

Testimony to the House Committee on Higher Education

"Study the feasibility of offering an optional curriculum that emphasizes ethics, Western civilization, and American traditions to satisfy portions of the Texas Core Curriculum."

by Elizabeth Young
Higher Education
Policy Analyst

Chairman Branch and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today and for requesting this particular interim charge. My name is Elizabeth Young, and I am a higher education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Today I'll be providing you with information relating to the need to offer an optional curriculum that emphasizes ethics, Western civilization, and American traditions to satisfy portions of the Texas Core Curriculum.

In 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), a non-profit educational organization, issued a study which found Texas undergraduates *fail* at civics.

Among the 50 universities surveyed nationwide were Baylor University, West Texas A&M, and the University of Texas at Austin. About 1,000 Texas freshmen and senior students were given a 60- question multiple choice test on American history and institutions. The test results are in Table 1.

Table 1

Class	Texas Students	Students Nationwide	Difference
Freshmen	47.9	51.7	-3.8
Seniors	50.8	53.2	-2.4

As seen in Table 1, Texas students perform worse than their peers nationwide. Additionally, Texas students only gained a trivial 2.9 percent in their civic knowledge over the course of their college careers. The study also found that undergraduates at these three Texas universities were below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

Not only did Texas students take fewer courses on the subjects at hand, but they were assigned less homework, even though homework has been proved to increase civic learning. The study notes that "Seniors enrolled at universities outside of Texas completed an average 13.7 hours of homework per week, compared to 11.2 hours for seniors enrolled in the three Texas universities." Other variables, such as being paired with peers on a similar intellectual level, also have an impact on civic learning. Course rigor, however, is something universities should be able easily to correct.

The results bring to light a lack of basic civic literacy among Texas college students that should be addressed by universities and/or the Legislature.

Universities could increase the number of civic courses available, attractive, and even required, especially courses in history and economics. The Legislature could find ways to encourage or even provide universities with incentives to do so. Another option would be to adjust the Texas Core Curriculum in order to place more emphasis on Western civilization courses.

Since the study's release in 2007, none of these indicated reforms have taken place. Regardless of how the Committee decides to deal with the issue, the Foundation hopes it finds as troubling as we do the lack of civic literacy among our college students. ★

Source: Gary Scott, "Texas Undergraduates Fail at Civics: ISI's American Civic Literacy Survey Results," (March 2007) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2007-03-PP04-HE2-Civics-Scott.pdf>.