

A Quiet Counterrevolution

St. John's College teaches the classics—and only the classics

Photos by Steve Northup, Black Star, for CrossTalk

By Kathy Witkowsky

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the Santa Fe campus of St. John's College looks not unlike a lot of other small, liberal arts schools. Located on 250 acres high above New Mexico's capital city, the campus consists of a cluster of two- and three-story adobe-style buildings, designed to blend in with the area's southwest architecture. T-shirt and jeans-clad students congregate outside the student union, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. Most of them look desperately in need of a good night's sleep. Nothing unusual there.

But inside those buildings, St. John's is staging a quiet counterrevolution. Defying educational trends that emphasize multiculturalism and technical know-how, St. John's teaches the classics—and only the classics, insisting that they still are and should be the basis of a college education.

One morning last fall, freshman Anna Canning stood, chalk in hand, at the blackboard in front of her dozen or so classmates. Following Euclid's proof, she created an equilateral pentagon around a circle—without using outside measuring tools. "I've never really liked math," Canning, of Eugene, Oregon, said afterwards. But because the class had started with the very basics—What's a point? What's a line?—math wasn't so threatening, she said. And it was a lot more interesting. "Being able to see where things are coming from is very different than reading a textbook that says, 'This is *this* way.'"

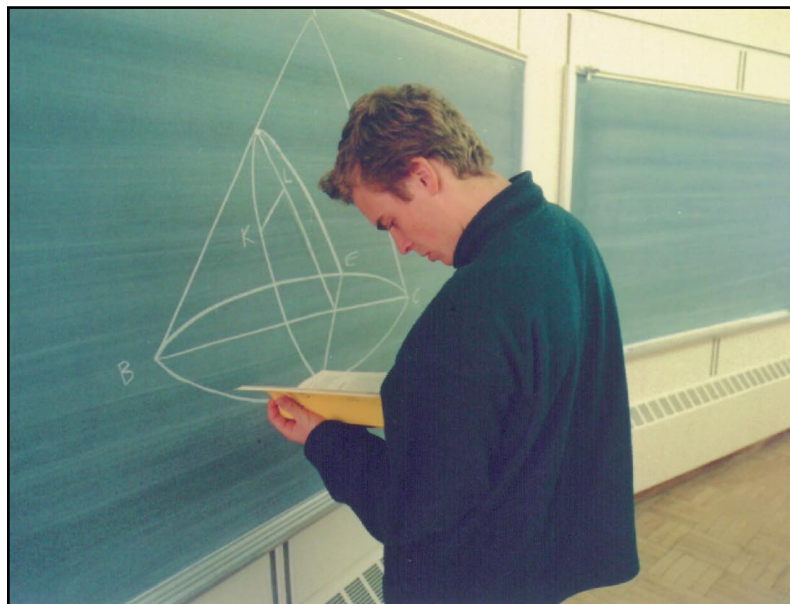
That's a sentiment heard over and over again from St. John's students, or "Johnnies," as they are known, who are taught not to take anything for granted. The tacit "because I said so" justification so often evident in higher education classrooms and texts does not make the grade at St. John's.

"St. John's is not committed to any notion of progress in history," said James Carey, who serves as dean of the school's Santa Fe campus (St. John's also has a campus in Annapolis, Maryland; each campus has 400 to 425 undergraduate students and another 80 to 100 graduate students). "We don't rule out the possibility that along with some learning of things in time, there's a forgetting of things that have already been learned."

Consider: Could you explain why the earth revolves around the sun? Write a four-voice counterpoint composition according to rules devised by a 17th-century composer? Discuss whether Aristophanes was justified in his criticism of Socrates? Prove the mechanical advantage that pulleys provide?

You could if you were a graduate of St. John's.

"The word 'liberal' comes from 'liberty,'" said Carey. "And liberal education is meant to be freeing." Freeing



Matthew Burritt works on a math problem at St. John's College, where the study of mathematics begins with basic questions like, "What's a point? What's a line?"

from what, exactly? From preconceived notions and the prejudices of the day, Carey said. Thus the curriculum, what St. John's refers to reverently as "The Program," consists almost solely of the great books of Western civilization—and it is mandatory for all students.

