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Ivy League Basics

WHAT ARE students being taught at the nation's elite colleges? Or, if you'd rather put the question in its most politically provocative form, what kinds of horrific gaps in their education are developing as a result of this or that new academic movement or faddish orthodoxy? While adult politicians tear one another to rhetorical shreds over this question in the national media, a group of students from the University of Pennsylvania has been quietly doing some polling. They've mapped some gaps, all right. But it's not clear which of the warring adult sides should score the points.

Starting shortly after the November election, the Penn researchers—in a study project led by adjunct professor and sometime presidential pollster Frank Luntz—asked 3,119 students on the eight Ivy League campuses to name the speaker of the House of Representatives, the leading figure in Solidarity, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the person who said “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” There were some questions about politics, too: Did the students consider themselves liberal or conservative (half liberal, 20 percent conservative, 21 percent moderate), did they favor choice on abortion (84 percent yes), could they name at least one of their home-state senators? (That only 50 percent said yes to the last question may be an ego-bruiser in these latitudes, but, considering that college students

are away from home, it may not be evidence of utter civic breakdown.)

Other unfortunate results aren't so easy to dismiss. Only 25 percent of the students polled could identify the Lincoln quotation; 11 percent didn't know Jefferson had written the Declaration of Independence. Oddly, Lech Walesa did better with 67 percent, a reminder that ignorance of current events and ignorance of basic American history and civics are two different issues. The first is a relatively transitory state remediable, as the poll suggests, by news consumption (two-thirds of the students polled read a daily newspaper, fewer than half watch daily TV news, 46 percent have been to a rally for a political candidate.) The second is more deep-seated: it strikes at what's taught and what's ignored, not in colleges, but in high schools.

This information about the preparation of even the best-prepared students is important to the campus debate. That's not because it speaks directly to the questions about the “canon,” traditional vs. revised, that now grip academia. It's because it emphasizes a current danger in that debate: the danger that professors enjoyably involved in reevaluating or “subverting” accepted history, or the classics, may very well be dealing with students to whom much of that “accepted” history is completely unknown. A student who never studied the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address is not ready to “rethink” Western culture.