

A Portrait of the Student Teacher

By Louis Goldman

From time to time, Gallup polls and other surveys appear in the press reporting the opinions and level of knowledge of the public at large and of selected sub-groups. I have often replicated these surveys in Wichita, most auspiciously in 1968 when a modified version of James S. Coleman's survey *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, was administered to large numbers of Wichita students, teachers, and other citizens (1,123 students, 1,956 teachers, 1,500 citizens).¹ There was remarkable similarity between the responses of Coleman's United States-wide sample and the Wichita sample.

At other times, I have composed surveys myself, somewhat confident that our local population would, indeed, resemble the nation at large. Mostly, however, I have surveyed juniors, seniors, graduate students, and sometimes faculty in our college teacher education program. Herewith are some of my findings.

*Louis Goldman is an
associate professor in the
Department of
Curriculum and
Instruction at Wichita
State University, Wichita,
Kansas.*

General Level of Knowledge

A recent *Reader's Digest* survey² asked 2,130 high school seniors six factual questions. I replicated the survey in January of 1995 with 56 Wichita State University (WSU) seniors and 10 faculty in the University's Department of Curriculum and Instruc-

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tion. Here are the items, followed by the high school seniors (HSS), WSU seniors (WSUS), and faculty (FAC) percentage of correct response:

	<u>HSS</u>	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
1. The Mississippi River flows into:			
a. the Atlantic Ocean.		5%	
b. the Great Lakes.		4%	
c. the Gulf of Mexico.	76%	86%	100%
d. the Pacific Ocean.		2%	
e. I don't know.		4%	
2. Who said "Give me liberty or give me death"?			
a. Samuel Adams		11%	
b. John Hancock		4%	
c. James Madison		2%	
d. Patrick Henry	57%	77%	100%
e. I don't know.		7%	
3. Which part of the blood carries the most oxygen to the body?			
a. plasma		2%	
b. platelets		11%	
c. red cells	61%	71%	78%
d. white cells		13%	11%
e. I don't know.		7%	
4. In the Bible, Job was known for his:			
a. skill as a builder.		4%	
b. patience during suffering.	39%	71%	100%
c. prowess in battle.		2%	
d. prophetic ability.		5%	
e. I don't know.		18%	
5. $3 \frac{1}{5}$ equals			
a. 3 divided by $\frac{1}{5}$.			
b. 3 minus $\frac{1}{5}$.			
c. 3 times $\frac{1}{5}$.		11%	
d. 3 plus $\frac{1}{5}$.	55%	89%	100%
e. I don't know.			
6. The civil rights movement of the 1960s focused on:			
a. equality for minorities.	90%	98%	100%
b. campaign finance reform.			
c. judicial reform and the recall of judges.			
d. state referenda for political reform.		2%	
e. I don't know.			

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7. Bradley Rusch reports in *Phi Delta Kappan* (June 1994, p. 783)³ that in the fall of 1993 he asked his junior college classes to identify NAFTA, Al Gore and Joey Buttafuoco. The results, with comparisons:

	<u>Rusch</u>	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
a. NAFTA	0%	82%	90%
b. Al Gore	<1/3%	98%	100%
c. Joey Buttafuoco	100%	79%	70%

The March 1994 issue of *Time*⁴ reported the results of its survey of the public's knowledge of current events in eight countries. Germans were clearly the best informed; Americans ranked above Mexicans and barely above Spaniards. Here are the *Time* results compared to those of the WSU students and faculty:

	<u>Time</u> <u>(Amer.)</u>	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
8. What is the name of the ethnic group that has conquered much of Bosnia and has surrounded the city of Sarajevo?	28%	66%	70%
9. Who is President of Russia?	50%	70%	80%
10. Who is Boutros Boutros-Ghali?	13%	20%	60%

To the above, I added the following questions:

11. Who is Andrew Wyeth?	13%	70%
12. Who is Aaron Copland?	18%	90%
13. Who is Newt Gingrich?	88%	90%
14. Who is Lance Ito?	82%	80%

According to the National Endowment for the Humanities,⁵ large numbers of college seniors confuse Karl Marx's edict and the United States Constitution. I asked:

15. What is the source of "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need"?			
a. the U.S. Constitution		8%	
b. Karl Marx		52%	70%
c. the Old Testament		6%	
d. Thomas Jefferson		32%	

Beliefs and Attitudes

A *Times-Mirror* poll in September 1994⁶ reported that 65 percent of the 4,809 people surveyed thought "it was all right for blacks and whites to date each other—up from 43 percent in 1987." I found that 82 percent of the WSU students agreed, as did 100 percent of the faculty.

