



DOCUMENT REVIEWED:	“The Shaping of the American Mind: The Diverging Influences of the College Degree & Civic Learning on American Beliefs”
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Summary of Review

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute report, *The Shaping of the American Mind: The Diverging Influences of the College Degree & Civic Learning on American Beliefs*, suggests that college is failing to provide an adequate education in civic knowledge and is also influencing graduates to become less supportive of American values. Desirable “civic learning” about American values is associated with positions and attitudes that are anti-abortion, pro-free-market economics, consistent with fundamentalist Biblical interpretations, and otherwise generally associated with contemporary conservative political positions. The bulk of the report focuses on contrasts of college graduates and non-graduates on these political values, based on a civics test administered as a telephone survey. “Civics knowledge,” as they define it, is presented as of greater value than college education. The study suggests that more educated people are more liberal, yet the omission of basic information about the researchers’ polling methods, their fundamental analytic techniques and their actual results renders any such conclusions insupportable. Consequently, the report offers no valid information that could inform policy makers or the public.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

On February 14, 2010, Fox News aired a segment on a new report by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), *The Shaping of the American Mind: The Diverging Influences of the College Degree & Civic Learning on American Beliefs*.¹ ISI is a think tank dedicated to furthering college students' "understanding of the economic, political, and moral principles that sustain a free and humane society" including limited government, the rule of law, market economy, and moral norms (p. 30). The report paints a picture of college graduates as ill-informed and out of step with American values, criticizing their poor civic knowledge and liberal leanings on social issues.² The image presented prompted host Clayton Morris to ask Tucker Carlson on *Fox and Friends*, "Is it better to not go to college at all than to get this kind of education?"³

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The report identifies four major findings. The first states that college fails to adequately transmit civic knowledge. Seventy-one percent of Americans "failed" the ISI's civic knowledge test, with college graduates averaging 57% correct and non-college graduates scoring 49% correct.⁴

The first finding also identifies five social issues where college "influenced" opinions. Those with college degrees were more likely to favor same-sex marriage and abortion on demand. They were less likely to believe that anyone can succeed in America with hard work, to favor teacher-led prayer in public schools, and to believe that the Bible is the "Word of God." The report found it

"surprising" that college graduates were not more supportive of the relevance of America's Founding documents.

The second major finding examined the "influence" of civic knowledge and a college degree on social issues opinions. Civic knowledge "affected" personal opinions on 20 of the issues (of which the authors highlighted six), compared to the above-mentioned five "affected" by earning a bachelor's degree. Those scoring higher on the civic knowledge test were more likely to agree that (a) a person's evaluation of a nation improves with his or her understanding of its structures; (b) prosperity depends on entrepreneurs and the free market; and (c) the Ten Commandments remain relevant. They were less likely to agree (a) that legislatures should subsidize colleges in proportion to their students learning about America; (b) that the free market brings about full employment; and (c) that the Bible is the Word of God. Less support by those with more civic knowledge for prayer in school was among the 13 items not addressed.

The third major finding was that civic knowledge, not college, increased a person's regard for America's ideals. The authors identified four issues out of 39 as opposing America's ideals: (a) believing that America corrupts otherwise good people, (b) believing that America's Founding documents are obsolete, (c) believing that the Ten Commandments are irrelevant, and (d) disagreeing with the statement that prosperity depends on entrepreneurs and free market. For these four items, having a higher score on the civic knowledge test had a "significant impact," but a college degree did not.

According to the report, younger people in-

icated less support for these American ideals. However, the report suggested that “the solution to this problem is not simply sending more young Americans to college, for college itself makes little difference in a person’s views on these matters” (p. 19).

Finally, of the 2,508 national public survey respondents, 240 had taught a college-level course, and they were more likely to agree that America corrupts otherwise good people, that the Ten Commandments are irrelevant, that raising the minimum wage decreases employment, that educators should instill more doubt in students and reject certainty, and that homeschooling families neglect their community obligations. For none of these statements did college instructors agree and non-college instructors disagree; professors just had higher levels of agreement.

III. THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Although there is a massive literature on civic education and the learning of political values, the report’s scant literature review focuses on Benjamin Franklin’s philosophy regarding the purpose of higher education and brief reviews of two previous studies conducted by ISI itself. The underlying premise of the study is that a major purpose of higher education is to teach history, government, capitalism and democracy. The authors interpret Franklin’s (and George Washington’s) vision of higher education as a program designed to “nurture a national consensus built around those enduring principles necessary to maintaining a free, prosperous, and self-governing nation.” However, the report does not recognize or address the reality that others disagree even with the ISI interpretation of Franklin’s ideas. For instance, professors Harkavy and Hartley at the University of Pennsylvania, which was

founded by Franklin, consider Franklin’s vision as providing direction for collaborations with communities to provide democratic opportunities to the less fortunate.⁵ And, of course, Franklin was not the only wise or knowledgeable person to weigh in on issues such as civic education, the purpose of higher education, or the learning of political values.

