

OUR VIEWS

Teach citizenship

America's universities owe their students more than the debt of a lifetime. Their degree should represent a substantial accomplishment, and their education should prepare them for citizenship as well as a career. A new study suggests that most of the nation's institutions of higher education need to fortify their degree requirements and refocus their core curriculum.

What does a student get for, to cite one of the most egregious cases, \$144,000 (and change) at Harvard? A degree, of course, probably a substantial debt, and not much in the way of a foundational education. The study, released Monday by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, found that Harvard requires less than the minimum standard in literature, foreign language, U.S. history, U.S. government, economics and mathematics. Sadly, apart from cost, Harvard's approach is typical of U.S. universities.

The survey, available at What-WillTheyLearn.com, covered 714 institutions of higher education in all 50 states. The council awarded an "A" to just 16 of those schools. Five of the 16 are in Texas; West Point and the Air Force Academy are on the list; three are Catholic schools (not including Notre Dame, which rated a "B"). Cal State San Bernardino also scored a "B," UC Riverside a "C," the University of Redlands a "D."

Some colleges and universities note that asking whether institutions offer the specified courses says nothing about the quality of those classes. True — but such qualitative rankings were not the point of this exercise.

And the critics argue the sur-

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vey exemplifies a narrow, 1950s-era vision of what higher education should provide. Yet that contention overlooks a fundamental concept: A common understanding of the foundational ideas of American society is necessary for the country's future.

Regarding the shortcomings of courses in history and government, the former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, writes at the council's Web site: "This is especially dangerous in America, where nothing holds us together except our democratic principles. If universities don't pass them down, our children will not inherit our nationhood genetically. They can receive that heritage only through learning."

There have been few eras in American history that citizen wisdom has been more crucial than it is today. The United States faces daunting choices: What level of services can the nation afford? What level of debt is sustainable? What should the role of government be in a free-market economy?

Preparing Americans to answer those questions wisely is vital. A university's core curriculum should include U.S. history, economics, mathematics, English literature and composition, science and a foreign language. Until

recently, this was an unexceptional course of study.

Americans, schooled or not, are practical people. At some point they will begin to wonder whether the benefits of a college education are worth the cost. Neither the universities nor the nation benefit if the consensus begins trending toward "no."