Textbooks—the middlemen of academics—are conspicuous by their absence. So are a lot of other things, like professors (teachers are called "tutors"), lecture halls (there aren't any lectures), majors (the curriculum is preset), and tests (students are evaluated on class participation and original papers; students see their grades only upon request). In Santa Fe, there is also no gymnasium and just 15 school-owned computers.

At St. John's, everything is secondary to the texts. And these are not simple texts.

Anna Canning and her fellow freshmen are starting with the Greek philosophers, historians and mathematicians: Homer, Sophocles, Herodotus and Euclid, among others. Next year, they'll move on to Renaissance thinkers: Shakespeare, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Copernicus. As juniors, they'll take on the works of the 17th and 18th centuries: those by Cervantes, Molière, Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Rousseau and Mozart. And finally, in their senior year, they'll tackle 20th-century authors: Melville, Yeats, Dostoevsky, Freud, Heidegger and Einstein. And

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—James Carey, dean of St. John's Santa Fe campus



St. John's students read few feminist authors because, says College Dean James Carey, "to build an education upon the desire to represent as many perspectives as one can is problematic."

that's just a sampling.

By the time she graduates, Canning and her classmates will have completed four years of math, two years each of ancient Greek and French, three years of laboratory science, one year of music and four years of philosophy, history and literature, as well as a semester of visual arts. (The visual arts program is offered in Santa Fe but not in Annapolis.) In the process, they will have digested classic works by more than 100 authors whose writings span nearly 3,000 years of Western history. Reading these works in chronological order, the thinking goes, students not only learn facts and ideas; they learn the process by which those facts and ideas accrued.

And because all students must study all subjects, they can see the links—and the gaps—between them. "There's no academic place to hide," said John Agresto, president of the Santa Fe campus. "It takes a kid to say, 'I want to be smart in all the areas a person can be smart.'" Some schools boast about the number of students who graduate with straight A's. Agresto brags about just the opposite: "We have only graduated four straight-A students in 30-odd years." That, he said, is partly because St. John's doesn't stoop to grade inflation, and partly because it is virtually impossible to be good at all the subjects students are required to take at St. John's.

No wonder the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* describes St. John's as "perhaps the most intellectual college in the country." And no wonder, too, that the attrition rate at St. John's is more than 30 percent. Officials acknowledge that St. John's is not for everybody. But for students who like to read, and talk about what they read, it's nothing short of collegiate heaven.

"It was like, books? All we do is read? That's my thing!" exclaimed Katy Christopher, a sophomore from Gunnison, Colorado, recalling her reaction when she first learned

about St. John's. As is the case for about 40 percent of her classmates, Katy did not apply anywhere but St. John's—a choice she has never regretted. "Being able to read all the time and talk to interesting people is so much fun," said Katy. "I go home and think, 'Well, gosh, I can't really have a conversation about Aristotle here!'"

"People at home just don't think that much," Katy continued. "They may not be stupid," she allowed, "but they just don't think." And to a Johnny, not thinking is, well, *unthinkable*.

That St. John's turned into a haven for intellectuals is little more than an accident of history—the silver lining to a rather ugly academic cloud looming over the school. St. John's was founded in Annapolis in 1696 as King William's School (it became St. John's in 1744), and for more than two centuries it limped along, distinguished primarily, according to Dean Carey, by its lacrosse team.

But during the Depression, St. John's lost its accreditation. Subsequently, the board of directors turned to educational reformers Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan, hired them as president and dean, respectively, and gave them carte blanche to design a new curriculum. Unbound by the rivalries inherent in the academic departmental system, the two men were free to design an integrated system based upon the great books of Western civilization. About two-thirds of the authors included in the newly unveiled 1937 curriculum remain part of it today.

In 1964, rather than increase enrollment in Annapolis, the school opened the Santa Fe campus. Students can, and often do, transfer between the two campuses, which maintain the same undergraduate curriculum. (St. John's also offers a master's degree in liberal studies and, in Santa Fe, in Eastern classics, too.)

