

Study: College students lack skills

Most enrolled at four-year schools can't figure tips or balance their checkbook

By BEN FELLER

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

Nearing a diploma, most college students cannot handle many complex but common tasks, from understanding credit card offers to comparing the cost per ounce of food.

Those are the sobering findings of a study of literacy on college campuses, the first to target the skills of students as they approach the start of their careers.

More than 50 percent of students at four-year schools and more than 75 percent at two-year

colleges lacked the skills to perform complex literacy tasks.

That means they could not interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure, understand the arguments of newspaper editorials, compare credit card offers with different interest rates and annual fees or summarize results of a survey about parental involvement in school.

The results cut across three types of literacy: analyzing news stories and other prose, understanding documents and having math skills needed for checkbooks or restaurant tips.

"It is kind of disturbing that a

lot of folks are graduating with a degree and they're not going to be able to do those things," said Stephane Baldi, the study's director at the American Institutes for Research, a behavioral and social science research organization.

Most students at community colleges and four-year schools showed intermediate skills, meaning they could perform moderately challenging tasks. Examples include identifying a location on a map, calculating the cost of ordering office supplies or consulting a reference guide to figure out which foods contain a particular vitamin.

There was brighter news.

Overall, the average literacy of college students is significantly higher than that of adults across the nation. Study leaders said that was encouraging but not surprising, given that the spectrum of adults includes those with much less education.

Also, compared with all adults with similar levels of education, college students had superior skills in searching and using information from texts and documents.

"But do they do well enough for a highly educated population? For a knowledge-based economy? The answer is no," said Joni Finney, vice president of the

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, an independent and nonpartisan group.

"This sends a message that we should be monitoring this as a nation, and we don't do it," Finney said. "States have no idea about the knowledge and skills of their college graduates."

The survey examined college and university students nearing the end of their degree programs. The students did the worst on matters involving math.

Almost 20 percent of students pursuing four-year degrees had only basic quantitative skills. For example, the students could not

estimate if their car had enough gas to get to the service station. About 30 percent of two-year students had only basic math skills.

Baldi and Finney said the survey should be used as a tool. They hope state leaders, educators and university trustees will examine the rigor of courses required of all students.

The survey showed a strong relationship between analytic coursework and literacy. Students in two-year and four-year schools scored higher when they took classes that challenged them to apply theories to practical problems or weigh competing arguments.

BRIEFS

NATION

WASHINGTON

Key Democrat says he won't vote for Alito

Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy said Thursday he will oppose Supreme Court nominee Samuel Alito's confirmation, saying he did not believe the conservative judge would be independent of President Bush and the executive branch in his future rulings.

"At a time when the president is seizing unprecedented power, the Supreme Court needs to act as a check and to provide balance," Leahy, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, said in a speech at Georgetown University's law school. "Based on the hearing and his record, I have no confidence that Judge Alito would provide that check and balance."

It is not a surprise that the Vermont senator is voting against Alito. He was one of the nominee's harshest interrogators at Alito's confirmation hearings last week.

Leahy became the latest Democrat to announce a position on Alito, a former U.S. attorney and lawyer for the Reagan administration. Democrats Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Max Baucus of Montana announced their opposition to Alito on Wednesday.

CHICAGO

Dick's needs good quarter from Galyan's

Shares of Dick's Sporting Goods Inc. have risen about 30 percent since mid-October, but the retailer needs a solid fourth quarter, particularly from its Galyan's acquisition, for the stock to climb higher.

Dick's announced in June 2004 that it was buying struggling Plainfield-based Galyan's Trading Co., a competitor with 47 stores, for more than \$300 million. The deal put Dick's in markets where it hadn't been, including Atlanta and Chicago. Dick's said then it expected to earn \$1.70 a share to \$1.75 a share for the 2005 fiscal year that ends in a few weeks.

The Pittsburgh-based retailer completed the conversion of Galyan's stores to Dick's stores, which included closing a store in Greenwood, during the first three months of last year. The company raised its earnings-per-share guidance for the current year to between \$1.82 and \$1.87 when it reported first-quarter results in May. The stock reached its 52-week high of \$40.42 on July 12.

But Dick's lowered its per-share forecast to \$1.70 to \$1.75 in August when it reported second-quarter results, saying sales at the former Galyan's stores were below expectations.

WASHINGTON

New-home construction broke record in 2005

Construction of new single-family homes surged to an all-time high in 2005 but construction activity fell sharply in December, sending a signal that the nation's long housing boom could be cooling off.

