

Bible Literacy Project

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*Bible Literacy Report II:
What University Professors Say Incoming Students Need to Know*
Executive Summary, Introduction, Methodology, Professors in Study

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Bible Literacy Report II: What University Professors Say Incoming Students Need to Know

Executive Summary

What do today's college students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America's elite colleges and universities?

This study surveyed 39 English professors at 34 top U.S. colleges and universities to learn their assessment of how important Bible literacy is to college-level study of English and American literature. What do incoming freshmen in college-level English courses need to know about the Bible?

Almost without exception, English professors we surveyed at major American colleges and universities see knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. The virtual unanimity and depth of their responses on this question are striking. The Bible is not only a sacred scripture to millions of Americans, it is also arguably (as one Northwestern professor stated), the “most influential text in all of Western culture.”

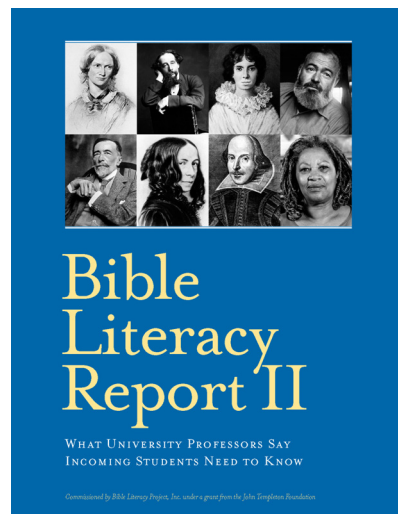
For example, when asked to respond to the question, “Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible,” no professor disagreed; nine provided additional explanation. When asked, “Some scholars say Western literature is steeped in references to the Bible. How would you respond to that?” 38 of 39 English professors agreed; 24 strongly. When asked, “In your opinion, how important is it for students who take your courses to be familiar with the Bible?” 38 of 39 professors said it was important.

Overwhelmingly, professors in this survey indicated that a lack of basic Bible literacy hampers students' ability to understand both classics and contemporary work. Arduously “decoding” scripture references detracts from absorbing and responding to great works of art, both ancient and modern.

At the same time, a number of professors expressed discomfort or reservations with appearing to “take sides” in favor of the Bible in the contemporary context. They did not wish to associate themselves with a political movement around the Bible, or to seem to detract from the importance of other aspects of a good education, including the value of becoming knowledgeable about other world religions.

This report concludes that high schools should make basic Bible knowledge part of their curriculum, especially for college preparatory students. Doing so requires developing a variety of educational materials and curricula that simultaneously (a) acknowledge the Bible's status as sacred scripture to millions of Americans, (b) are fair to students of all faith traditions, and (c) are of high academic quality.

Doing so will be an important part of meeting the next generation's educational needs in an increasingly diverse population.



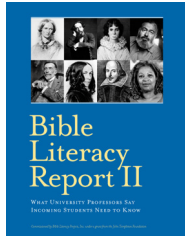
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Introduction to the Report



The Bible has had a profound influence on European and American arts and letters as well as the shape of the English language itself. In 1986, English professors at U.S. colleges were asked what they wished incoming freshmen had read before entering their college. the most frequently named work was the Bible (Juhasz & Wilson). In a 1997 study, 81 percent of American high school English teachers reported it was important to teach some Bible literature (Wachlin). In a 2005 study, 98 percent of American high school English teachers reported that Bible literacy was academically advantageous (Wachlin).

What do today's college students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America's elite colleges and universities? This study surveyed English professors at 34 colleges and universities to get their assessment on how important Bible literacy is to a good education: What advantages do students who are Bible literate have when it comes to approaching English and American literature? What problems have these scholars observed in their students who lack this basic knowledge? What do incoming freshmen in college-level English courses need to know about the Bible?

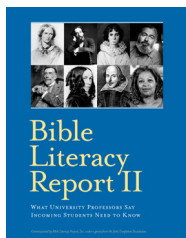
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Methodology



Using *U.S. News*' 2005 rankings in four college categories (national universities, public universities, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive colleges) as a guide, we secured interviews with English professors from both the *first-* and *second-*rated schools in all four categories. Once an interview at a top-ranked school was arranged, we also sought additional interviews with professors at rated nearby colleges and universities. The initial contact was made with English department chairs. Thirty-four of 44 initial contacts resulted in an interview with a professor at that university. Five professors were interviewed as a result of a recommendation from someone other than the chair.

Eleven professors from public universities, 19 professors from private non-sectarian universities, and 9 professors from religiously affiliated colleges or universities were interviewed for this study.

We interviewed professors from the following schools (with their rankings from *U.S. News* in parenthesis).

National Universities: Princeton University (#1 tied), Harvard University (#1 tied), Yale University (#3), Stanford University (#5 tied), Massachusetts Institute of technology (#5 tied), Columbia University (#9), Northwestern University (#11), University of Chicago, (#14), University of Notre Dame (#18), Rice University (#17), Brown University (#13), University of California at Berkeley (#21), University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (#22 tied), University of Virginia (#22 tied), tufts University (#28), the College of William and Mary (#31), New York University (#32), University of Washington (#46), University of Maryland (#56), Texas A&M University (#62), Brigham young University (#74), Howard University (#90), University of Utah (#111), and University of Oregon (#117).

