

## **The Decline of Literary Studies**

Mark Bauerlein, English professor emeritus at Emory University and a senior editor of First Things

In 1970, 1 in 13 undergraduates in the US majored in English. In those High Theory years, the names Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan were magical and notorious throughout the campus. Interpretation was exciting and adventuresome--it was fun. Not anymore. Less than 1 in 60 students majors in English. Conservatives in America blame "politicization" for the decline, the relentless and humor less focus on racial and sexual identity, and they have a point, but the fun factor must be considered, too. If the politics that literature professors push did involve wit and play as it did in the High Theory years, we might not see so steep a decline in English status. The ultimate question isn't about politics. It is this: What makes interpretation fun? I mean this as a serious question, and we shall consider it in light of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida at their best.