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**Testing the Teachers**

**By** [**DAVID BROOKS**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/davidbrooks/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

There’s an atmosphere of grand fragility hanging over America’s colleges. The grandeur comes from the surging application rates, the international renown, the fancy new dining and athletic facilities. The fragility comes from the fact that colleges are charging more money, but it’s not clear how much actual benefit they are providing.

Colleges are supposed to produce learning. But, in their landmark study, “Academically Adrift,” Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa found that, on average, students experienced a pathetic seven percentile point gain in skills during their first two years in college and a marginal gain in the two years after that. The exact numbers are disputed, but the study suggests that nearly half the students showed no significant gain in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills during their first two years in college.

This research followed the Wabash Study, which found that student motivation actually declines over the first year in college. Meanwhile, according to surveys of employers, only a quarter of college graduates have the writing and thinking skills necessary to do their jobs.

In their book, “We’re Losing Our Minds,” Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh argue that many colleges and universities see themselves passively as “a kind of bank with intellectual assets that are available to the students.” It is up to students — 19 and 20 year olds — to provide the motivation, to identify which assets are most important and to figure out how to use them.

Colleges today are certainly less demanding. In 1961, students spent an average of 24 hours a week studying. Today’s students spend a little more than half that time — a trend not explained by changing demographics.

This is an unstable situation. At some point, parents are going to decide that $160,000 is too high a price if all you get is an empty credential and a fancy car-window sticker.

One part of the solution is found in three little words: value-added assessments. Colleges have to test more to find out how they’re doing.

It’s not enough to just measure inputs, the way the U.S. News-style rankings mostly do. Colleges and universities have to be able to provide prospective parents with data that will give them some sense of how much their students learn.

There has to be some way to reward schools that actually do provide learning and punish schools that don’t. There has to be a better way to get data so schools themselves can figure out how they’re doing in comparison with their peers.

In 2006, the Spellings commission, led by then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, recommended a serious accountability regime. Specifically, the commission recommended using a standardized test called the Collegiate Learning Assessment to provide accountability data. Colleges and grad schools use standardized achievement tests to measure students on the way in; why shouldn’t they use them to measure students on the way out?

Many people in higher ed are understandably anxious about importing the [No Child Left Behind](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/n/no_child_left_behind_act/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) accountability model onto college campuses. But the good news is that colleges and universities are not reacting to the idea of testing and accountability with blanket hostility, the way some of the members of the K-12 establishment did.

If you go to the Web page of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and click on “[assessment](http://www.aacu.org/resources/assessment/index.cfm),” you will find a dazzling array of experiments that institutions are running to figure out how to measure learning.

Some schools like Bowling Green and Portland State are doing portfolio assessments — which measure the quality of student papers and improvement over time. Some, like Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, use capstone assessment, creating a culminating project in which the students display their skills in a way that can be compared and measured.

The challenge is not getting educators to embrace the idea of assessment. It’s mobilizing them to actually enact it in a way that’s real and transparent to outsiders.

The second challenge is deciding whether testing should be tied to federal dollars or more voluntary. Should we impose a coercive testing regime that would reward and punish schools based on results? Or should we let schools adopt their own preferred systems?

Given how little we know about how to test college students, the voluntary approach is probably best for now. Foundations, academic conferences or even magazines could come up with assessment methods. Each assessment could represent a different vision of what college is for. Groups of similar schools could congregate around the assessment model that suits their vision. Then they could broadcast the results to prospective parents, saying, “We may not be prestigious or as expensive as X, but here students actually learn.”

This is the beginning of college reform. If you’ve got a student at or applying to college, ask the administrators these questions: “How much do students here learn? How do you know?”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/20/opinion/brooks-testing-the-teachers.html?_r=1&emc=eta1%3E&pagewanted=print>

**Responses to Testing the Teachers** (a few out I selected out of the 541 that had been posted by Monday 30 April). You can read more posted below the essay itself at the URL above.

* M. Rose, New Orleans, LA

Where to start? As a professor first at a small private and then a large state university, I can assure you educational failures are a symptom of larger trends in societal makeover. Companies want to interview only business, marketing, and management majors instead of English, history, and philosophy majors although surveys show overwhelmingly that companies want workers who "write well" and "think critically" (what Mr. Brooks wants to test).