Unlike many top-flight liberal arts colleges, St. John's isn't all that hard to get into: The school accepts 75 to 80 percent of applicants, primarily based on three written essays and, to a certain extent, grades. There is no application fee, and standardized tests, like the Scholastic Assessment Test, are optional. About three-quarters of the enrolled students ranked in the top half of their high school class, but only one fifth graduated in the top tenth.

School officials said that's because they're less concerned that the applicant show a body of accumulated knowledge than a true desire for attaining it. And more and more students are indicating that desire; applications to the Santa Fe campus have increased more than 40 percent over the past decade, and they're up in Annapolis, too. About one-

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The 250-acre St. John's College campus sits on a hilltop overlooking Santa Fe, New Mexico. A second campus is in Annapolis, Maryland.

fourth of each freshmen class is transfer students—who decide to enroll despite the fact that St. John's won't accept credits from other institutions.

This year, freshman Paul Obrecht of Wheaton, Illinois, was one of those transfers. Why was he willing to start over? "At state schools, the goal is to prepare yourself for a career, and the diploma is a badge," said Obrecht, who majored in education at the University of Illinois but dropped out after two years. "These classes call upon you to synthesize everything you've learned up to that point. It's a good opportunity to hone your thinking skills."

St. John's believes the key to honing those skills is discussion. So instead of professors, classes are led by "tutors," whose job is to engage the students in active learning. Don't be fooled by the humble title, though: Almost all of St. John's tutors have earned Ph.D.s, many from the world's leading academic institutions.

But according to the school's philosophy, even the most educated scholars remain advanced students at best. So, at St. John's, teaching is less about answering questions than it is about asking them. Even then, tutors try to limit their input. "Am I being too directive?" tutor Michael Bybee asked his "Hamlet" class recently, after he had suggested a course of thinking. Not a question you are likely to hear very often at other colleges—at least not from a teacher.

And while professors at other academic institutions are encouraged to specialize, tutors at St. John's are required to lead classes outside their fields of study. Over the past 33 years, for instance, tutor Ralph Swentzell has taught every single class St. John's offers, with the exception of French. The policy, said Swentzell, keeps tutors on their academic

toes. It's easy, he said, to lose empathy for your students if you lecture in the same subject year after year. "But when you're forced to be a student again," he said, "you pick up a tolerance which I think most college professors have lost."

St. John's also eschews the usual "publish or perish" attitude. Many tutors, Swentzell among them, have never published at all. Instead, they are evaluated on the strength of their teaching.

That teaching takes place in small, stark classrooms, which consist of a table encircled by 20 or so chairs. There is usually a blackboard, and only sometimes a clock, which, despite the lengthy and intense two- and three-hour classes, doesn't seem to bother anyone. Computers are relatively rare; computer classes are non-existent.

Even the science labs are pretty bare-bones. "But there's a reason for that," said sophomore Heather Davis of Easton, Maryland. "We're repeating experiments that have been done by the founders of science." They didn't have a lot of fancy high-tech equipment. What they did have was basic curiosity and intellectual reasoning—and that's what St. John's is attempting to foster, Davis said.

Part of the learning process is acknowledging intellectual failings. So, at St. John's, it is not at all unusual for students to 'fess up in front of their peers. "I don't get it," one student announced unabashedly at the beginning of her senior math class, which was studying Einstein. Like eager rescue workers, her classmates rallied to her aid, requesting that she pinpoint the source of her confusion so they could better assist her.

This skill—the ability to listen and engage in discussion, to work together toward intellectual growth—is a top priority at St. John's. "We try to develop habits of civility and rationality and discourse," said Carey.

While their dress can be described as informal at best (and sloppy at worst), students maintain a semblance of decorum by addressing each other in class as "Mr." and "Ms." And while "like," the '90s version of "um," shows up frequently during freshmen seminars ("Aristotle, he was, like, pretty hard, like, on Socrates..."), by the time they've reached the junior and senior level the students are noticeably more articulate, their comments more thoughtful. By that time, too, it is rare to find students interrupting each other, and when they do, they are quick to apologize. They seem less interested in appearing smart than in



President John Agresto frequently is called upon to defend the St. John's "Great Books" curriculum, which has changed only slightly over the years.

becoming smart.