Liberal Arts: Williams College (#1), Amherst College (#2 tied), DePauw University (#42), Wheaton College (#51), and Gordon College (unranked, convenience sample).

Large public universities: University of California at Berkeley (#1), University of Michigan (#2 tied), University of Virginia (#2 tied), the College of William and Mary (#6), University of Washington (#14), University of Maryland (#18), Texas A&M University (#22), University of Oregon, University of Utah.

Comprehensive colleges: Stonehill College (#1, North), Berry College (#2, South), Calvin College (#2, Midwest), Corban College (#8, West), and Concordia University at Portland, Oregon (unranked, convenience sample).

Nine of the 34 colleges and universities included in this study were religiously affiliated: Berry College, Brigham young University, Calvin College, Concordia University, Corban College, Gordon College, University of Notre Dame, Stonehill College, and Wheaton College.

The comments of two additional professors were included in the study—professors whom the principal investigators met through this research and related Bible literacy work: Roger Baker, Brigham young University (#74 national); and Paul Parrish, Texas A&M University (#22 public). Throughout the report, the additional professors were not counted in the data tabulations.

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University Professors in the Study

Adele Berlin

Robert H. Smith Professor of Biblical Studies;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow;
State of Israel Prize of the Minister of Science,
Culture, and Sport for Classical Literature
University of Maryland

Gordon M. Braden

Linden Kent Memorial Professor; English
Department Chair; Roland H. Bainton Book Prize;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
University of Virginia

Leslie Brisman

Karl young Professor of English
Yale University

Gerald L. Bruns

the William P. and Hazel B. White Professor
and Chair of English; Guggenheim Fellow;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
University of Notre Dame

Howell Chickering, Jr.

G. Armour Craig Professor of Language
and Literature
Amherst College

J. Scott Colley

College President; Professor of English,
Rhetoric, and Writing
Berry College

Stuart K. Culver

English Department Chair
University of Utah

Kevin Dunn

Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and
Sciences College; English Professor
Tufts University

Richard J. Dunn

English Department Chair
University of Washington

Barbara L. Estrin

English Department Chair
Stonehill College

Janis D. Flint-Ferguson

English Department Chair
Gordon College

Edward A. Geary

English Department Chair
Brigham Young University

Ernest B. Gilman

Professor of English; Guggenheim Fellow
New York University

Warren Ginsberg

Chair and Distinguished Professor in English
University of Oregon

Wayne E. Glausser

English Department Chair;
Indiana Professor of the year
DePauw University

Steven Goldsmith

Associate Professor of English
University of California at Berkeley

J. Dennis Huston

Professor of English
Rice University

David Scott Kastan

old Dominion Foundation Professor in the
Humanities; Chair of English and Comparative
Literature; first American to serve as General Editor
of the Arden Shakespeare; Guggenheim Fellow
Columbia University

Robert Kiely

Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker
Professor of English
Harvard University

Ulrich Knoeflmacher

Paton Foundation Professor of Ancient and
Modern Literature
Princeton University

George P. Landow

Professor of English and the History of Art;
Fulbright Scholar; Guggenheim Fellow;
Fellow of the Cornell Society for the Humanities
Brown University

Ina Lipkowitz

Lecturer in Literature
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Linda H. Peterson
Neil Gray, Jr. Professor of English;
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Department Chair, 1994-2000
Yale University

Robert M. Polhemus
the Joseph S. Atha Professor in Humanities;
English Department Chair
Stanford University

Monica Brzezinski Potkay
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The College of William and Mary

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Murray Professor of English, Emeritus
Princeton University

Leland Ryken
Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English
Wheaton College

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Associate Professor and Coordinator of Secondary
Education, Language and English Education
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Concordia University at Portland, Oregon

Karen E. Swann
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Chair of English and Communication;
Professor of Humanities
Corban College

Christina von Nolcken
Professor of English Language and Literature;
Associate English Chair for Undergraduate Studies
University of Chicago

Ralph Williams
Professor in the Department of English,
Language and Literature; “Best Professor” Michigan
Daily Newspaper Survey (nine of the last ten years);
Excellence in Education teaching Award
University of Michigan

Susan Wood
Gladys Louise Fox Chair and Professor in English;
Best Book of Poetry Award, Texas Institute of Letters
Rice University

Jon Stanton Woodson
Professor of English; 2005-2006 Fulbright Scholar
to University of Pecs in Pecs, Hungary
Howard University
Additional related comments from...

Roger G. Baker
Associate Professor of English; Lilly/AAR
teaching Fellow, Fulbright Fellow
Brigham Young University

Paul A. Parrish
Regents Professor and English Department Head;
Executive Director, South Central Modern
Language Association
Texas A&M University

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