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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**NEW STUDY FINDS AMERICANS, INCLUDING ELECTED OFFICIALS, EARN A FAILING GRADE WHEN TESTED ON AMERICAN HISTORY AND ECONOMICS**

*Third Intercollegiate Studies Institute Report on Civic Literacy Suggests There is an Epidemic of Historical, Political and Economic Ignorance in America; Colleges Must be Main Part of Cure*

**Washington, D.C., November 20, 2008** – Are most people, including college graduates, civically illiterate? Do elected officials know even less than most citizens about civic topics such as history, government, and economics? The answer is yes on both counts according to a new study by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). **More than 2,500 randomly selected Americans took ISI’s basic 33-question test on civic literacy and more than 1,700 people failed, with the average score 49 percent, or an “F.” Elected officials scored even lower than the general public with an average score of 44 percent and only 0.8 percent (or 21) of all surveyed earned an “A.”** Even more startling is the fact that over twice as many people know Paula Abdul was a judge on American Idol than know that the phrase “government of the people, by the people, for the people” comes from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

Complete results from ISI’s third study on American civic literacy are being released today in a report entitled *Our Fading Heritage: Americans Fail a Basic Test on Their History and Institutions*. The new study follows up two previous reports from ISI’s National Civic Literacy Board that revealed a major void in civic knowledge among the nation’s college students. This report goes beyond the college crowd however, examining the civic literacy of everyday citizens, including self-identified elected officials. But according to ISI, the blame and solution again lie at the doorstep of the nation’s colleges.

“There is an epidemic of economic, political, and historical ignorance in our country,” says Josiah Bunting, III, Chairman of ISI’s National Civic Literacy Board. “It is disturbing enough that the general public failed ISI’s civic literacy test, but when you consider the even more dismal scores of elected officials, you have to be concerned. How can political leaders make informed decisions if they don’t understand the American experience? Colleges can, and should, play an important role in curing this national epidemic of ignorance.”

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A large majority of respondents agree colleges should prepare citizen leaders by teaching America's history, key texts and institutions. Seventy-two percent of respondents with a high school diploma believe colleges should teach our heritage as do 74 percent with graduate degrees. However, the impact of college in advancing civic knowledge, as evidenced in ISI's first two studies, is minimal. In the new study, this trend is confirmed. The average score among those who ended their formal education with a bachelor's degree is 57 percent or an "F", which is only 13 percentage points higher than the average score of 44 percent earned by those who hold high school diplomas. And when you hold other non-college influences constant, the gain from a college degree drops to about 6 percent, quite consistent with past ISI findings.

Further demonstrating the minimal influence of college in advancing civic literacy, ISI discovered that the civic knowledge gained from the combination of engaging in frequent conversations about public affairs, reading about current events and history and participating in advanced civic activities is greater than the gain from an expensive bachelor's degree alone. Conversely, talking on the phone, watching owned or rented movies and monitoring TV news broadcasts and documentaries diminish a respondent's civic literacy.

"People may be listening to television experts talk about economic bailouts and the platforms of political candidates, but they apparently have little idea what our basic economic and political institutions are," observes Dr. Richard Brake, ISI's Director of University Stewardship. "Our study raises significant questions about whether citizens who voted in this year's landmark presidential election really understand how our system of representative democracy works."

For example, Brake points out that less than half of all Americans can name all three branches of government. And only 21 percent know the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" comes from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which President-elect Barack Obama cited in his acceptance speech on Election night.

Following is a sampling of other results from several basic survey questions:

- 30 percent of elected officials do not know that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are the inalienable rights referred to in the Declaration of Independence; and 20 percent falsely believe that the Electoral College "was established to supervise the first presidential debates"
- Almost 40 percent of all respondents falsely believe the president has the power to declare war
- 40 percent of those with a bachelor's degree do not know business profit equals revenue minus expenses
- Only 54 percent with a bachelor's degree correctly define free enterprise as a system in which individuals create, exchange and control goods and resources

- 20.7 percent of Americans falsely believe that the Federal Reserve can increase or decrease government spending

“The nation’s ignorance of the kind of knowledge necessary for informed and responsible citizenship—and the failure of our nation’s colleges to effectively address and fix this problem—would certainly be unacceptable to our founding fathers, who believed that the university would create leaders to preserve liberty,” asserts Dr. Brake. “Our report demonstrates that Americans today expect no less from our colleges than our founders did.”

The report calls upon elected officials, administrators, trustees, faculty donors, taxpayers and parents to reevaluate collegiate curricula and standards for accountability. Some of the questions ISI believes need to be asked are the following:

- Do colleges require courses in American history, politics, economics and other core areas?
- Do colleges assess the civic or overall learning of their graduates?
- Do elected officials link college appropriations to real measures of civic or overall learning?

“Citizenship is a life-long commitment,” says Bunting. “Colleges need to do their part to help young citizens keep their commitment. In the process, they will be helping to preserve the civic vitality of our nation.”

The ISI test was administered in conjunction with Dr. Kenneth Dautrich of the University of Connecticut and Braun Research, Inc. All 33 questions and ISI’s *Our Fading Heritage* report are available at [www.americancivilliteracy.org](http://www.americancivilliteracy.org).

### **About the Intercollegiate Studies Institute**

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) ([www.isi.org](http://www.isi.org)) was founded in 1953 to further in successive generations of American college youth a better understanding of the economic, political, and ethical values that sustain a free and humane society. With ISI’s volunteer representatives at over 900 colleges, and with more than 65,000 ISI student and faculty members on virtually every campus in the country, ISI directs tens of thousands of young people each year to a wide array of educational programs that deepen their understanding of the American ideal of ordered liberty.

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