



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on October 26, 2016

## Dumb American Youth

Do you wonder why Sen. Bernie Sanders and his ideas are so popular among American college students? The answer is that they, like so many other young people who think they know it all, are really uninformed and ignorant. You say, “Williams, how dare you say that?! We’ve mortgaged our home to send our children to college.” Let’s start with the 2006 geographic literacy survey of youngsters between 18 and 24 years of age by *National Geographic* and Roper Public Affairs.



Less than half could identify New York and Ohio on a U.S. map. Sixty percent could not find Iraq or Saudi Arabia on a map of the Middle East, and three-quarters could not find Iran or Israel. In fact, 44 percent could not locate even one of those four countries. Youngsters who had taken a geography class didn’t fare much better. By the way, when I attended elementary school, during the 1940s, we were given blank U.S. maps, and our assignment was to write in the states. Today such an assignment might be deemed oppressive, if not racist.

According to a *Philadelphia* magazine article, the percentage of college grads who can read and interpret a food label has fallen from 40 to 30. They are six times likelier to know who won “American Idol” than they are to know the name of the speaker of the House. A high-school teacher in California handed out an assignment that required students to use a ruler. Not a single student knew how.

An article on News Forum for Lawyers titled “Study Finds College Students Remarkably Incompetent” cites a study done by the American Institutes for Research that revealed that over 75 percent of two-year college students and 50 percent of four-year college students were incapable of completing everyday tasks. About 20 percent of four-year college students demonstrated only basic mathematical ability, while a steeper 30 percent of two-year college students could not progress past elementary arithmetic. NBC News reported that Fortune 500 companies spend about \$3 billion annually to train employees in “basic English.”

Reported by [Just Facts](#), in 2009, the Pentagon estimated that 65 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. were unqualified for military service because of weak educational skills, poor physical fitness, illegal drug usage, medical conditions or criminal records. In January 2014, the commander of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command estimated this figure at 77.5 percent, and in June 2014, the Department of Defense estimated this figure at 71 percent (<http://tinyurl.com/guz7pqy>).

A few weeks ago, my [column](#) discussed the dishonesty of college officials. Here’s more evidence: Among high-school students who graduated in 2014 and took the ACT college readiness exam, here’s how various racial/ethnic groups fared when it came to meeting the ACT’s college readiness benchmarks in at least three of the four subjects: Asians, 57 percent; whites, 49 percent; Hispanics, 23 percent; and blacks, 11 percent. However, the college rates of enrollment of these groups were: Asians, 80 percent; whites, 69 percent; Hispanics, 60 percent; and blacks, 57 percent. What I am labeling as dishonest, fraudulent or deceitful comes from the fact that many more students are admitted to college than are in



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fact college-ready. Admitting such students may satisfy the wants and financial interests of the higher education establishment, but whether it serves the interests of students, families, taxpayers and the nation is another question.

To accommodate less-college-ready students, colleges must water down their curricula, lower standards and abandon traditional tools and topics. Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein writes in his book *The Dumbest Generation*: Tradition “serves a crucial moral and intellectual function.... People who read Thucydides and Caesar on war, and Seneca and Ovid on love, are less inclined to construe passing fads as durable outlooks, to fall into the maelstrom of celebrity culture, to presume that the circumstances of their own life are worth a Web page.”

*Walter E. Williams is a professor of economics at George Mason University. To find out more about Walter E. Williams and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate webpage at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).*

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