What Colleges Don't Teach

by Phyllis Schlafly April 11, 2007

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Education Secretary Margaret Spellings says that the Federal Government needs some accountability for the billions of dollars the taxpayers pour into university education. That's right, we do; but her plan, to set up a national database to track students, plus a system of testing like No Child Left Behind, is not the solution.

The problems Spellings identifies — students transferring to different colleges, dropouts, and the years of time it takes to graduate — are only some of what's wrong with colleges today. Other important problems include: college tuition is unconscionably inflated, students are not getting their money's worth yet they leave college with incredibly burdensome debt, colleges are paying high-priced professors to teach worthless courses while at the same time students find it difficult to get into basic courses they need to graduate, students are admitted who are not prepared to do college work, and a high percentage of students attend remedial courses to learn what they should have learned in high school.

Secretary Spellings could force improvements in both colleges and high schools if the Federal Government would refuse college grants and loans for remedial courses so that colleges would admit only those ready to do college-level work.

Even worse, however, is what the colleges don't teach. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) has just rendered a national service by releasing a comprehensive

study on higher education's failure to teach students about America's history and institutions.

The investigation was based on the premise that today's college students, who will be our nation's future leaders, must have a basic understanding of American history and founding principles if they are to be informed citizens. How can they evaluate America's relationship to the rest of the world unless they have a clear vision of America's unique identity and how we got where we are?

The results of ISI's multi-year study by eminent academics, who are experienced in the classroom, are depressing. That's why the ISI report is called "The coming crisis in citizenship."

ISI contracted with the University of Connecticut's Department of Public Policy to undertake the largest statistically valid survey ever conducted in order to find out what colleges and universities are teaching their students about U.S. history and institutions. They surveyed 14,000 randomly selected college freshmen and seniors at 50 colleges and universities.

The students were tested with 60 multiple-choice questions to measure their knowledge in four subject areas: American history, American government, America and the world, and the market economy. Freshmen and seniors were given the same test, and here are the results.

Seniors scored only 1.5 percent higher, on average, than freshmen, and at 16 schools, seniors scored lower than freshmen. I guess that means they learned little or nothing about America in their four years of college.

If the multiple-choice test had been administered as an exam in a college course, seniors would have failed with an average score of 53.2 percent. That's called getting an F.

Seniors at 22 of the 50 colleges scored on average below 50 percent. More than half the seniors could not identify the correct century when the first American colony was established at Jamestown, or recognize Yorktown as the battle that ended the American Revolution.

Fewer than half of college seniors recognized that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" is from the Declaration of Independence.

Another finding of this unique investigation was that prestige doesn't pay off when it comes to learning about America. The colleges that boast high rankings in the famous U.S. News & World Report list of top colleges ranked particularly low when it comes to American history.

At many prestigious colleges, including Yale, Brown, and Georgetown, seniors know less than freshmen about American history. Maybe the Yalies spent so much time singing with the Whiffenpoofs down at Mory's that they forgot what they learned at the high-priced prep schools they may have attended in order to qualify for admission to an Ivy League college.

It seems to boil down to the obvious fact that students don't learn what colleges don't teach. If learning American history is the measure, a student can just as well attend a low-budget college.

Many of the leftwing professors are eagerly encouraging their students to participate in political action. But it won't be a happy participation if the students rush into political action without a good grounding in U.S. history, constitution, and civics.

The ISI report takes its cue from Thomas Jefferson, who wrote: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and never will be." In other words, retaining our freedom depends on an informed citizenry.

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