William Sherman; 6% identified Lewis Carroll, Emily Dickinson, Euclid,

Zen, or the Reformation; 5% knew of Francis Bacon or Immanuel Kant; 4% knew Dante was a writer; 3% knew of Brahma, T. S. Eliot, John Milton or Richard Wagner; 2% knew Thomas More, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Sartre or Virginia Woolf; and 1% identified Cervantes, Cicero and Virgil. Of the 492 students in the survey, two identified John Henry Newman (There is a Newman Center at SCSU.) and one identified John Bunyan and Plutarch. (The one student who identified Newman, Bunyan and Plutarch is an international student from India who scored 97% correct. No student educated in the American school system did nearly so well.)

As a whole, our group of current university students correctly identified 23.9% of the terms which means that they failed to identify 76.1% of a sample of some of the most significant people, places and events in our heritage.

The results may be argued with. Ninety-eight terms cannot represent all of our potential heritage; it can merely attempt to be a representative sample. Furthermore, the ability to identify a term may not mean that one can use the concepts the term implies actively in thought or judgement. But at the very least these results are a clear symptom. Few physicians would hesitate to begin treatment on a patient with symptoms this clear of a physical illness as dangerous as this intellectual illness is.

A difficulty, however, is that before we can solve a problem we need to know its cause or causes, and in this case we will disagree about what the causes are. It is possible to blame the media and its inane content, or to point to a general fragmentation of American culture and blame a culture that is willing to accept the hour after hour and day after day of mindless recreation that the media provides without demanding any genuine content. But since knowledge has always been the role of the educational establishment and since creating a desire for genuine learning is one of education's goals, education is a logical culprit to consider.

Within education, a possible cause rests in the curricular reforms of ten to twenty years ago that replaced a substantial core curriculum with an elective system that all too often allowed teachers to offer, and students to accept, courses that were topically interesting and themes that were popular rather than significant so that Marvel comics replaced Milton and science fiction replaced Shakespeare. Or a possible cause is the educational philosophy that has said that above all else students must be happy to learn, and the educational value of material became confused with its entertainment value. Another possible cause lies in the "isms" of the last two decades which confuse education with indoctrination and believe that teaching students to have the proper attitudes was our primary goal, rather than believing that broadly-educated students would make the most intelligent and humane social decisions for themselves if allowed to. Another possible culprit could be the humanists themselves who often disagree on what material is significant enough to be studied, who often place their own private agenda or interests above a more general good, who have secretly lost faith in the material they teach, or who have failed to show in the ways they have led their lives that there is any value in the humanism they have taught and have instead shown students that someone who has spent years and years studying literature or history or philosophy can be as petty and mean and greedy as anyone else.

We may well need to debate the causes, but it is time for the debate to begin in earnest. There is far too much that is being lost. The ultimate value of the humanities is intangible, but we generally share a sense of what those values are: a more significant understanding of human beings and human nature; a recognition of the richness available in the human experience; an ability to place ourselves, our current thought, and our problems in a large, rich context of shared human experience and an ability to evaluate and judge from within that context; a life more fully and wisely lived. William Bennett describes some of the values in the report by the National Endowment for the Humanities, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*:

The humanities tell us how men and women of our own or other civilizations have grappled with life's enduring, fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilizations flourish? Why do they decay?

The humanities are sometimes rejected or ignored as being antiquated. It is argued they speak of human thought and experiences in a world where experience has changed dramatically. Or it is argued they represent only the experience of the male sex or the white race in a world that recognizes two sexes and many races. But in fact beneath limited surface features that can be bound to a period or race or sex, the humanities contain a reservoir of that which is of greatest value gathered from thousands of years of human experience, something no current experience can attempt to replace without great loss.

The danger is to our students and our future. As the world grows rapidly more complex, as change and even the rate of change move faster and faster, and as humans hold more and more power in their hands, our students will face problems, decisions and promises beyond what we, or they, can now imagine. Without the balanced context they should have to be able to think and judge within, they will have only topical ideas and opinions to judge and act from, and the possibility for ghastly errors is greater and greater.

We desire excellence in education. Sometimes we even claim it. But it is dishonest and dangerous to claim excellence (or even competence) in an education that ignores the humanities to the extent ours does. There is even something Orwellian about our making such a claim, for Orwell knew that one way to hide any weakness was to loudly proclaim strength. An irony is that it is hard to discuss such an Orwellian claim with current students, for too few of them know what "Orwellian" means.