And “smart,” according to St. John’s, doesn’t mean understanding the latest software or being able to predict the stock market’s future. What it means is being able to discern what is true from what is not. “Truth is an issue for us,” Carey said. Other issues that remain at the core of the St. John’s experience: What is a good life? What is a just regime? What is nature? What is God?

“Clarity about these questions is what we’re aiming at,” Carey said.

Indeed, at a time when the nation’s colleges and universities are struggling to broaden their appeal by offering unique specialty courses designed to attract a wider cross-section of students, St. John’s remains committed to its unswervingly intellectual, rigorous and Western-based approach.

Twenty-five years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article about St. John’s College. According to St. John’s President Agresto, that article could be published today virtually unchanged. While some schools might be embarrassed by such an admission, Agresto, who has had to defend the St. John’s curriculum against critics who attack it as narrow and male-dominated, said, “I think that’s a good testimony to our steadiness.”

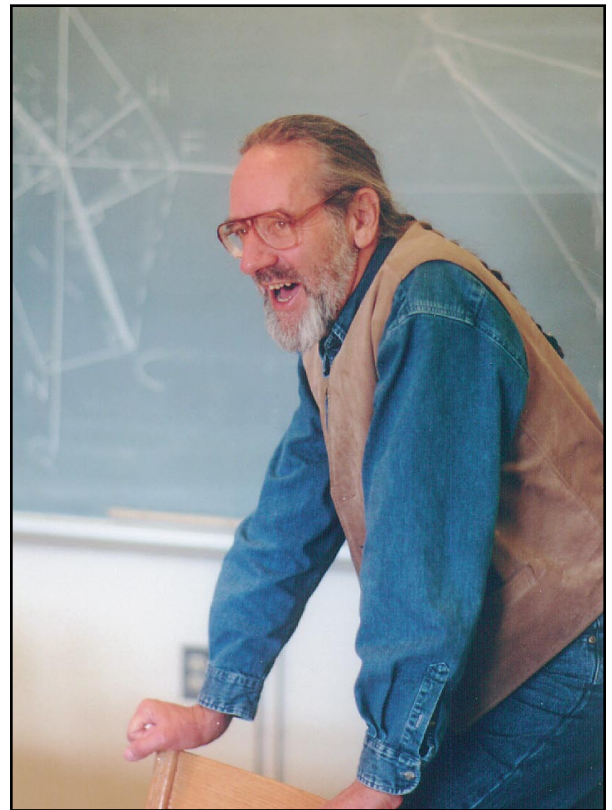
No one denies that most of the works read at St. John’s were written by white men—dead white men at that, since the program features very few late 20th-century books. Virginia Woolf and Flannery O’Connor have made the cut, but Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison, for instance, have not. Agresto said there is a reason for that: The works read at St. John’s have stood the test of time, and have had a lasting effect upon society.

Those who advocate multiculturalism, Agresto said, claim they’re doing so in the name of diversity, when actually they come armed with a specific social and political agenda. “Multiculturalism has been used by ideologists masquerading as educationalists for decades now,” charged Agresto. “And we’re not going to do that.”

Critics who suggest the school discriminates by excluding female and minority authors have got it all wrong, Agresto said. By choosing works based solely on their merits, St. John’s treats women and minorities more equitably, not less so, he argued. “Women need to know what men have known all these years,” Agresto said. “No sense giving lesser authors to the women and great books to the men.”

Carey concurred. “We wouldn’t be inclined to read someone because he or she represents a group that is disenfranchised,” he said. “To build an education upon the desire to represent as many perspectives as one can is problematic.”

Interestingly, female Johnnies accept the rationale without complaint. “Most of what we read is written by white men—there’s no doubt about that,” said sophomore Heather Davis. But she vigorously defended the curriculum.



Tutor Ralph Swentzell has taught every subject except French during a 33-year career at St. John’s.

“The point of these great books is to read and appreciate them regardless of sex or ethnicity,” she said, adding, “I’m not missing out on anything I won’t be able to get my hands on after I leave.”

