

THE FACULTY

Top English Departments No Longer Require Courses on Shakespeare, a Study Finds

BY DENISE K. MAGNER

A STUDY of the English curricula at 70 of the nation's top colleges and universities has concluded that only a third of them require their majors to take a course on Shakespeare. At the same time, the study found, courses on sexuality and popular culture are proliferating.

The National Alumni Forum, a non-profit group concerned about what it views as declining academic standards, issued a report on the study, "The Shakespeare File: What English Majors Are Really Studying."

Of the 70 institutions covered by the study, only 23 require English majors to take a course on Shakespeare. "The abandonment of Shakespeare requirements is not merely a trend; it is now the norm," said the report.

The forum's study was prompted by a controversy at Georgetown University last spring, when the English department abandoned a requirement that majors take courses on two of the three writers "regarded as the pre-eminent representatives of English language and literature—Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and John Milton," the report said.

In the Ivy League, only Harvard University requires a course on Shakespeare, according to the report. Of the 25 leading liberal-arts colleges in the study, only Claremont McKenna, Hamilton, Middle-



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bury, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges have such a requirement, it said.

To Jerry Martin, president of the forum, that is a travesty. "Shakespeare is the most essential author in the English language," Dr. Martin said in an interview. "He would be cross-culturally recognized as the most important writer in any language. He's inspired the greatest Japanese films, for example, and some Germans argue he can only be truly understood in German."

Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association, said she had not seen the forum's report, but she challenged its conclusions as oversimplified. The M.L.A.'s own survey of a random sample of 366 four-year institutions, she said, shows that 60.8 per cent required majors to take Shakespeare in 1991-92, up from 54.2 per cent in 1984-85. The 1991-92 totals are the most recent available.

"The data we have make clear that whether an institution requires Shakespeare or not, students take it," she said.

The same institution that offers a single English course on female writers or on sexuality typically offers four or five sections on Shakespeare, Ms. Franklin said. "Shakespeare is simply one of the most popular literature courses, and it has been ever since I've been in the business. It's very nice of them to worry about Shakespeare, but it's a little like offering to help the Chicago Bulls."

COURSE ON POPULAR CULTURE

To Dr. Martin, however, many English departments are sending a disturbing message by not requiring Shakespeare. "They are saying it's perfectly acceptable to give someone a bachelor's in English even if they have not taken a course on Shakespeare," he said.

He added that although some majors are

exposed to Shakespeare in survey courses, many colleges do not require majors to take a survey course on British literature.

"If Shakespeare is 'out,' popular culture is 'in,'" the forum's report said, citing a long list of courses on such topics as advertising, AIDS activism, computer games, fashion, music videos, oppression and

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marginalization, soap operas, and theme parks.

"Ideally, every student should read Shakespeare—if his works are not central to a liberal education, what is?" the report said. "But for English majors not to read Shakespeare is worse. It is like an M.D. without a course in anatomy. It is tantamount to fraud."

The forum plans to mail its report to trustees of the 70 colleges and universities that took part in the survey. ■