The Commerce Department reported that construction of new homes and apartments fell by 8.9 percent last month, the biggest decline in nine months.

In another report, the Labor Department said that the number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits fell to 271,000 last week, the lowest level in nearly six years.

The unexpectedly sharp drop of 36,000 claims provided further evidence that the labor market continues to show strength.

WASHINGTON

Mortgage rates dip to lowest in three months

Rates on 30-year mortgages fell for a sixth straight week, dropping to the lowest level in three months, according to a weekly survey released Thursday.

Mortgage giant Freddie Mac said rates on 30-year, fixed-rate mortgages dipped to 6.10 percent this week, down from 6.15 percent last week.

Rates have been falling since mid-December when rates on the 30-year mortgage were at 6.32 percent. The rate is now the lowest since the week of Oct. 20.

BOSTON

Advisory group opposes J&J offer for Guidant

A proxy advisory firm is recommending Guidant Corp. shareholders reject Johnson & Johnson's latest buyout proposal, a move that comes as J&J weighs whether to sweeten its offer for the medical device maker once again to trump Guidant's favored suitor of the moment, Boston Scientific Corp.

The Massachusetts company owes its current front-runner status in part to Abbott Laboratories Inc., a third-party player whose offer of cash and other assistance to help Boston Scientific go after Guidant is fueling speculation that the new allies could themselves become merger partners someday.

Institutional Shareholder Services, a 21-year-old firm that holds a virtual monopoly on advising shareholders on proxy votes and governance issues, on Wednesday issued a recommendation against J&J's bid ahead of Guidant shareholders' scheduled Jan. 31 vote.

Whether the vote will occur is unclear because the Indianapolis-based company's board on Tuesday dropped its earlier support for J&J's latest \$24.2 billion bid and declared Boston Scientific's \$27.2 billion counter-offer superior.

J&J has until Tuesday to respond under terms of its agreement with Guidant. The next day is the final chance for Guidant's board to formally accept Boston Scientific's offer.

By TOM COYNE

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW CARLISLE

Half the year, conversations in this small northern Indiana community are filled with references to school time and town time, fast time and slow time, Chicago time and Michigan time.

Starting April 2, the distinctions will be year-round, courtesy of a U.S. Department of Transportation ruling that will keep St. Joseph County on Eastern time when Indiana begins observing statewide daylight-saving time.

"It stinks," Judy Lambert, a waitress at Miller's Home Cafe in the town of about 1,600 residents, said Thursday. "I just wanted us to all be on the same time. What's wrong with the whole state being on one time? It's stupid."

The Department of Transportation announced Wednesday that eight Indiana counties would switch to the Central time zone. The DOT also ruled that nine other counties, including St. Joseph County, that had requested a switch from Eastern to Central time would stay on Eastern.

Many in New Carlisle, 15 miles west of South Bend, were unhappy

"What's wrong with the ... state being on one time?"

Judy Lambert

LaPorte County resident on a decision to let some counties switch time zones

with the decision, saying it made a confusing situation worse.

The town is on Eastern time, but it forms a school district with Rolling Prairie in LaPorte County, which is in the Central time zone. New Prairie United School Corp., which has five schools, stays on Central time, even the elementary school that is in St. Joseph County.

In past years, the two counties

were on the same time for the nearly seven months that LaPorte County observed Central Daylight time. Starting April 2, they'll be divided year-round.

"It's terrible. Terrible!" said Lambert, who lives in LaPorte County about three miles and one time zone from the cafe.

Others said they wished the legislature, which last year decided to begin observing daylight time, had left things as they were.

"We had a routine going here," said Cindy Miller, who owns the cafe. "Now we're going to have a new routine."

Miller acknowledged people's lives were affected even when they didn't change clocks with

the rest of the nation. The local news came on at 11 p.m. in the winter, 10 p.m. in the summer.

"Our life changed even though we never touched the clock," she said. "But we had it down pat. We knew that the schools were an hour later and we just got accustomed to that. Now we're going to have to think about something different."

Steve Ripstra, a lawyer in Jasper — about an hour from Illinois and an hour from Evansville, both of which are in the Central time zone — wanted to stay on Eastern time. But Dubois County will switch to Central time.

"It's just nicer to have it lighter later in the day," he said. "It's handier."

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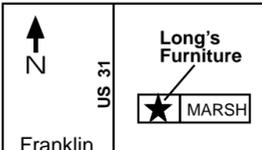
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