

New Study of the Literacy of College Students Finds Some Are Graduating With Only Basic Skills

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Washington, D.C. – Twenty percent of U.S. college students completing four-year degrees—and 30 percent of students earning two-year degrees—have only basic quantitative literacy skills, meaning they are unable to estimate if their car has enough gasoline to get to the next gas station or calculate the total cost of ordering office supplies, according to a new national survey by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). The study was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Report: The Literacy of America's
College Students

The AIR study found there is no difference between the quantitative literacy of today's graduates compared with previous generations, and that current graduates generally are superior to previous graduates when it comes to other forms of literacy needed to comprehend documents and prose.

The new study, "The National Survey of America's College Students," (NSACS) is based on a sample of 1,827 graduating students from 80 randomly selected 2-year and 4-year public and private colleges and universities across the United States. By targeting students nearing the end of their degree programs, the study provides a broader and more comprehensive picture of fundamental college literacy skills than ever before.

"The surprisingly weak quantitative literacy ability of many college graduates is troubling," says Dr. Stéphane Baldi, who directed the AIR study. "A knowledgeable workforce is vital to cope with the increasing demands of the global marketplace."

Study findings include:

More than 75 percent of students at two-year colleges and more than 50 percent of students at four-year colleges do not score at the proficient level of literacy. This means that they lack the skills to perform complex literacy tasks, such as comparing credit card offers with different interest rates or summarizing the arguments of newspaper editorials.

Students in two- and four-year colleges have the greatest difficulty with quantitative literacy: approximately 30 percent of students in two-year institutions and nearly 20 percent of students in 4-year institutions have only Basic quantitative literacy. Basic skills are those necessary to compare ticket prices or calculate the cost of a sandwich and a salad from a menu.

