

HUMANITIES

In a "Report to the President, the Congress and the American People" Lynn Cheney, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently brought together in one place all the issues and arguments that have long been brewing on American campuses about the future of the liberal arts in the United States.

Entitled "Humanities in America," the report focuses on a troubling irony: Outside the academy, interest in the humanities is soaring, as evidenced by large and increasing numbers of Americans who are flocking to concert halls, libraries, theaters, exhibits and cultural festivals; on campus, however, humanities scholars are mired in minutiae and students are routinely bypassing liberal arts courses for classes in science and business.

Ms. Cheney cites two reasons for the trend: politics and the inexorable demands of a system that stresses specialization.

The statistics make the situation clear: Between 1966 and 1986, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities declined by 33 percent. In 1965-66 academic season, one in six students majored in the liberal arts; now, it is one in sixteen. At the same time, one in every four is majoring in business.

It is true that students these days expect more quid pro quo from their education. The demands of the marketplace are acute and they feel them. They seem to be more practical, more vocationally oriented, than previous cohorts. Many academies, in the interest of their own economic survival, have offered students the kinds of career curriculums they

want. But in changing their standards and dropping traditional requirements, American academies have failed, as Ms. Cheney suggests, to make their students culturally literate, cutting them off from both the treasures of the past and the world beyond the marketplace.

For example, a 1988 endowment survey shows the following:

- * At more than 80 percent of America's colleges and universities, it is possible to earn a bachelor's degree without taking a single course in American history;

- * At 37 percent of those schools it is possible to get a degree without learning any history at all;

- * At 45 percent, students are not required to study British or American literature, the literature of their native tongue;

- * At 62 percent, they are not made to study philosophy;

- * And at 77 percent, there is no prerequisite for a foreign language.

She notes that a number of American academics have written about a "lost sense of meaning in academic humanities. And they have made these observations, paradoxically enough, at the same time that people outside the academy are increasingly turning to literary, historical, and philosophical study, are increasingly finding in the 'good arts' a source of enrichment for themselves and their society."

How did this happen? She traces part of the problem back to 1876, and the founding of Johns Hopkins University on the German academic model of specialization. "It emphasized the discovery of knowledge and encouraged narrowly focused research rather than broad learning." While this approach -- calculated myopia -- was apt for science, "sometimes

the fit between scientific approach and humanistic content has been painful."

The humanities represent the broad view and as liberal arts scholars narrow their focus, the liberal arts tend to "lose their significance." This narrowness -- the specialization required to earn a Phd. -- has become in American colleges and universities "the prescribed path of advancement" and "fewer and fewer" scholars risk taking a generalized view.

They also are spending more time on research and less in the classroom. Instead of teaching, America's best and brightest scholars, its most dynamic instructors, spend their time writing about arcane threads of culture because that is the kind of effort the system demands and rewards.

"This is not because faculty members dislike teaching," Ms. Cheney reports. "To the contrary, on a recent survey, 63 percent declared that their interest lies more in teaching than in research. But since the founding of the modern university, teaching has typically not been valued as highly as publication of the results of specialized research....Advancements in the classroom have counted less than scholarly monographs."

She is also troubled about the influence of television on American culture, echoing the fears of others who believe that soon, "reading might become an endangered activity." The core of the humanities, she goes on, is concentrated in books. Therefore, "What is the fate of literature if few people can read?"

But at the heart of the debate about the future of the humanities

are the incendiary arguments that have arisen about the so-called "cannon of western thought." Not since the Vietnam war has the passion of personal and social politics so charged the air on American college campuses.

"Viewing humanities texts as though they were political documents is the most noticeable trend in academic study of the humanities today," Ms Cheney writes.

At the core of the debate are the works of western literature and culture: the Bible, the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, Shakespeare and Cervantes, Hobbs and Locke, Freud and Darwin, and so on.

On one side are those who attack such works as culturally outdated and biased. For example, when a group of American academics gathered in conference at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill this fall to discuss "The Future of the Liberal Arts," one of the conferees, Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor of English and comparative literature at Cornell University, said that the traditional cannon emerged at time when "scholar critics were white men and when women and persons of color were voiceless, faceless servants and laborers, pouring tea and filling brandy snifters in the board rooms of old boys clubs."

Many of like opinion appear to want the old cannon thrown out in favor of one that reflects America's polyglot and technological society, a cannon made up of the voices that come from the ranks of the third world and those socially oppressed -- women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals.

Ms. Cheney sees this as an attack on "the idea that the study of Western Culture should be central to a college education." She offers evidence of such attacks at: Stanford University, where the faculty senate voted to eliminate a required course in Western culture; Columbia University where, in the words of Professor Edward Said, some faculty members "loathe with a passion beyond description" an undergraduate course in Western masterpieces; and, finally, any of the schools where courses in third-world culture or ethnic studies are being taught in the place of a course in western culture.

In the end, she comes down firmly on the side of those who believe that the classics, their origins notwithstanding, have a value that is timeless, beyond the politics of any era:

"The humanities are about more than politics, about more than social power," Ms. Cheney says. "What gives them their abiding worth are truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all."

Such a course of study, she says, lets students "take away from their undergraduate years a sense of the interconnection of ideas and events -- a framework into which they can fit the leaning of a lifetime."

END ALL.