Immigrants get 'a better test' for U.S. citizenship

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Body

Quick, fellow citizens, what are the colors of our national flag? OK, what color are its stars? How about this: Name the form ***immigrants*** fill out to apply for ***U.S. citizenship***. Anyone? What, you never heard of Form N-400?

For years, scholars, historians and policy makers have mocked the inane questions on the naturalization examination that ***immigrants*** must pass to gain ***U.S. citizenship***, arguing that it ***tested*** trivia and minted new Americans who lacked meaningful knowledge about their adopted country's history and governance.

But that's set to change Wednesday, when ***U.S. Citizenship*** and Immigration Services rolls out ***a*** redesigned naturalization exam.

"We're trying to encourage civic learning and attachment," Alfonso Aguilar, chief of the Office of ***Citizenship***, said in ***an*** interview during ***a*** stop in San Francisco. "The ***test*** is not harder. It's just ***a better test***. It follows ***a*** basic ***U.S***. history and civics curriculum. It's more on concepts than on rote memorization."

The current ***test*** was developed in 1986, but without guidance from scholars or historians. And it wasn't always administered consistently: ***Immigrants*** in some cities were given multiple-choice answers, while others had to recite from memory.

The redesign began in 2000 and involved help from ***test*** development contractors, the National Academy of Sciences, ***a*** panel of history and ***U.S***. government scholars, and English-as-***a***-second-language experts.

Gone are such oft-ridiculed questions as the one about the ***citizenship*** form. Replacing them are questions aimed at basic concepts in American governance, such as "What is the rule of law?" or "What are two rights of everyone living in the United States?"

"If you don't understand those ideals," asked the Puerto Rico-born Aguilar, "how American are you?"

Other questions require ***a*** fuller understanding of the people and events that shaped American history. So rather than asking "Who was president during the Civil War?" the new ***test*** asks: "What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did?"

As with the old ***test***, applicants are given the entire list of 100 possible questions and the answers in advance to study. When they are called in for ***an*** interview, typically months later, they must give the correct answer in English to at least six of 10 selected questions from that list to pass. Those who apply for ***citizenship*** before Wednesday may choose to be ***tested*** on either the old or new exam. After that, they must use the new one.

Joren Lyons, ***a*** staff attorney with the non-profit Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco, which helps ***immigrants*** handle naturalization applications, worries that some who spent years studying the old ***test*** might ***get*** stuck with the new one. But he wasn't concerned about the new ***test's*** content.

"Our concern is having ***a test*** that's fair," Lyons said. "Their goal is to make it more meaningful, and I think some of the questions achieve that. On paper, it seems like ***a*** reasonable effort. We'll see how all this plays out in the field."

So which ***test*** is harder?

At the request of the Mercury News, ***a*** trio of San Jose State University students gamely agreed to try answering 10 questions from each. Accounting major Alex Andal, 21; pre-nursing major Julienne Baris, 19; and broadcast journalism major Marianne Mendezona, 19, easily passed the new ***test***.

They had little difficulty naming, say, ***a*** right from the First Amendment, ***a*** voting right from the constitutional amendments, or one American Indian tribe. They knew slavery was ***a*** problem that led to the Civil War and understood that separation of powers stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful.

These are American college kids, after all, not strangers in ***a*** strange land. But they did stumble ***a*** bit trying to recall something Benjamin Franklin is famous for.

"Electricity?" Baris asked. "Is he on the $100 bill?" (He started the nation's first free libraries and was ***a*** diplomat, among acceptable answers on the ***test***.)

The old ***test*** stumped them even more.

"Pelosi?" Baris offered when asked to name one of the state's senators while her companions sat in silence. (Nancy Pelosi is ***a U.S.*** representative from San Francisco and speaker of the House of Representatives.)

OK, who said "Give me liberty or give me death!"

"Was it ***a*** president, or ***a*** woman?" Mendezona wondered. (Neither. It was Patrick Henry, urging fellow Virginians in 1775 to prepare for fighting the British in the American Revolution.)

Still, they had little trouble naming red, white and blue as the colors of the ***U.S.*** flag or recalling that the vice president becomes president if the president dies.

But after taking both exams, the student volunteers weren't sure the new ***test*** was any ***better*** than the old.

"They're just different questions and different answers," Andal said.

Baris agreed some of the questions on the old exam were "kind of stupid, and some of it was too trivial." But she and Mendezona still felt the old one required more studying.

"It was harder," Baris said.

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