Social Change Tops Classic Books in Professors' Teaching Priorities

By ROBIN WILSON

A new national survey of faculty members shows that the proportion of professors who believe it is very important to teach undergraduates to become "agents of social change" is substantially larger than the proportion who believe it is important to teach students the classic works of Western civilization.

According to the survey, 57.8 percent of professors believe it is important to encourage undergraduates to become agents of social change, whereas only 34.7 percent said teaching them the classics is very important. Observers say the difference results from influences as diverse as conservative criticisms of curriculum and Barack Obama's call for social activism during his presidential campaign.

The survey found that, on the issue of classics and change, professors' opinions also vary by rank. Full professors are more likely than assistant professors to say teaching the classics is important, and assistant professors are more likely than full professors to say encouraging undergraduates to become socially involved is important.

A report on the survey, "The American College Teacher," was released Thursday by the University of California at Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute. The institute questioned 22,562 professors across many disciplines at 372 colleges and universities in the 2007-8 academic year about their goals for classroom instruction, and asked them how they spent their time and how satisfied they were with their jobs. The institute completes the survey every three years (The Chronicle, September 16, 2005).

Sylvia Hurtado, a professor of education at UCLA who directs the research institute, said the gap between those who value teaching Western civilization and those who value teaching students to be social activists reflects a shift in emphasis from the abstract to the practical. "The notion of a liberal education as a set of essential intellectual skills is in transition," she says. "It's also about social and personal responsibility, thinking about one's role in society, and creating change."

Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors, says he believes faculty members should teach the classics. "I teach American literature all the time, that's what I do," says Mr. Nelson, who is a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

But he says that to many professors, teaching the classics has become part of a "conservative agenda" that they don't want to be part of. Conservative critics of academe, he says, "have poisoned the well for these subjects because they've gotten politicized and become symbols of a reaction against the progressive academy."

But Peter W. Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars, attributes the gap between Western civilization and social change in part to the influence of Barack Obama's campaign. He suspects that many professors have long believed that teaching students to be agents of change is more important than teaching them to value the classics. Few, however, have openly acknowledged that, he says. "There used to be something a bit shameful for a faculty member to take such an anti-intellectual position," he says.
But the 2008 presidential campaign, he says, changed that, giving "a sense of legitimacy to the idea that political action could and should trump traditional forms of intellectual inquiry."

The survey found other evidence that professors are increasingly interested in helping students develop morals and in helping them get a well-rounded education and form a commitment to their communities. In particular, 72.8 percent of professors think it is important to instill in students an appreciation for the liberal arts—nearly 15 percentage points more than said so three years ago. About 56 percent say it is important to instill an appreciation for community service—a nearly 20 percentage-point increase—and 71.8 percent say it is important to enhance students' "self understanding." About 70 percent say it is important to help students develop "moral character," 13 percentage points more than said so three years earlier.

The report says the shift may reflect the fact that faculty members are more aware of their role in helping students with "psychosocial" development in the wake of the murders at Virginia Tech and on other campuses.

"Faculty are just more attuned to looking at the whole student than they might have been before these incidents on campus," says Linda DeAngelo, assistant director for research at the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, which is part of the institute and which administered the survey.

The survey of professors also found that:

- Female professors are more likely than male professors to say they spend 13 or more hours a week preparing for class, while men are more likely than women to say they spend 13 or more hours a week doing research and scholarly writing.
- Younger professors are more supportive than full professors of offering remedial education for college students, and women are more supportive of it than are men.
- Male professors are more likely than female professors to include students in their research projects.
- Only one-third of all professors believe they have a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives.

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