

YOU HAVE ✓ PREMIUM ACCESS

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEWS

OPINION

DATA

ADVICE

JOBS

DEAN ▼

Individual Subscriber

RENEW

≡ SECTIONS

FEATURED: How to Talk to Famous Professors

An Activist Takes Aim at Colleges

The 21st-Century Library

Presidential

Search



FACULTY

Most Americans, Including College Graduates, Flunk 'Civic Literacy,' Group Says

By David DeBolt | NOVEMBER 21, 2008 ✓ PREMIUM

WASHINGTON

Got a bachelor's degree hanging on your wall? Quick, what was the main issue of the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1858?

If you don't have a clue, join the club. According to a new report by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, earning a college degree does not necessarily guarantee an increase in knowledge of American history, government, or economics.

The report, "Our Fading Heritage: Americans Fail a Basic Test on Their History and Institutions," is based on a survey that quizzed more than 2,500 randomly selected Americans, including college graduates and elected officials, to test their "civic literacy." Of those who took the 33-question multiple-choice test, nearly 1,800, or roughly 71 percent, failed.

According to the report, college graduates whose highest educational-attainment level was a bachelor's degree answered 57 percent of the questions correctly. That was 13 percentage points higher than the score for Americans whose formal education ended with a high-school diploma.

Only one age bracket of college graduates, baby boomers, did not fail the test over all but came close with an average score of 61 percent. A score below 60 percent was considered failure.

More than three-quarters of college graduates holding a bachelor's degree did not know that the main issue in the Lincoln-Douglas debate was whether slavery should be expanded into new U.S. territories, the report says.

The report is the third on civic literacy in three years from the institute, a nonprofit organization that promotes a traditional curriculum and supports conservative student publications on campuses.

The first two surveys questioned college students on their knowledge of basic history and civics. After the first report was released in 2006, some higher-education experts questioned the study's methodology and focus on a narrow range of facts. (*The Chronicle*, November 24, 2006).

A Call for More Civic Education

At a news conference here on Thursday, members of the institute pointed to the latest survey's findings as further proof that universities need to improve the civic knowledge of college graduates.

"We are convinced if American civic literacy is to improve, its colleges and universities must lead the charge," said Eugene W. Hickok, a former deputy secretary of education and a member of the institute's National Civic Literacy Board.

One of the people who attended the news conference, David Azerrad, a former adjunct professor of American politics at the University of Dallas, said afterward that too few universities are requiring basic courses in American history. According to "The Hollow Core," a report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, where Mr. Azerrad now works as a program officer, of the 50 universities involved in the study, only seven required a survey course of American history. That's "unacceptable," Mr. Azerrad said.

"You don't have to be an expert," he said. "We are not asking students to take eight classes, just one."

The study also found that graduates who had attained a doctoral degree had an average score of 72 percent. Those who had earned a master's degree earned an average score of 64 percent, seven percentage points above the average score for respondents with undergraduate degrees.

Of those surveyed, 164 identified themselves as having been elected to office at least once, though they did not specify what level of government they served. The elected officials earned an average score of 44 percent, lower than that of the general public.

"I think it would be very interesting to see if this is a trend," Mr. Hickok said.

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Higher Education