### The Survey

Please identify each of the following as fully as possible in a short phrase:

(*)	(*)
Dante Alighieri (19 - 4%)	John Keats (40 - 8%)
Thomas Aquinas (47 - 10%)	Martin Luther King (365 - 74%)
Aristotle (179 - 36%)	Vladimir Lenin (237 - 48%)
Louie Armstrong (156 - 32%)	Martin Luther (152 - 31%)
Attila the Hun (34 - 7%)	Machiavelli (33 - 7%)
Auschwitz (261 - 53%)	Magna Carta (53 - 11%)
Johann Sebastian Bach (334 - 68%)	Chairman Mao (109 - 22%)
Francis Bacon (24 - 5%)	Mediterranean (175 - 36%)
Bolivia (142 - 29%)	John Milton (14 - 3%)
Brahma (15 - 3%)	Thomas More (8 - 2%)
Johannes Brahms (49 - 10%)	Napolean (189 - 38%)
Elizabeth Barret Browning (97 - 20%)	New Delhi (124 - 25%)
Bunker Hill (117 - 24%)	John Henry Newman (2 - 0%)
John Bunyan (1 - 0%)	Issac Newton (238 - 48%)
Julius Caesar (285 - 58%)	Friedrich Nietzsche (10 - 2%)
Lewis Carroll (29 - 6%)	Nile (290 - 59%)
Cervantes (6 - 1%)	Richard Nixon (329 - 67%)
Geoffrey Chaucer (65 - 13%)	Pablo Picasso (353 - 72%)
Winston Churchill (246 - 50%)	Paul of Tarsus (19 - 4%)
Cicero (6 - 1%)	Plato (103 - 21%)
Confucius (267 - 54%)	Plutarch (1 - 0%)
Charles Darwin (292 - 59%)	Reformation (29 - 6%)
Leonardo da Vinci (216 - 44%)	Relativity (49 - 10%)
Jefferson Davis (87 - 18%)	Renaissance (64 - 13%)
Charles de Gaulle (60 - 12%)	Franklin Delano Roosevelt (171 - 35%)
Dialectic (11 - 2%)	Jean Jacques Rousseau (11 - 2%)
Emily Dickinson (29 - 6%)	Bertrand Russell (8 - 2%)
Albert Einstein (160 - 33%)	Carl Sandburg (52 - 11%)
Dwight D. Eisenhower (116 - 24%)	Jean Paul Sartre (11 - 2%)
T. S. Eliot (13 - 3%)	William Tecumseh Sherman (36 - 7%)
Elizabeth I (274 - 56%)	B. F. Skinner (169 - 34%)
Ralph Waldo Emerson (14 - 3%)	Socrates (117 - 24%)
Euclid (28 - 6%)	Spanish Armada (49 - 10%)
Exodus (196 - 40%)	Joseph Stalin (216 - 65%)
Ezekiel (181 - 37%)	Tecumseh (68 - 14%)
William Faulkner (38 - 8%)	Thailand (151 - 31%)
Francis of Assisi (110 - 22%)	Henry David Thoreau (70 - 14%)
Sigmund Freud (367 - 75%)	Nat Turner (40 - 8%)

Ernest Hemingway (88 - 18%)	Mark Twain (272 - 55%)
Hippocrates (38 - 8%)	Valkyrie (6 - 1%)
Adolph Hitler (414 - 84%)	Vincent Van Gogh (210 - 43%)
Homer (109 - 22%)	Queen Victoria (188 - 38%)
J. Edgar Hoover (41 - 8%)	Virgil (7 - 1%)
Industrial Revolution (147 - 30%)	Richard Wagner (14 - 3%)
Islam (97 - 20%)	Waterloo (102 - 21%)
Istanbul (99 - 20%)	Virginia Woolf (9 - 2%)
Thomas Jefferson (198 - 40%)	Wounded Knee (163 - 33%)
Carl Jung (77 - 16%)	Zen (28 - 6%)
Immanuel Kant (27 - 5%)	Zeus (295 - 60%)

\*The first number indicates the number of students who answered correctly and the second number indicates the percentage who were correct.