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## **At Colleges, Sun Is Setting on Shakespeare**

**By WILLIAM H. HONAN**

Georgetown University's abandoning of the requirement that English majors study at least two authors among Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton -- which drew criticism and prompted a teach-in last year -- is now the norm, a new study by the National Alumni Forum finds.

Two-thirds of the 67 colleges and universities responding to the forum's survey submitted requirements and course lists for English majors that indicate required courses on the great writers are falling by the wayside.

In their place, courses proliferate on popular culture topics, like "The Gangster Film" (Georgetown), "Melodrama and Soap Opera" (Duke University) and "20th-Century American Boxing Fiction and Film" (Dartmouth College).

"It's happened because English professors don't want to teach Chaucer and Shakespeare anymore," said Jerry L. Martin, president of the National Alumni Forum, a nonprofit educational organization of alumni, donors and trustees founded in 1995. "They want to teach pop culture courses because that's what the students want."

The survey contacted the "top 50" schools, listed by U.S. News & World Report, and 20 others to provide regional balance.

William W. Cook, chairman of the department of English at Dartmouth, said he was "not upset if a tiny minority of students don't study Shakespeare."

"We mustn't deify Shakespeare," he said.

Professor Cook added that the move away from great authors resulted from "the explosion of available materials" and the desire of the faculty "to provide more choice."

Rhonda Cobham-Sander, chairwoman of the English department at Amherst College, said that because of the proliferation of "must read" literature, she neglected American literature in her own undergraduate education.

"Consequently, what we try to do," she said, "is teach students how to read, where to go to find what they want, and different methods."

Until recently, English majors at most colleges and universities were required to study the works of at least one of the three writers generally regarded as pre-eminent English authors: Chaucer, Shakespeare or Milton. Beginning with the class of 1999, Georgetown will require no such courses.

Only 23 of the schools responding to the forum's survey required English majors to take a Shakespeare course. Furthermore, a number of schools -- among them such elite institutions as Amherst and the University of Michigan -- have programs for English majors in which it is possible to avoid reading a single play or sonnet by Shakespeare.

Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., said, "Most English departments are now held so completely hostage to fashionable political and theoretical agendas that it is unlikely Shakespeare can qualify as an appropriate author."

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**Organizations mentioned in this article:**

National Alumni Forum

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