



## Colleges failing in civics

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If you're a little fuzzy on the sequence of Civil War battles and how John F. Kennedy handled the Cuban missile crisis, welcome to college. You'll fit right in.

Seniors at 50 universities nationwide, including Texas State University in San Marcos and Texas A&M International University in Laredo, earned an average grade of 54 on a quiz covering American history, government, political thought and economics, according to a survey released Tuesday by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a Wilmington, Del.-based nonprofit.

Conducted by researchers at the University of Connecticut, the study tested 14,000 freshmen and seniors at various institutions, from public state schools to Ivy Leaguers, and covered topics such as civil rights, the Cold War, the Federalist Papers and the Constitution.

The results showed money can't buy civics knowledge — students at schools with the highest tuition, biggest subsidies, largest endowments and best-paid presidents learned the least about America's moorings during their four years in college.

"Ivy is a badge of distinction academically. However, our evidence suggests they are failing very badly, at least where civics knowledge is concerned" said Gary Scott, a senior research fellow at the institute and a former economics professor at St. Mary's University.

Overall, Harvard seniors posted the highest average score of 70, with the two Texas schools trailing in the bottom 10. But looking at how much students improved over four years by comparing seniors' scores to those of freshmen, the Ivies performed poorly compared with state schools and less prestigious privates.

### More Information

- [E-N video: Civics Test](#)
- [American Civic Literacy Test](#)

At Eastern Connecticut State University, for instance, freshmen scored 31 while seniors scored 41, a gain of 10 points. Seniors at Cornell, on the other hand, scored 57, five points lower than the freshmen score of 62, prompting the authors to call Cornell a "giant amnesia machine."

The study also found that minorities scored lower than Anglos, students from families that talked about current events and history scored higher and foreign students learn virtually nothing about U.S. history at American universities.

At Texas A&M International University, where seniors scored a 41 and freshmen scored a 38, provost Dan Jones questioned the validity of the 60-question, multiple choice test.

"They are legitimate questions ... but the assortment ranges from the glaringly obvious to the horrifically obscure," Jones said. "Any time you get into testing general knowledge, you always get into some group's definition of what general knowledge is. There is no universal agreement on that."

Also, some of the study's conclusions about married parents and English-speaking homes boosting civic literacy had the whiff of politics, Jones said. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute is nonpartisan, but it's often listed as a conservative think tank.

"It sounds more like political statements than an actual test of student competencies," Jones said.

But Scott said this year's study results mirrored many of last year's findings, lending credence to its conclusions.

So why is this even important? Some students would argue that the point of college is to get a good job, not memorize the dates of Civil War battles.

Scott disagrees. Civically aware students are more likely to vote, volunteer and be engaged in democracy, he said.

"Life is much more than about professional training," he said. "Advanced civilization, prosperity, culture and freedom are not automatic. When citizens turn inward and don't pay attention, they will lose their freedoms."

The goal of transforming young people into informed citizens is an oft-cited rationale for using public dollars to support higher education, said David Guenther, director of media relations for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free market think tank based in Austin that is helping raise awareness about poor civic literacy in colleges.

"It's a cause for concern," Guenther said. "Let's make sure as we are spending the money that we are getting good results."

So what can universities do to boost civic knowledge?

Scott advocates that students take more history and politics classes, and making sure those classes are engaging, not just rote memorization.

At the University of Texas at Austin, philosophy Professor Robert Koons is leading a project to create a concentration in Western civilization and American institutions. Students will take courses from different disciplines — all designed to help them better understand the foundations of American democracy.

"One of the real needs is some kind of coherency, to bring things together into a conversation of big ideas," Koons said.

No matter how much students cover in high school, it's important to keep learning, Koons said.

"When you don't reinforce it, all that knowledge slips away," he said.

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