**U.S. Adults Fare Poorly in a Study of Skills**

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American adults lag well behind their counterparts in most other developed countries in the mathematical and technical skills needed for a modern workplace, according to [a study](http://skills.oecd.org/skillsoutlook.html) released Tuesday.

United States Lagging in Skills

A study of basic skills among people ages 16 to 65 showed that the United States is behind other countries in basic math skills and working with technology, and is roughly in the middle of the pack in literacy.



The study, perhaps the most detailed of its kind, shows that the well-documented pattern of several other countries surging past the United States in students’ test scores and young people’s college graduation rates corresponds to a skills gap, extending far beyond school. In the United States, young adults in particular fare poorly compared with their international competitors of the same ages — not just in math and technology, but also in literacy.

More surprisingly, even middle-aged Americans — who, on paper, are among the best-educated people of their generation anywhere in the world — are barely better than middle of the pack in skills.

Arne Duncan, the education secretary, released a statement saying that the findings “show our education system hasn’t done enough to help Americans compete — or position our country to lead — in a global economy that demands increasingly higher skills.”

The study is the first based on new tests developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a coalition of mostly developed nations, and administered in 2011 and 2012 to thousands of people, ages 16 to 65, by 23 countries. Previous international skills studies have generally looked only at literacy, and in fewer countries.

The organizers assessed skills in literacy and facility with basic math, or numeracy, in all 23 countries. In 19 countries, there was a third assessment, called “problem-solving in technology-rich environments,” on using digital devices to find and evaluate information, communicate, and perform common tasks.

In all three fields, Japan ranked first and Finland second in average scores, with the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway near the top. Spain, Italy and France were at or near the bottom in literacy and numeracy, and were not included in the technology assessment.

The United States ranked near the middle in literacy and near the bottom in skill with numbers and technology. In number skills, just 9 percent of Americans scored in the top two of five proficiency levels, compared with a 23-country average of 12 percent, and 19 percent in Finland, Japan and Sweden.

“The first question these kinds of studies raise is, ‘If we’re so dumb, why are we so rich?’ ” said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. “Our economic advantage has been having high skill levels at the top, being big, being more flexible than the other economies, and being able to attract other countries’ most skilled labor. But that advantage is slipping.”

In several ways, the American results were among the most polarized between high achievement and low. Compared with other countries with similar average scores, the United States, in all three assessments, usually had more people in the highest proficiency levels, and more in the lowest. The country also had an unusually wide gap in skills between the employed and the unemployed.

In the most highly educated population, people with graduate and professional degrees, Americans lagged slightly behind the international averages in skills. But the gap was widest at the bottom; among those who did not finish high school, Americans had significantly worse skills than their counterparts abroad.

“These kinds of differences in skill sets matter a lot more than they used to, at every level of the economy,” Dr. Carnevale said. “Americans were always willing to accept a much higher level of inequality than other developed countries because there was upward mobility, but we’ve lost a lot of ground to other countries on mobility because people don’t have these skills.”

Among 55- to 65-year-olds, the United States fared better, on the whole, than its counterparts. But in the 45-to-54 age group, American performance was average, and among younger people, it was behind.

American educators often note that the nation’s polyglot nature can inhibit performance, though there is sharp debate over whether that is a short-run or long-run effect.

The new study shows that foreign-born adults in the United States have much poorer-than-average skills, but even the native-born scored a bit below the international norms. White Americans fared better than the multi-country average in literacy, but were about average in the math and technology tests.

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