

Study finds students lack basic knowledge

College seniors fail history test

By Tamara Henry
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Columbus Day poll suggests one-fourth of American college seniors either never heard or do not remember the childhood ditty: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

In addition to finding that one in four do not know Christopher Columbus made his famous landing in the Western Hemisphere prior to the year 1500, the Gallup Poll suggests considerable ignorance of other basic facts about history and literature.

Nearly 60 percent did not know the Korean War started when Harry S. Truman was president, 58 percent did not know that William Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* and nearly a quarter believed a famous saying from Karl Marx is part of the U.S. Constitution.

"If the students' answers were to be graded, more than half of those tested would have failed," concluded the survey, which was conducted for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Armed with the survey results, NEH Chairman Lynne Cheney called Sunday for colleges and universities to revise their curricula so undergraduates study "essential areas of knowledge."

In a booklet titled "50 Hours," she outlined a suggested core curriculum for college students.

Responding to her admonition, several college presidents essentially told the NEH chief — in more or less polite terms — either to mind her own business or that she was behind the times.

The following are some of the Gallup Poll highlights:

- 24 percent of the college seniors surveyed thought Columbus landed in the Western Hemisphere some time after 1500.
- 42 percent could not place the Civil War in the correct half century.
- 58 percent did not know that Shakespeare was the author of *The Tempest*, but 95 percent knew that Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- 58 percent did not know Truman was president when the Korean War began, 14 percent thought it started when John F. Kennedy was president.
- 55 percent could not identify the "Magna Carta."
- 23 percent believed that Marx's phrase, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," is part of the U.S. Constitution.

According to the survey, 39 percent of the college seniors failed the 49-question history section. On the portion of the survey devoted to literature, which consisted of 38 questions, 68 percent of the students failed.

Cheney said many colleges and universities allow students to earn bachelor's degrees without taking courses in history, literature, science or mathematics and she urges trustees and administrators to support faculty members who are working to strengthen general education requirements.

Cheney's core curriculum suggest study in five basic areas of knowledge: 18 hours in cultures and civilizations, including the origins of civilization and other civilizations such as in Africa, East Asia and Islam; 12 hours in a foreign language, preferably more advanced courses in a language studied in high school; six hours in the concepts of mathematics; eight hours in foundations of the natural sciences and six hours in the social sciences and the modern world.

The courses should be taught in small classes and in an integrated fashion, so that, for example, students reading Descartes' philosophy in a western civilization course are reminded of his contributions to mathematics, Cheney said. She also suggested that the classes be taught by the college's most distinguished faculty.

James Underwood, dean of faculty at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., criticized the NEH for recommending a "superficial, rigid, and impractical" college curriculum. He added that Union College this fall began a general education curriculum with an emphasis on history and literature.

"A reform that relies so heavily on the traditional western civilization course runs the risk of a dangerous superficiality," said Underwood. "The western civilization course tries to 'do everything' and demands for its success the mythical Renaissance man as teacher. History should be taught by broadly educated historians and literature by professors of literature."

Similar sentiments were echoed by Michigan State President John DiBiaggio, who said the school already has gotten an revised curriculum approved by the community and board of trustees.

The Gallup survey included 33 questions taken from a 1986 NEH-funded survey of 17-year-olds and five questions from examinations that the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service administers to prospective American citizens.

Grading the 87-question survey on the standard A to F scale, where scoring less than 60 percent correct constitutes a failing grade, 55 percent of the students would have earned an F. An additional 20 percent would have received a D. Only 11 percent of the respondents would have earned an A or B.

The Gallup survey of 696 seniors was conducted between April 4 and April 27, using a self-administered test booklet. It had a 4 percent margin of error. The participating students attend 67 four-year American colleges and universities, both public and private.

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INFORMATION TABLE

October 10-11, 9:00am to 3:00pm, EMU Lobby

PRESENTATIONS

Tuesday, October 10, 3:30pm

"Let it Begin Here", EMU Maple Room

Wednesday, October 11, 12:00

"Peace Corps Impressions", EMU Maple Room

Wednesday, October 11, 7:30pm

"Putting your Science degree (or Liberal Arts degree) to work in the Peace Corps", EMU Gumwood Room

INTERVIEWS

October 30-31, 9:00am to 4:00pm,

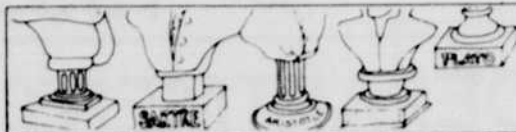
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