IV. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S METHODS

Instruments

Of the 33 items on the ISI civic knowledge test, three were from the test required for U.S. citizenship and three approximated items from that test.⁶ The remaining items were considerably more difficult than the citizenship test. For instance, nine of the 33 items were under the category “market economy” and dealt with issues like progressive tax structures, international trade, and fiscal policy.⁷ Moreover, the items about abortion legislation, the Scopes Monkey Trail, Aquinas, and the Federal Reserve may not fit commonly accepted notions of basic “civic knowledge.”

Sample

In a telephone interview, 2,508 respondents answered a 33-item mostly multiple-choice test and a 39-item, five-part Likert-type scale opinion survey. Respondents also provided 46 pieces of demographic information. Considering the entire telephone survey was 118 questions, only the most dedicated respondents would make it to the end, calling into serious question the unsubstantiated claim in the report that these participants “represent a probability sample of all individuals who live in households with residential telephone service in the United States” (p. 24). The introductory script was not provided, nor was the response rate to the survey or the actual results. That is, although

readers are told that 2,508 respondents answered the survey, readers are not told whether 3,000 were initially called or if that number was 5,000, or even 20,000. The lower the response rate, the greater chance of selection bias and therefore invalid results.

The authors did mention that a standard weighting process was used as part of the sampling process. However, neither the demographic makeup of the sample nor the weights were presented. For example, there was no mention of the number of college and non-college graduates in the sample—a vital factor for a survey contrasting the values of these two groups. Furthermore, the nature of the sample comes into question when readers are told that almost 10% of the respondents were college instructors. Of the 228 million adults in the U.S. in 2008, 1.7 million were instructors at the post-secondary level (less than 1%).⁸

Analyses

The report included a page of statistical equations to demonstrate the multiple regression approach used. Although the page includes technical terminology, no actual results from the use of these equations were presented. As discussed below, the most vital omission was effect sizes; no effect sizes were presented. The reader, therefore, can have no notion of whether the purported relationships were large or trivial.

V. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Due to the lack of actual results reported in any meaningful way, the reader is left with a collection of unsupported assertions.

Colleges should inculcate a particular “civics education”

The implicit premise of this study is that a

primary purpose of a college education is to indoctrinate students to a particular interpretation of democracy. Based on the report, it appears that this desired form of democracy must emphasize founding documents, capitalism and free market economics, and Christianity (particularly the Old Testament). This bias is pervasive and appears to be linked to the stated purpose of the ISI.

Improper polling and test scoring

ISI's survey, which was lengthy at 118 items, may or may not have generated credible results. Because of the omitted information about response rates and completion rates, the reader cannot know. Moreover, on the subset of 33 civic knowledge questions, setting the passing point at 60% on a test of very specific knowledge, where multiple-choice items with up to five response choices were read over the phone, appears arbitrary. No rationale for this cut-off score was provided. The first major finding was that college did not improve civic knowledge; however, college graduates outscored non-college graduates by eight percentage points. Without external validation benchmarks, standard deviations, sample sizes, and the conventionally accepted statistical tests, it is impossible to know whether that difference was statistically significant or particularly meaningful.

Causal inferences

The authors repeatedly and improperly inferred causation from multiple regressions (a correlation-based approach). Having a college degree may be related to scores on a test or responses to opinion statements, but that does not mean that the college degree caused these outcomes. Further, failing to report the size and significance of this correlation leaves the reader adrift. People who choose to attend college may share different characteristics than those who do not attend. People who attend conservative Bob Jones

University may share different characteristics than those who attend UC Berkeley, and although the experiences of the students at those schools may certainly affect their civic knowledge and their political attitudes, a great deal of those differences and characteristics undoubtedly exist at the time they enter as freshmen. The data and analyses used in this report cannot support causal statements regarding the influence of college, yet that was the crux of the report.

Selective and contradictory findings

Respondents with college degrees reported a lower level of agreement with the statement that the Bible is the Word of God. But so did those with higher civic knowledge. Escaping the narrative were the results that those with higher civic knowledge scores expressed less support for prayer in school, less support for the free market's ability to produce full employment, and less agreement that American Founders would oppose universal healthcare. This sort of selective emphasis of findings again points to the report's bias.

Missing statistics

The biggest flaw in the report was what was not there: statistics. Considering the rather technical description of the methodology, the lack of statistics was surprising and casts pervasive doubt on the analysis.

As mentioned, the results from the multiple regressions were not reported, nor were the significance of the equations or the weights for the variables. Also missing were even basic numbers such as sub-sample sizes (e.g., college degree and not), means, and standard deviations. The approach used to interpret answers is also troubling and appears to have resulted in exaggerated differences. Using the 1 to 5 Likert scale (with 3 as neutral), anything less than 2.99 was categorized as "disagree" and 3.01 and above was "agree." Yet, the actual means were not

HOW ISI DEFINES BASIC CIVICS

Ten things you should know to pass the ISI civic knowledge test:

1. What aspect of slavery was the main topic of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?
2. What does the Bill of Rights prohibit concerning discrimination based on sex and the official religion of the United States?
3. What did Roosevelt threaten when the Supreme Court found parts of the New Deal unconstitutional?
4. What was the impact of the Anti-Federalists on the US Constitution?
5. What was the impact of Plessy v. Ferguson, Roe v. Wade, and the National Organization of Women on abortion?
6. What philosophy do Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas share?
7. What did the Puritans believe concerning the morality of war, religious freedom, and the sinfulness of humanity?
8. What is the definition of business profit?
9. What does level of localization of knowledge in the price system have to do with economic prosperity based on free markets versus the government's centralized planning?
10. What policy tool, other than controlling interest rates, does the Federal Reserve have?

