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Tuesday, February 22, 2000

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George Washington Is Last in the Minds of College Students, a Survey Suggests

By [DENISE K. MAGNER](#)

Seniors at the nation's top colleges and universities know who the rap singer Snoop Doggy Dogg is, but most can't identify George Washington as an American general at the battle of Yorktown, according to a survey released Monday.

The survey is the latest effort by the **American Council of Trustees** and **Alumni** to take academe to task for failing to offer a rigorous core curriculum. The report of the survey, "Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century," says that 81 percent of the college seniors surveyed last December received a grade of D or F on history questions drawn from a basic high-school curriculum.

The council, a Washington-based nonprofit group that advocates a traditional curriculum and more-rigorous academic standards, commissioned the Roper Organization -- the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis -- to question students at the 55 campuses identified by *U.S.*

News & World

Report

as the nation's leading universities and liberal-arts colleges. The report does not state how many students were questioned, and council officials could not be reached for comment on the Presidents' Day holiday.

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Among the survey's results:

- 34 percent of the respondents said they knew that Washington was a general at Yorktown.
- 42 percent knew that the phrase "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen" referred to Washington.
- 23 percent correctly identified James Madison as the "father of the Constitution."
- 22 percent knew that the words "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" was a line from the Gettysburg Address.

On the pop-culture front, however, students were up to speed: 99 percent identified the cartoon characters Beavis and Butt-Head, and 98 percent knew that Snoop Doggy Dogg was a rap singer.

The council placed the blame for this lack of knowledge squarely on colleges for failing to require that students take courses on U.S. history.

"This study is a clarion call for action," said Anne D. Neal, the report's author and vice president of the council. "If institutions of higher education no longer require their students to have a basic knowledge of American civilization and its heritage, we are all in danger of losing a common frame of reference that has sustained our free society for so many generations."

Some historians were not swayed by the survey's results. Jerry Dennerline, chairman of the history department at Amherst College, said that Amherst does not have a U.S.-history requirement, but that his department has large enrollments in the American-history courses it offers. "At Amherst, we've had a curriculum

without requirements for a long time," he says. "Anyone who does a survey and asks specific questions is going to get results that reflect the interest of the questioner rather than the interests of the education the students have received. We produce critical thinkers who are able to read and comment on history. And what they choose to memorize in response to quizzes is up to them."

In 1996, the council published a report called "The Shakespeare File: What English Majors Are Really Studying," which found that two-thirds of elite institutions no longer require their English majors to study Shakespeare. Critics of that study noted that while colleges may not require Shakespeare, many students are taking courses on the Bard, which remain among the most-popular on campuses.



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