

Ivy League Prof Dishes on How to Get a Good College Education

I recently revisited [an article written by Jeffrey Hart](#) some eleven years ago. Hart is an emeritus professor of English at Dartmouth College, and was a senior editor at National Review magazine back when that magazine was as concerned about culture as politics.

He [reminisces about a freshman composition course](#) he taught at his Ivy League school in 1988, in which he required his students to write essay on certain assigned readings. One of them was University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom's legendary *The Closing of the American Mind*, which painted an unflattering portrait of the state of education in America.

"They hated it," said Hart, primarily because Bloom was essentially saying that they (college students) were ignorant, poorly educated, and knew little other than clichés.

Hart responded to their indignation with "an impromptu oral quiz" about certain basics of American history and Western civilization:

"Could anyone (in that class of 25 students) say anything about the Mayflower Compact?"

Complete silence.

John Locke?

Nope.

James Madison?

Silentia.

Magna Carta? The Spanish Armada? The Battle of Yorktown? The Bull Moose party? Don Giovanni? William James? The Tenth Amendment?

Zero. Zilch. Forget it."

Upon reflecting on the students' cultural illiteracy, Hart writes:

"The embarrassment was acute, but some good came of it. The better students, ashamed that their first 12 years of schooling had mostly been wasted (even if they had gone to Choate or Exeter), asked me to recommend some books."

Among the books Hart recommended off the top of his head: Samuel Eliot Morison's [*Oxford History of the American People*](#), Max Farrand's [*The Framing of the Constitution*](#), and Jacob Burckhardt's [*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*](#).

Hart's general advice on how students—even at Behemoth U—can ensure themselves a good education was that they should take the "ordinary courses":

"Thus, do take American and European history, an introduction to philosophy, American and European literature, the Old and New Testaments, and at least one modern language. It would be absurd not to take a course in Shakespeare, the best poet in our language. There is art and music history. The list can be expanded, but these areas every educated person should have a decent knowledge of – with specialization coming later on."

You can find all of his advice [here](#).

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