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NO COLLEGE STUDENT LEFT BEHIND?

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ABSTRACT

Today we face a challenge to the organization of higher education that will transform the enterprise, however it is resolved. That challenge goes under the name "learning outcomes," or sometimes "accountability." It is a challenge brought largely by those outside higher education, and it is based on criticisms of the performance of college and university instructors in the face of heightened public expectations. One resolution to the challenge may be the adoption of standardized testing for learning outcomes; another may be to bring greater professionalism to the role of college teaching.

In this essay, I will argue that the learning-outcomes movement, although well-intentioned and appealing in some ways, could easily be injurious to the ideals of higher education. Taking steps to professionalize college teaching can, by contrast, improve the quality of the teaching corps, while leaving intact three essential features of higher level teaching and learning: (1) the centrality of discipline-based knowledge systems; (2) the plurality of approaches that contribute to the formation of well-educated adults; and (3) the transformative potential of the college teacher as model of reason joined to creative engagement with course materials. If educators take the initiative to enforce standards of professionalism, the faculty itself, rather than external regulators, will be in charge of accountability in higher education. It will not be easy to bring greater professionalism to college teaching, because graduate education has, understandably, focused on research rather than teaching. But the future of higher education may ride on the willingness of educators to make the effort.

The Spellings Commission and the Future of Higher Education

In 2006, the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, popularly known as the Spellings Commission, issued a report highly critical of the performance of America's colleges and universities. The report used dispiriting results from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) to support its calls for greater accountability in the form of standardized assessments of learning outcomes. Among the most noteworthy findings from the NAAL: only one-third of college-educated adults could accurately contrast two editorial opinions or understand a table relating age, exercise, and blood pressure.¹ The Spellings Commission proposed incentives for the adoption of standardized testing for purposes of making higher education accountable to consumers. In the words of the Commission, "We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the ...reforms we propose..."²

At the time, it seemed likely that the report would create a brief stir, before disappearing into policy oblivion. There were many reasons to believe this: The report was published at a time when the already wounded Bush Administration was nearing lame duck status. Unlike K-12 education, higher education has remained

relatively favored in public esteem. Moreover, the report argued for a brand of test-based accountability that seemed, on the surface, inconsistent with fundamental premises of higher learning. The implicit model for the Spellings Commission's recommendations, the No Child Left Behind Act, had by this time already failed to deliver on its promises for continuous growth in student language and math proficiency, and had provoked a bitter, if largely unpublicized, backlash among classroom teachers.³

But the Spellings Commission report has not faded away. Learning outcomes are on the agenda of virtually every public system and nearly every institution of higher education in the country. (Not surprisingly, highly selective private institutions remain largely untouched.) Two of the leading higher education associations, the Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State and Land Grant Colleges and Universities (NASLGUC), have begun a voluntary system of accountability, which authorizes six competing test instruments as sources of information on learning outcomes.⁴

Some part of this success is due to the persistence and shrewdness of Secretary Margaret Spellings and the chair of the Commission, Charles Miller. Some part is also due to the conflicting interests of higher education associations. Efforts to build an alliance against the Spellings Commission's recommendations have foundered on these conflicting interests. Many public systems feel the pressure from state legislatures and regional accreditation boards to show their value, and competitions that rank institutions on learning outcomes have proven appealing to those college and university executives who see the possibility that their own institutions will score higher than others on measures of "value added" to student learning.

But this is only part of the story. A large part of the success of the Spellings Commission must, in truth, be attributed to the growing opposition of large parts of the American public to continuing business as usual in higher education. Surveys show that Americans are very concerned about escalating tuition costs, and they want to be assured that they are purchasing something of value with the dollars they are spending. They like the idea of "accountability" and measured improvements in learning, and they are not confident that higher education will deliver without outside pressure.⁵ In a 2002 survey commissioned by the Educational Testing Service (not the most unbiased source, of course), a near majority of Americans said they wanted "more accountability" for student learning in college. Slightly larger proportions of respondents said they considered "low standards" a "very serious" issue in higher education and wanted a role for government in assuring "cost and quality."⁶ Accountability was on the states' higher education policy agenda long before the Spellings Commission report. The Spellings Commission only pushed it closer to the top of that agenda and made it a national issue.

It is important to recognize the idealism behind the learning-outcomes movement. Accountability is not only a critique of college teaching as it currently exists; it is also motivated by a conviction that higher education should be judged by its own expressed aspirations to produce well educated adults. Accountability's measure of professionalism is demonstrated results. This is not a measure many would dismiss as inappropriate.

Indeed, the bureaucratic-managerial model for organizing work advocated by the Spellings Commission has proven a powerful alternative to the professional model in many occupational realms, including medicine, once under more or less complete occupational control. The bureaucratic-managerial model prescribes what is to be accomplished in work and measures the success of these prescriptions through quantitative evaluations.

