

CONNECTION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Achievement Tests?

One trend that no amount of data can capture is the increasingly routine spinning of notions of “achievement” for ideological purposes. This past fall, a study conducted by the University of Connecticut's Department of Public Policy for the conservative Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) made a splash with the finding that freshmen at some of America's most elite colleges know more about American history and government than seniors at those same institutions. The researchers asked 14,000 students at 50 colleges nationwide multiple-choice questions about America's history, government, relationship with the world and—that other bedrock measure of American cultural literacy—the “market economy.” The average score for college seniors was 53.2 percent, not two percentage points better than the 51.7 percent average for freshmen.

The chief villains in ISI's world of limited government, free markets and personal responsibility are prestigious worldly institutions like Brown, Yale, Williams and MIT—four of 16 colleges where freshmen scored *higher* than seniors, or as the ISI suggests, students actually *lost* American knowledge. The researchers marveled that a 1 percent increase in civic learning, as measured by ISI's survey, corresponded to a drop of 25 positions in *U.S. News and World Report's* college rankings. The “liberal press” ate up the story, leaving it to a media watchdog in Colorado to expose ISI's interlocking board relationship with the institution it deemed No. 1 civic citizen, Rhodes College. Few, if any, outlets noted that No. 3 Grove City College boasts on its web site of rejecting not only “relativism and secularism,” but also Title IX protections against discrimination.

More recently, Connecticut's Yankee Institute for Public Policy, which promotes lower taxes, proposed awarding full two-year scholarships to Connecticut community colleges to high school students who meet their graduation requirements in three years. Tax savings are not the only benefit Yankee sees in shaving a year off high school; there's also the chance to further squeeze electives. “Instead of trying to justify a fourth year of high school with an odd mixture of advance [sic] placement and eclectic non-core courses,” argues the institute's executive director, “perhaps it makes more sense to concentrate on fulfilling the real mission of secondary education and make sure that students are learning the basics when they need to—earlier.”

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, founded by Lynne Cheney, peddles the same rigid view of learning and achievement at the college level. Railing against Harvard's core curriculum recently, ACTA huffed that “students can fulfill its lax requirements with all sorts of narrow and trendy courses, such as ‘The Perfect Tale: The Art of Storytelling in Medieval France’ and ‘Japan Pop: From Basho to Banana.’” ACTA warned that the core “makes no guarantee that students will learn what they need to be informed citizens.”

So precisely which combination of courses *does* guarantee that graduates will be not only informed, but also thoughtful citizens, savvy enough to navigate the global economy? The anti-Storytelling in Medieval France crowd, which tends to be anti-arts and anti-gym at the K-12 level, leans to the basics. Its agenda has been absorbed as conventional wisdom and codified in state testing regimens—with predictable results. A report from the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C., finds high school exit exams are leading to increased instructional time in tested subjects “often at the expense of other high school learning experiences and electives.”

Yet there is no upward trend in evidence that the three R's and almighty eighth-grade algebra have a corner on the capacity, as John Adams put it, “to elevate the minds of our children and exalt their courage; to accelerate and animate their industry and activity; to excite in them an habitual contempt of meanness, abhorrence of injustice and inhumanity, and an ambition to excel in every capacity, faculty and virtue.” There's no theorem for that. Nor do the “tested subjects” prepare graduates to know when a press secretary is lying, what to say to a friend who is diagnosed with cancer, when to honor a professional loyalty and when to blow the whistle or how to deal with global warming. Indeed, “trendy” electives on The Vietnam Experience and Man and His Environment may be just as promising on those fronts.

Narrow prescriptions of what it means to achieve will only undermine efforts to expand opportunity and deprive the region of its imagination.

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