Source: Summarized from the ISI ISI civic knowledge test for *The Shaping of the American Mind: The Diverging Influences of the College Degree & Civic Learning on American Beliefs*, pp. 26, 27.

reported. In the report, the items were listed in order of strength of opinion, but another table listed the items by the size of their

standard deviation (without reporting the standard deviation). Other than an occasional percentage score, the report was devoid of any supporting detail.

VI. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

The reporting of this study could easily lead a casual reader to erroneously infer that higher education diminishes an individual's civic knowledge. The study's design and presentation also suggest that contemporary conservative political values are the equivalent of civic knowledge. The result is an ill-supported, anti-intellectual conclusion, as demonstrated by Fox News' Tucker Carlson's answer about whether a student should go to college: "Well that's actually an open question."

The resulting policy guidance this report provides may, in fact, be destructive of the very ideals of education the authors ascribe to the Founding Fathers—particularly informed democratic participation. Based on decades of sound research, earning a college degree has been associated with improved

general verbal and quantitative skills, specific subject matter knowledge, oral and written communication skills, and formal reasoning and critical thinking.⁹ This is in addition to the well-established benefits of improved occupational opportunities and higher income.¹⁰

Methodologically, the report is overly narrow in ascribing a purpose to higher education, the civic knowledge test is not representative of the field, the 118-question telephone interview instrument is suspect, and the actual results were not presented.

The report seeks to promote a particular political position in the guise of social science. It therefore fails Albert Einstein's definition of civic learning in a democracy:

What can the schools do to defend democracy? Should they preach a specific political doctrine? I believe they should not. If they are able to teach young people to have a critical mind and a socially oriented attitude, they will have done all that is necessary.¹¹

Notes and References

- ¹ Cribb, T. K., Brake, R., Scott, G., Dautrich, T. J., & Ford, P. (2009, Dec.). *The Shaping of the American Mind: The Diverging Influences of the College Degree & Civic Learning on American Beliefs*. Wilmington, DE: The Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Retrieved February 16, 2010, from <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/>
- ² The reports' authors thus join others who have accused those in academia of having a liberal bias. See for example, Wright, L., Ratliff, M., & Neal, A. (2006). The politically and culturally one-sided campus: causes, consequences, remedies. *Academic Questions*, 19(4), 55-77.
- ³ Carlson, T. (2010, February 14). *Fox and friends: College skews political spectrum*. [Television broadcast]. Retrieved February 16, 2010, from <http://video.foxnews.com/v/4016232/college-skews-political-spectrum>
- ⁴ The previous studies by ISI that found college freshman averaged a 52% in one study and 50% in the other, and college seniors averaged 53% in one study and 54% in the other. The two earlier ISI studies were:
Intercollegiate Studies Institute. (2007). *Failing our students, failing America*. Wilmington, DE: The Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Retrieved February 19, 2010, from http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/2007/summary_summary.html
Intercollegiate Studies Institute. (2008). *Our fading heritage: Americans fail a basic test on their history and institutions*. Wilmington, DE: The Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Retrieved February 19, 2010, from http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/2008/summary_summary.htm
- ⁵ Harkavy, I. & Hartley, M. (2008). Pursuing Franklin's democratic vision for higher education. *Peer Review*, 10(2/3), 13-17.
- ⁶ However, the citizenship test requires naming one of the three branches of government, whereas ISI's civic knowledge test required naming all three. The citizenship test asks for one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did, whereas the civic knowledge test asked about the main issue in the Lincoln/Douglas debates.
- ⁷ Although economics is certainly an important subject, this strong focus on economics in a civics test is unusual. A quick review of the tables of contents for four civics books showed the following: two had nothing about economics and two had one chapter (out of 13 and 15 chapters, respectively).
- ⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010, March). *Occupational outlook handbook, 2010-11 edition, teachers-postsecondary*. Retrieved March 2, 2010, from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos066.htm>
- ⁹ Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Other benefits associated with earning a college degree include increased valuing of aesthetics; education- intrinsic occupational rewards; altruism; civil rights and liberties; improved identity status; ego development, self-concept (academic, social, self-esteem); autonomy; intellectual orientation; interpersonal relations; personal adjustment and psychological well-being; and maturity and general personal development.
- ¹⁰ Day, J. C. & Newburger, E. C. (2002, July). *The big payoff: Educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved February 24, 2010, from www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf
- ¹¹ Einstein's message to the New Jersey Education Association, Atlantic City, 1939. Retrieved February 24, 2010, from <http://www.asl-associates.com/einsteinquotes.htm>

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