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U.S. Millennials Come Up Short in Global Skills Study

Shortfalls affect all segments of American society

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

America's wealthiest and best-educated young adults still lag behind their peers in other countries in the literacy, numeracy, and computer-age problem-solving skills needed to compete in the global labor market.

That, coupled with yawning racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and even grimmer skills levels for students with less than a college degree, could lead to long-term difficulty for the country, according to a new study by the **Education Testing Service** Center for Research on Human Capital and Education in Lawrenceville, N.J.

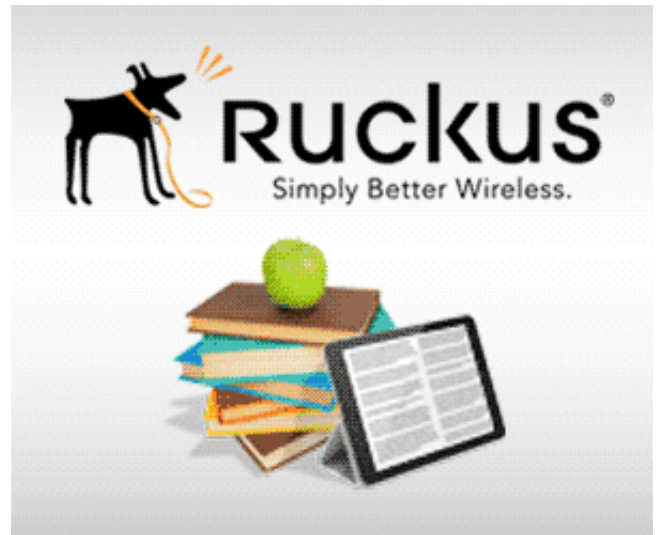
It's far from the first study to suggest American students are falling behind their international peers. But the analysis of U.S. millennials—those born after 1980, ages 16 to 34 during the study—specifically highlights that the skills gap goes beyond young people who are typically seen as more "at-risk," like immigrants and high school dropouts.

"We've often looked at these as disconnected, only looking at the problems of individual parts," said Martha J. Kanter, a visiting professor of higher education at New York University and former assistant education secretary under President Barack Obama. She was not associated with the study.

"These findings confirm everything that we and many others have said about what needs attention ... ever since [the education report] 'A Nation at Risk,'" she added. "The findings are as troubling, if not more so."

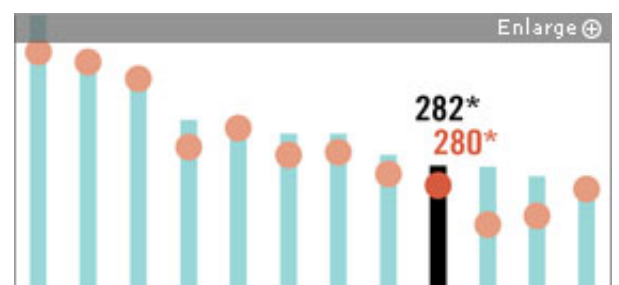
The ETS study, to be released this week, compares millennials in 22 industrialized countries, including the United States, who took part in the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, or PIAAC, in 2012, the last time it was given. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which runs the school-based Program for International Student Assessment, also runs the PIAAC, which is given directly to adults in their homes. Unlike the PISA, which measures academic content skills, the PIAAC measures practical, career-oriented literacy and numeracy skills, and, as of 2012, "problem-solving in technology-rich environments."

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Results Around the World

Americans between the ages of 16 and 34 fared poorly on tests designed to measure their grasp of the literacy, numeracy, and computer-age problem-solving skills needed to compete in the international labor market. Even the youngest of U.S. millennials lag behind peers in other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries.



Tied for Last

Across the board, young Americans fared poorly compared to those in the other countries studied. They tied for last, with Italy and Spain, in math skills. In problem-solving, they again performed at the bottom of the pack, with Ireland, Poland, and the Slovak Republic. U.S. millennials also had lower literacy scores than peers in 15 out of 22 countries, tied with a few, and outperformed only peers in Italy and Spain. Younger members of the cohort, who presumably grew up under the last decade of high-stakes accountability initiatives, were no more competitive globally than older millennials.

Moreover, the skills gaps persisted among students who are least likely to be considered academically at risk. Those who performed in the top 10 percent of all Americans in their age group still performed worse than the top performers in 15 other countries, including Germany and the Republic of Korea.

While a higher proportion of U.S. millennials versus those in other countries had earned a college degree, those with a four-year degree in the United States still showed lower math skills than those with college degrees in any country studied but Poland and Spain. Moreover, the percentages of Americans who demonstrated the lowest-level math skills increased from 2003 to 2012, regardless of what level of education they had achieved.

Even those with a master's or doctoral degree demonstrated lower numeracy skills than their counterparts in all but a few countries. The average U.S. math score for millennials with a postbaccalaureate degree, 308, was not only below the average for countries studied who are in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, but was below the average score for young adults with just a bachelor's degree in several countries, and near the score for top-performing students with less than a bachelor's degree in a few countries.

"We have a number of challenges to face, and it doesn't look like the millennials are going to help us grow our way out of the systemic problems," said Madeline J. Goodman, a report co-author and ETS researcher. "What it requires us to do is in some sense rethink the nature of the problem and not look at [educational] attainment as the only solution to the problem."

Yawning Gaps

The United States did rank first in one area: It has the widest gap of any of the countries studied between the achievement of those in the top 10 percent and those in the bottom 10 percent of performance.

In the United States, 72 percent of young adults with a high school diploma or less did not meet minimum proficiency levels in numeracy. They scored 54 points lower on a 500-point scale, or more than a full standard deviation below Americans with a four-year college degree.

"To put it bluntly, we no longer share the growth and prosperity of the nation the way we did in the decades between 1940 and 1980," the authors wrote, later adding, "The disparity in private (as well as the public) investments made on behalf of children between different levels of [socioeconomic status] can be substantial, lasting, and self-perpetuating."

American millennials with a high school diploma or less performed lower than those with a secondary credential in every country but France.

In all of the countries with large immigrant populations that were studied, foreign-born young adults had lower

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skills than native-born peers, but in the United States, native-born millennials showed a greater decline in skills from the 2003 to 2012 cohorts than did their immigrant peers.

Racial and ethnic performance gaps continued, with 12 percent of white and Asian young adults in America showing advanced levels of math skill, versus only 3 percent of Hispanic and 1 percent of black millennials.

Yet on average, OECD countries had about 15 percent of all millennials performing at an advanced level, and white and Asian students in the United States performed below their counterparts in most other countries studied.

Ms. Kanter cautioned that it is still difficult to compare the U.S. population of 340 million with the smaller and more homogenous populations of many OECD countries. She called for more research to identify and replicate K-12 and higher education systems that do provide world-class skills to young adults.



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