University Senate Survey of Civic Knowledge of Incoming Undergraduates

At the January 2019 Purdue University Senate meeting, President Daniels presented data on the state of civics literacy in the U.S. which indicated many US residents do not possess even a basic knowledge of American government. Pres. Daniels proposed a requirement of passage of a civics test (based on the naturalization test) to earn a degree from Purdue University.

As a first step, the University Senate determined a baseline of civics knowledge for new Purdue undergraduate students was needed. Given this need, during the summer, Cheryl Cooky, Chair of the University Senate convened a working group of disciplinary experts and tasked the group with exploring and creating a pilot assessment of civics knowledge to distribute to Purdue's incoming freshman class during Boiler Gold Rush (BGR). The summer working group included: Cheryl Cooky, Chair of University Senate; Jay McCann (Political Science), Phillip VanFossen (Ackerman Center for Democratic Citizenship), Robert Browning (Political Science/ Center for CSPAN Scholarship and Engagement- CCSE), Peter Watkins (CCSE), Frank Dooley (Senior Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning), and Andy Zehner (Office of Institutional Research, Assessment and Effectiveness).

The working group created a survey utilizing portions of two instruments used in national studies in order to make comparisons. Twenty questions were drawn from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's national survey of civic knowledge (https://woodrow.org/news/one-state-pass-us-citizenship-exam/) and 8 questions were taken from the National Election Study (https://electionstudies.org/). This survey was distributed by email to all incoming undergraduate students (n=7,926) during BGR week. Approximately 36% of incoming students responded, but—due to incomplete responses or other factors--only 2,114 responses were accepted (26.7%) for analysis.

The working group conducted a preliminary analysis of the data and first results indicate that incoming Purdue undergraduate student respondents appear to have greater civic knowledge than the general population across the United States, as well as the state of Indiana. In addition, incoming Purdue students appear to exhibit greater civic knowledge than other college graduates in Indiana. Key findings are listed below.

- Woodrow Wilson instrument (20 items):
  - Best results: 'Name one right in the First Amendment?" (91.5% correct compared to 74% for the US and 74% for Indiana)
  - Worst: 'When was Constitution written?" (30.8% correct; compared to 12% for the US and 12% for IN)
  - Most in the 65-80% correct range….
  - 77.8% of respondents 'passed' (i.e., 60% correct as compared to 36% of WW national sample and 53% of IN residents who attended college)
    - Passage rates differed for resident/non-resident; domestic/international; race/ethnicity
- National Election Survey instrument (87items):
  - Best results: "Number of times an individual can be elected President?": (96%; compared to 90% for the US sample)
  - Worst: "On which of the following does the US government currently spend the least? Foreign Aid, Medicare, National Defense, or Social Security" (53% correctly identified "Foreign Aid"; compared to 36% for the US sample)
  - Most in the 55-96% correct range

During the September 10, 2019 meeting, Cooky presented preliminary results to the Senate and the University Senate endorsed—via consent of assembly—the working group's efforts.

As of September, Nan Kong (University Senate, Education Policy Committee), Assata Gilmore (VP of Purdue Student Government) and Jeff Stefancic (Office of Dean of Students. Education Policy Committee) have joined the working group of disciplinary experts and will serve as liaisons to the Senate.

During the fall, the working group will continue to analyze the BGR results and refine the survey instrument. The group is considering distributing a refined survey in introductory political science courses as another pilot study, and will investigate other peer institutions who have civics literacy requirements.