When we opened the ivy-covered gates to women and all manner of humankind, we changed what's inside the gate: now vocational education. Then we told students who fifty years ago would have learned a valuable trade by apprenticeship or at a vocational school that they now had to go to college, where they'd be trained for a trade ("hotel management," for example).

We then told traditional college-bound students they had to declare a major in high school--no "education" in the "broaden the mind" sense of the word.

Now we wonder why college costs a fortune (no alternatives) and students can't write well--and they can't. The most motivated, hard-working students at my small private were the students keeping their parents up with worry about the "crazy" major: anthropology (if you can find a department); history; English; philosophy; languages. (I'd include the biologies and mathematics here as well.) The good news about more assessment is that schools will need those "unemployable" young adults to keep the scores high.

* Arthur, Denver

What garbage, David Brooks.

You sound like a college student saying his TA is not teaching.

Students have the greatest accountability for their own education. An institution is to provide the opportunity but it cannot be expected to spoon feed knowledge.

As someone who has completed undergraduate, graduate, and postdoc training, knowledge requires great effort. Today's student, in general, has less motivation to put forth the effort.

What percentatge of graduate students in engineering and the sciences are from the United States? I don't think Chinese and Indian grad students are complaining about the US education system. Where did all the US students go?

It is unrealistic to make institutions primarily accountable for what an individual should be - PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

This article reeks of victimization. My parents didn't send me to the best schools. I had bad teachers. I wasn't taught.

Students have the power to direct their education.

* DAB, Newton, MA

I'm an emeritus math professor who taught at a selective research university. While the students interested in math were as intellectually sharp as in "the old days," I could see a definite downward trend in quality of material in the more elementary level undergraduate courses. A previously unheard-of practice of parents complaining about the poor grades their children received in a calculus course, say, would have repercussions with the administration. Since the cost of an education was outlandishly high, and the parents had an interest in their child getting into med or law school, for they they needed high marks, they felt they had a right to demand conditions that would guarantee success. I definitely saw the quality of syllabi in such courses decline; on the few occasions that I taught such a course, I could not bring myself to follow the syllabus. But I could afford not to. In any event, one of the downward pressures on quality level is that applied by the "investors" (the parents), who really are more interested in a credential than an education. It seems to me that the more universities follow the "corporate model," the worse they become (see, e.g., the quality of for-profit colleges). And that, Mr. Brooks, may be the real problem to address.

* Enrique Lasansky, Tucson

The only thing this article is useful for is to awaken us to the reality that our education system is in trouble at every level, not just K-12. It doesn't matter if this or that college doesn't curve grades and students are working hard in some institutuions. In general, across the nation, we have a serious problem. As others have implied: the educational issues are symptomatic of a culture that is in decline. We live in an anti-intellectual and anti-cultural (less and less appreciation for fine arts, sciences and learning in general) environment. The media propagates this state of affairs. Our leaders worry about test scores a bit, but very few of them set examples of being culturally proficient persons. If we gave Congress members tests in art, philosophy,science and a second language, how many would pass? How can the rest of the nation be expected to value learning, when our leaders are completely occupied with fundraising, parties, sex and amusements?

* <a href=, undefined

I agree that there must be a way of rewarding measuring learning and rewarding good pedagogy, but I think that doing so is much more complicated than Mr. Brooks suggests.

Colleges are moving from intellectual training to job training (especially as manifested in the shift from the liberal arts model to early specialization and skills-based programs). In addition, much of the learning that takes place on college campuses is no longer academic, but social learning. Students participate in many more extracurriculars than they ever have, and a large (and growing) part of the college experience is learning how to network, multitask, and socialize effectively. This is all because our industries value these skills more than ever - a successful job candidate is not one who can read and understand a policy brief well, but who can make a slick presentation or impress an interviewer, even if the substance is shallow.

Stepping back, I think this augurs very poorly for our future as a country. We are training our young people to network rather than to innovate, to persuade rather than to analyze. We are grooming a generation of deft followers rather than bold leaders. This manifests so apparently in our universities, but they will not change until the structural incentives do.