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Building Citizens: A Simple Test Could Promote Knowledge and Service

By
Steve Uhlfelder

If our democracy is to remain strong, we need to expect more from our citizens, and especially our college students, who will be the future leaders of our nation. In the past several decades, since there has been no draft, our students have gotten off pretty easy for the freedoms they now enjoy. Why not require them to take a civics test before they are admitted to a public college or university, or before they receive any public aid?

In order to attend a university, students should accept responsibility for learning about our nation and the government that confers that privilege. Immigrants must take a test before becoming citizens. Is it too much to ask of college students to take a similar test before admission?

Nine out of 10 Americans agree that it is important to teach civics and government, but recent polls have shown that most citizens do not have a basic understanding of how our government functions. I found that only 40 percent of those surveyed could name an agency of the president's Cabinet, and another study revealed that fewer than 60 percent could identify the three branches of government. Sixty-three percent of young Americans cannot find Iraq on a map of the Middle East.

These embarrassing statistics reveal a deficiency in our education system as well as lack of interest by our young people in our democratic system of government and the freedoms and opportunities it provides.

Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee recognized the problem and worked to pass the American History and Civics Bill, which creates pilot education academies for teachers of history and civics. More recently, he has introduced legislation for a pilot project for standardized testing of civic education. The senator laments, "Our children are growing up ignorant of our nation's history." Former Sen. Bob Graham of Florida is tenaciously working on requiring more civic education in our state's public schools and universities.

As one possible remedy, I propose that before any student is allowed to attend a public college, he or she be required to pass a very simple citizenship test. The test would be the same as the test currently taken by newly naturalized citizens of the United States. The goal of this measure would be to encourage people to learn the basics about our nation's history and the workings of its government before having the privilege of going to a subsidized college.

The test is a straightforward, short-answer exam that asks basic questions concerning America's fight for independence, past and current presidents, the U.S. Constitution, the branches of the government, the Supreme Court and a few other topics. Here are a few examples taken from the New Pilot Naturalization Test, which has been given to about 6,000 volunteer citizenship applicants since the beginning of this year:

What does the Constitution do?

What do we call changes to the Constitution?

Why did the colonists fight the British?

A complete sample of the test can be found on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations Service's Web site.

There could certainly be exemptions from the test. Students who have served in the military or programs such as the Peace Corps would have already proven they know the meaning of service and the importance of privileges and rights we have as Americans. Many countries actually require service of students before they attend college.

Mandatory military service is one of the oldest forms of national service and is common to both democratic and nondemocratic countries. Democratic countries such as Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Mexico, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey require male and occasionally female citizens to participate in military service when they turn 18. With no mandatory military service remaining in this country, the least young people can do when they reach the age of majority is prove they have a basic knowledge of how this great country, which has provided them with so many privileges and rights, functions.

The purpose of this citizenship test would not be to discourage people from entering the university system, but rather to encourage people to learn about what makes our country great.

Voting by citizens 18 to 24 years old is at an all-time low. These are the same people being called upon to defend our country's liberties today; one of the main reasons they do not vote is because they feel disconnected from their government. Learning how our system of rules and laws applies to them could actually change their view and encourage more participation in the governmental process.

So little is required today of any citizen. Why wouldn't this simple test we require of noncitizens be applied to students who have enjoyed the liberties in this country their entire lives?



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