And while her mother was skeptical because of the preponderance of white male authors taught at St. John’s, senior Carisa Armendariz of El Paso, Texas, said she thought it would help her function when she graduates and has to maneuver through a male-dominated society. “I’m learning to think from a white male viewpoint,” said Carisa, who is Hispanic. “And I think that’s going to be a good tool for me.” (Minorities make up about ten percent of the student body at each campus.)

Occasionally, students do study modern works of fiction by women or minorities, either in eight-week junior and senior electives called “preceptorials” or in student-organized reading groups. The school’s small bookstore maintains a section devoted to modern fiction, where sophomore Aaron Mehlhaff of Binghamton, New York, and Tommy Thornhill of San Rafael, California, were browsing one afternoon last fall. They admitted they rarely found time to read anything beyond their schoolwork, but “you can dream,” said Thornhill, longingly fingering a couple of trade paperbacks. The only way to squeeze in an extra book, he said, was to turn in early on a Friday or Saturday night—something he recently did in order to digest some Goethe.

That might sound alternatively confining and intimidating to some. But St. John’s students don’t appear to chafe at the curriculum’s constraints. Instead, they universally praise the cohesive nature of their education,

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preferring an integrated educational feast to a smorgasbord of viewpoints.

Take, for instance, Kallisti Staver, a sophomore from Detroit, who initially was drawn to St. John's because of her interest in philosophy. At St. John's she has seen connections she never thought about. "I've learned things about Greek math from reading the Greek plays," said Kallisti. She was so excited by her academic forays into Greek civilization, in fact, that last year she joined a Greek study group that met outside class.

"I really think that the way [the curriculum] is put together lays a very strong foundation for branching off into any areas we might take," Staver said.

According to the college seal, that is the goal of the school. "I make free adults out of children by means of books and a balance," it states.

Yet even St. John's officials acknowledge that such balance sometimes eludes them. Despite its ballyhooing about classical education, there is one area in which St. John's is somewhat remiss: physical education. The school doesn't offer any intercollegiate sports, and physical education is not included in the curriculum.

The situation—and the attitude about it—is best summed up by a T-shirt popular on the Santa Fe campus. "Great Books, No Gym," it proclaims. The T-shirt is soon to be obsolete—the school has broken ground for a new student activities center that includes a gymnasium, but remains short of funds to build it, and the Annapolis campus already has a gym.

Meantime, as head of the Santa Fe campus student activities office, Mark St. John is relegated to a messy basement room out of which he runs the school's intramural

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THERE IS A CERTAIN IRONY inherent in asking someone from St. John's College whether there have been any significant changes, since the defining philosophy of the institution is to stand on the most deeply held traditions.

Perhaps the most notable change in recent years involves the use of computers. In 1999 *National CrossTalk* reported that the Santa Fe campus had only 15 school-owned computers, but that is hardly the case today. "Students come in with computers as a tool, part of their everyday lives," said Larry Clendenin, who graduated from the college in the late 1970s and is now director of admissions for the Santa Fe campus. "At least two-thirds of our incoming freshmen are bringing personal computers with them," he said.

The Santa Fe campus has a computer lab with more than 50 machines, and the library also offers both PCs and Macs. "All of the rooms in residence halls are wired, so students have access to the World Wide Web," Clendenin said. Computers and software have found their way into the curriculum, he added, but he was careful to clarify that they are used only "as a support." St. John's College is "still a pencil and paper place in the classroom," he said.

According to David Cherry, admissions counselor at St. John's campus in Annapolis, computers are now "ubiquitous, if only because

Computers and software have found their way into the curriculum at St. John's, but they are used only as a support to the "paper and pencil" approach.

of the popularity of the net." But he added that it is "still rare for computers to be used for curricular purposes," and that it would be inappropriate for a student to submit a paper as an e-mail attachment. "They print it out, and hand it to their tutors in person," he said.

As we reported in 1999, the number of students who express an interest in

applying to St. John's continues to increase. But, since the college jealously limits enrollments to between 450 and 475 students at each campus, the only way for it to grow would be to establish a third campus—a distinct possibility, although there are no current plans to do so.

