



America's top liberal arts schools skip U.S. history, report finds

By Joshua Rhett Miller

Published January 28, 2014

FoxNews.com

U.S. history doesn't make the grade at the nation's elite liberal arts colleges, where students can dodge classes on America's founding by studying electronic dance, movie animation and, at one school, a course on "The Rhetoric of Alien Abduction," a new report finds.

The report — "Education or Reputation?: A Look at America's Top-Ranked Liberal Arts Colleges" — found that within those top 29 colleges, not a single institution except for three military academies requires a "foundational, college-level course" in American history or government.

"If you look at the course catalogs of most of these institutions, they recognize the importance of a strong foundation of varied skills and knowledge, but in many respects these are simply empty promises," said Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which released the report on Monday. "It's essentially representative of the 'anything goes' curriculum that reigns on college campuses nowadays."

"It's essentially representative of the 'anything goes' curriculum that reigns on college campuses nowadays."

- Anne Neal, president, American Council of Trustees and Alumni

For example, a student at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, can avoid a survey course in American history by fulfilling the general education concentration requirement by completing courses like "History of Electronic Dance Music" or "Decoding Disney: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Animated Blockbuster," according to the report.

"Majors must take two courses from either East Asia or Latin America, however," the report continues. "It appears the faculty understands how shoddy these requirements are, since they add the warning on the history department site: 'Students considering graduate study in history are advised to undertake some course work in U.S. and modern European history to prepare for the Graduate Record Examination.'"

Of the 29 top-ranked liberal arts colleges, only the United States Air Force Academy, the United States Military Academy, and the United States Naval Academy requires a survey course in American history. One school, Claremont McKenna in California, requires U.S. history or economics but not both. Just two of those institutions require an economics course, and five require a survey course in literature, according to the report.

A survey conducted in 2011 found that 70 percent of Americans think colleges and universities should require all students to take basic classes in core subjects such as writing, math, science, economics, U.S. history and foreign language. Those most likely to agree (80 percent) were ages 25-24, or those most aware of what the job market requires, the survey found.

“It’s time for students and families to take a hard look at what they’re paying for and what they’re going to get,” Neal told FoxNews.com. “It’s possible to invest \$250,000 in an education that ends in little intellectual growth, narrowed perspective and which qualifies the graduate for very little.”

Nationwide, inflation-adjusted tuition and required fees at four-year nonprofit colleges increased by an average of 13 percent in 2012-13, costing an average of \$29,056. That figure jumps to \$43,742 among the “elite liberal arts colleges” detailed in the report. Factoring in housing costs and other costs, the total cost of attendance typically exceeds \$53,000 annually. Furthermore, students who graduate with debt start their professional careers with an average debt between \$12,749 and \$26,567, the report found.

For those who devote their careers to education, the report is not especially eye-opening.

“Maybe I’ve been doing this for too long, but none of this is particularly surprising,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. “What most people might find most disturbing or surprising is that the biggest reason the cost of college is going up is bureaucracy. There’s a tendency to think if you’re paying more, you’re getting more – well, that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

A lack of focus on the core product — a sound, varied education — on the nation’s campuses of higher learning is a key component of the problem, McCluskey said. Too much emphasis is placed on recreational and alternative activities and issues like grade inflation continue to plague colleges large and small.

“Because they’re small, we tend to think they’d be sort of immune from problems we tend to associate with giant research universities,” McCluskey said of elite liberal arts school in the report. “But this is telling us that those cute little colleges have the same problems as the mega-university with 30,000 students.”

As the sticker price of college continues to surge upward, coupled with rising inflation and a dwindling job market, McCluskey said more and more people may find that the typical four-year path “doesn’t make a whole lot of sense” for them.

“For some people, it would make more sense to get specific skills and then move on,” he told FoxNews.com. “The traditional, residential four-year model just makes less and less sense for most people and a report like this demonstrates one of the reasons why that is.”