The conservative columnist Cal Thomas⁷ reported results of a survey of South-

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ern college students (SS) in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana in January 1995. (Unfortunately he failed to indicate if these were liberal arts students, business administration, etc., as students and faculty vary greatly by discipline.) Here are those results:

	<u>SS</u>	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
16. How do you regard yourself politically?			
a. liberal	46%	21%	70%
b. conservative	39%	55%	10%
c. neither	5%	24%	20%
17. With respect to right and wrong, do you believe			
a. it is a matter of personal opinion.	56%	24%	14%
b. there are absolutes.	38%	69%	58%
c. undecided.	6%	7%	28%

The large difference in political orientation between WSU faculty and students was in evidence in the response to this question:

18. Who would you like to see elected President in 1996?			
a. Colin Powell		2%	
b. Bob Dole		56%	
c. Bill Clinton		22%	63%
d. Jimmy Carter			
e. other (write in your choice) _____		20%	37%

The student write-ins were mostly conservative (Limbaugh, Gramm, Kemp, Cheney, etc.) while the faculty write-ins were liberal (Gore, Tsongas).

In 1986, the Gallup Poll⁸ (GP) reported on Americans' beliefs about the nature of Jesus:

	<u>GP</u>	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
19. Check the one statement about Jesus that best reflects your view.			
a. Jesus was divine in the sense that he was in fact God living among men.	42%	53%	33%
b. Jesus was divine in the sense that while he was only a man, he was uniquely called by God to reveal God's purpose in the world.	27%	17%	22%
c. Jesus was divine in the sense that he embodies the best that is in all men.	9%	15%	33%
d. Jesus was a great man and teacher, but I could not call him divine.	6%	7%	11%
e. Frankly, I'm not entirely sure there really was such a person.	2%	4%	
f. No opinion.	4%	4%	

With respect to United States spending on foreign aid, many magazines have

reported that the public believes we spend far too much (about 85 percent of the WSU students and 60 percent of faculty concur). Most groups, as well as both of the WSU groups, believe we spend a great deal more than we do—about 15 percent of the budget, which is more than 10 times what we actually do spend. When asked what we should spend, respondents typically recommend more than three times what we actually spend! Finally, respondents were asked:

	<u>WSUS</u>	<u>FAC</u>
20. What variable is most predictive of the academic success of students?		
a. The quality of school facilities	11%	
b. the quality of teachers	55%	27%
c. the nature of the students' peers	19%	9%
d. the socio-economic background	15%	63%

Discussion

As we might expect, student teaching seniors in the College of Education at Wichita State University are more knowledgeable than high school seniors and the public at large on items of general knowledge and current events. Even so, their knowledge of foreign affairs (Serbia, Boutros Boutros-Ghali) and cultural matters (Wyeth, Copland) is not impressive, and the fact that 11 percent believed that $3 \frac{1}{5}$ is the same as 3 times $\frac{1}{5}$ is mind-boggling.

The student teachers seem relatively free of racial bias. They are unexpectedly conservative politically, although this may be partially explained by their strong support for fellow Kansan Bob Dole's candidacy. Perhaps their most striking characteristic is their religious (and moral) conservatism, with 69 percent believing in moral absolutes and 53 percent believing in the unequivocal divinity of Jesus.

One of the most disturbing findings concerns the large number of students who believe that the quality of teachers is most predictive of the academic success of students rather than their socio-economic background. The potency of the socio-economic background has been repeatedly and convincingly demonstrated from Robert B. Lynd's study of *Middletown*, August B. Hollinghead's *Elmstown*, Lloyd Warner's *Yankee City*, Robert Havighurst's *River City*, to James S. Coleman's mammoth *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) and many more recent works. Every student of education should know this early in the game, but apparently they do not. Nor, more shockingly, do all professors of education, an even more disturbing fact.

The consequence of the erroneous belief in the power of the teacher is that as a teacher fails to significantly alter the lives of students, as she almost inevitably will, she will blame herself, believe she has failed, and perhaps leave teaching. Better to have a more realistic understanding of one's powers and be grateful for what little victories can be won.

We cannot conclude from these data **anything** about characteristics of students

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and faculty in other fields of study. Previous surveys have shown substantial differences in the level of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of students from one discipline and college to another. I suspect, however, that this profile of Wichita State University student teachers will bear considerable resemblance to student teachers in other middle-tier universities, irrespective of their region. It would be useful if *Phi Delta Kappan* would expand its annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward education to systematically and scientifically examine the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers, prospective teachers, and teacher educators.

Notes

1. Louis Goldman & Carl Bell, *School and Society in One City*, Unified School District 259, Wichita, KS, 1969.
2. Rachel Wildausky, "What's Behind Success in School?" *Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1994, pp. 49-55.
3. Bradley W. Rusch, "The Buttafucoization of America," *Phi Beta Kappan*, June 1994, p. 783.
4. *Time*, March 1994.
5. *Campus*, Winter 1995, p. 17.
6. Jill Lawrence, "Poll Finds Americans' Spirits Down, Intolerance Up," *Wichita Eagle*, Sept. 21, 1994, p. 1.
7. Cal Thomas, "American Universities Having Their Apparent Ups and Downs," *Wichita Eagle*, Jan. 11, 1995.
8. "Who Do You Say I Am?" (Gallup Poll, 1986) in *The Plain Truth*, Oct. 1994, p. 7.