Both campuses boast new residential facilities, and are now housing a higher percentage of their students, currently about 70 to 75 percent. "Santa Fe is an expensive place for students to live," said Clendenin. "It's our desire for all the students to be able to reside on campus if they want to. And we have additional residence halls planned to begin construction next year." According to Cherry, when two new residence halls were recently built on the Annapolis campus, "within a year, every room on campus was booked."

When it comes to St. John's "Great Books" curriculum, of course, any changes are reviewed very carefully, with deliberations involving the Faculty Committee on Instruction and the Student Committee on Instruction. And the pace of change is glacial. In 1999 we reported that Flannery O'Connor had recently "made the cut," with the inclusion of some of her short stories in the curriculum. Eight years later, when Cherry was asked about recent changes in the required readings, O'Connor's was still the first name cited. "That gets you into the 1950s," he said. "We also took out 'Prometheus Bound' (by Aeschylus), and put in Aristophanes' 'The Birds.'" Martin Luther was recently replaced by John Calvin, Cherry said, and he hinted that there is some serious talk of removing the "Rat Man" case history from the Sigmund Freud reading.

—Todd Sallo

Any alterations to St. John's "Great Books" curriculum are reviewed very carefully, with deliberations involving faculty and student committees. And the pace of change is glacial.

program. Forget about trophy cases: The school's two athletic trophies—representing its city league softball championships—are stashed away in a corner with some old newspapers.

St. John estimated that half of the students participate in one of the athletic extracurricular activities. The school prides itself, for instance, on its Santa Fe search and rescue team, which offers its services to the community. Across the hall from his office are mountain bikes, kayaks and canoes that students can check out for a small activity fee; students also can sign up for fencing, yoga or ballroom dance classes. Nonetheless, St. John said, some students consider the student activities office merely a source of “Pascalian diversions,” unworthy of their time.

“There is a kind of disdain for physical activity among some students,” St. John acknowledged. For an awful lot of students, physical activity means little more than walking to and from class. Sure, Johnnies may play “Spartan madball” (a kind of soccer/football/rugby free-for-all) at their spring festivals, but in reality they wouldn't make terribly good Spartans. “There are a couple of really weird people who do [athletic] stuff,” said sophomore Nicholas Alexandra, of New York City. “But the rest of us just sit around smoking cigarettes and thinking.” (The school does seem to have a preponderance of smokers, something students attribute to the intensity of the program.)

But eventually, those same students have to come down off the hill and deal with the real world. The prospect of leaving the insular community of St. John's makes them nervous, said Margaret Odell, director of placement. But they actually fare pretty well once they make the leap. About 80 percent of St. John's alumni wind up in graduate

school within five years of graduating. A 1993 survey of graduates revealed that 20 percent are in business or business-related occupations; another 18.5 percent are in teaching; 14.5 are in communication and the arts. The rest go on to a wide range of professions—in medicine, social services and law, among others.

“I honestly don't think there's anything our students can't do,” said Odell, who, like several other staff members, is enrolled in the school's graduate program. But at the same time, she worries that Johnnies are going to suffer from the school's—and the students'—aversion to technology. “It's like pulling teeth to get them to do research on the Internet,” she lamented.

“If they don't get a little smarter about using technology, the gap between what they learn here and in other places is going to get wider and wider,” Odell predicted. “I don't want



Students gather around a vacuum jar in Ralph Swentzell's physics class. Labs are deliberately kept bare-bones, like those of early scientists.

this curriculum to become obsolete, but I think we're going to have to make some changes.”

But if the past 60 years are any indication, St. John's isn't big on changes. School officials proclaim, without apology, that they offer the best liberal arts education in the country. They ask, Why fix something that's not broken?

Their students agree. Despite the theoretical nature of their education, most Johnnies profess confidence in their abilities to maneuver in the world beyond St. John's. Sure, there are the usual “Would you like fries with that?” jokes about the opportunities available to liberal arts graduates. But in general, Johnnies say they're optimistic about their futures. Given what they have accomplished, that's not surprising.

“After Einstein, Maxwell and Hegel,” noted senior Carisa Armendariz, who is looking for a job in journalism, “nothing seems all that hard.” ♦

Freelance writer Kathy Witkowsky lives in Missoula, Montana.

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