



Civic Illiteracy a Growing Problem Among College Students

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America's colleges and universities have historically served as the embodiment of the fundamental principles which shape America. At its very best, the university is the foundation which shapes the minds of the future leaders of this great nation. It is the setting which inspires innovation and societal progress. Colleges and universities are responsible for equipping students with the tools necessary to think, reason and debate. Civic education

and the study of American history is paramount not only to the development of students' informed reason, but also for the longevity of America itself.

The results of a new survey conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), alongside College Pulse, reveal that today's college students are unequivocally illiterate on the very basics of America civics. The results of this survey are clear: universities are failing students

and, thus, failing America itself.

This past July, ACTA released findings from *Losing America's Memory 2.0: A Civic Literacy Assessment of College Students*, the second installment of a survey which was initially conducted in 2000. The survey captured the responses from 3,026 undergraduate students across the country between May and June 2024. The goal of the survey was to gauge the basic civic literacy rates of college students. The results were staggering.

In looking at how students comprehend the operations of our nation's institutions, namely, Congress and the Supreme Court, the survey revealed that students have minimal knowledge about how these institutions function. Approximately one third of students surveyed could not identify the current Speaker of the House of Representatives and incorrectly believed the Supreme Court is required to have nine justices. The survey also revealed a majority of students (about 60%) could not identify the term limits for members of Congress.

Mechanics of the United States government aside, the survey also showed that students lack a basic understanding of the very principles upon which our government was created. The survey revealed that only 22% of students believe that *Republicanism* is a core principle of civic life in America.

The results of the survey point to a failure on behalf of colleges and universities, whose job it is to educate and prepare students to be informed citizens. Students cannot develop informed opinions if they do not understand how the country itself operates. A large segment of students in America prove to be uninformed, which is

not only a failure to that population itself, but also to the country, which relies on this population for its longevity.

The survey exposed an arguably even greater failure of colleges and universities. When asked about discussing social or political issues of the day, more than half of students reported they self-censor themselves in conversations with their professors or other students. This statistic is particularly alarming, as it is the role of colleges and universities to facilitate open discourse and engage students in debate among those with whom they disagree. A core tenet of the university is allowing the free exchange of ideas to circulate, which challenge students preconceived notions. These conversations are what allow students to form new and informed thoughts and opinions. The results of the survey reveal colleges and universities are not providing the right environment for these conversations to take place which, once again, proves to be a failure not only to the students themselves, but also to the country as a whole. Without new and informed schools of thought, societal progress is impossible.

The results of this survey demonstrate universities are failing today's students, which consequentially impedes progression in American society. The question becomes, how do we move forward? Organizations like ACTA are working hard to combat the civic illiteracy crisis that is gripping our nation. Shortly after receiving the results of the survey, ACTA launched its National Commission on American History and Civic Education, a commission of 22 distinguished scholars who aim to provide crucial guidance to colleges on the essential

elements of a U.S. history and government course and how to implement these recommendations in higher education.

Another initiative that is gaining traction across the country is the development of civic institutes dedicated to teaching the American story, such as the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida, the School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. These efforts are crucial steps toward reforming the broken education system.

The decisions which colleges and universities make in response to this ongoing crisis will have great bearing on the future of our nation. It is essential that colleges and universities equip students with the necessary tools to succeed. Civic education and the study of America's history are essential pieces of that puzzle. There is plenty of work to be done and, as is often true, change starts with a fruitful education.

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