Learning Outcomes and Bureaucratic-Managerial Control

Very few anticipate a future for post-secondary accountability that looks very much like K-12 accountability. The most widely praised of the current learning outcomes instruments, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), aims to assess cognitive capacities much higher on the Bloom taxonomy than the state K-12 tests. CLA asks students to complete a performance task and two analytical writing tasks. Each performance task has its own document library that includes a range of sources, such as letters, memos, summary of research reports, newspapers articles, maps, and photographs. The performance task requires students to answer open-ended questions about "a hypothetical but realistic situation." One sample question asks students to evaluate whether available data tends to support or refute claims about weaknesses in the construction of the wing of an airplane that a fictitious company is planning to purchase for its sales force. The analytical writing tasks require students to make and critique arguments. A sample make-an-argument question is: "There is no such thing as 'truth' in the media. The one true thing about the information media is that it exists only to entertain." A sample critique-an-argument question asks students to evaluate whether fast food restaurants contribute to childhood obesity based on a report about a research study. Students must reason through the flaws in the research study and its application.⁷

While superior to its competitors, CLA is not without weaknesses. Some 80 percent of the variance in an institution's CLA scores can be accounted for by its SAT scores. CLA scores are so highly correlated with the SAT that what remains after SAT is controlled has been described by one observer as "statistical dust." Given the role of chance variation and unmeasured individual sources of variation, numerical representations of institutional "value added" could be quite misleading, and comparisons among institutions based on point estimates rather than confidence intervals would be still more misleading.

The CLA is less a problem, however, than what is likely to come after it. The K-12 experience with accountability suggests that Gresham's Law applies to schooling -- bad tests tend to drive out good. And we might add as a corollary: bureaucratic-managerial systems seek to maximize leverage through raising the stakes for improvement in whatever they measure. At the beginning of the accountability era in K-12, respected educators like Lorrie Shepherd of the University of Colorado and Brian Rowan of Indiana University insisted on "authentic assessments" and "growth models," but multiple choice-based, easy-to-score, easy-to-rank outcomes emerged instead as the currency of the realm throughout the country. And, with NCLB, the stakes are high throughout the country. Rather than leaving no child behind, the state K-12 tests have left many non-tested subjects behind and hastened the transformation of many classroom teachers into test-prep technicians.

An era of accountability testing would have predictable negative consequences for public colleges and universities. Widespread adoption of the CLA or similar instruments as high-stakes assessments would inevitably lead to the reconstitution of many college classrooms around document-based performance tasks and making and breaking argument tasks. We can be confident that this is true, because every widely adopted test brings a focus on the skills and content it privileges and only on those skills and content. Indeed, the designers of the CLA have acknowledged that they would be happy if colleges and universities taught to their test.⁸

The CLA and similar assessment instruments focus on important cognitive abilities related to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. But this strength of the CLA is oddly misaligned with the traditional aims of higher education: to provide general education in basic fields of knowledge and advanced training in a specialized discipline. The skills CLA privileges are no substitute for subject matter mastery. The development of higher order cognitive capacities has always been an aim of higher education, but within the context of the variety of distinctive additional skills and understandings required for mastery of a discipline.

Consider what types of disciplinary skills and understandings are left out by the CLA: A teacher of history will want her students to see the interplay between personality, event, and larger social and political forces;

to think through specific themes of particular interest to her; to appreciate the range of interpretations of an event; and to consider why dominant interpretations have changed over time. She may be interested also in teaching some more technical skills, such as how to evaluate a bibliography in a subfield or how to construct an expository footnote. To develop these skills is to begin to think like an historian. Similarly, a teacher of drama may want his students to be able to discuss staging, critique performance, design a scene, and embody a character through reading a part, while at the same time learning basic principles of dramaturgy and rhetoric through the study of plays. All of this is possible in a class taught by well-trained and self-reflective teachers, but little or none of it is encouraged in the types of exercises commended by CLA.

If the CLA or a similar assessment instrument takes hold, college teachers will face pressures to help their institutions raise student test scores. Institutions might expect even their best teachers – perhaps especially their best teachers – to change their practices in the service of institutional aspirations to score high. This will reduce the freedom of great teachers to teach as they see fit. Indeed, as currently constituted, the learning outcomes movement shows a more or less complete disinterest in the transforming power of the gifted teacher. But such people make a big difference to the students they touch. For students who strive for better understanding and outstanding performance, it is very important to identify with the personality and élan of their teachers.

The future of science and scholarship – and the possibility of creative interventions in many other fields – consequently depends on teachers who can express with the full measure of their personalities the possibilities of disciplined inquiry joined to creative insight. If the possibility of exposure to these types of teachers is limited only to those paying premium prices at a few private universities beyond the jurisdiction of “accountability,” the cause of upward mobility in the United States could be compromised. But preserving the freedom for professors to teach as they see fit may require broader diffusion of methods to elevate the performance of those instructors who compromise the educational quality of the college classroom.

The Failure of Academic Professionalism

Professions are distinctive ways of organizing and performing work, based on occupational control, rather than bureaucratic-managerial control. Professions have historically developed where asymmetries in knowledge prevent consumers from knowing whether they are receiving high quality services. The way to produce people competent to perform these services has been through selection, training, and licensing. Professions require rigorous academic training and, sometimes, also lengthy apprenticeships. Most professions require licensing examinations as a qualification for practice. They also require continuing education so that practitioners remain current with the literature in their fields. Through these mechanisms, professions create market shelters so that only qualified members of the profession are allowed to perform the work. These market shelters tend to raise pay above what might otherwise obtain, but they also protect consumers against incompetent practitioners and foster commitment to work. Professions provide additional guarantees for clients through their promulgation of service ideals and codes of ethics. In return for quality control and self-policing, professionals typically enjoy freedom from close supervision and autonomy to exercise their trained judgment in the conduct of their work.⁹

The words “professor” and “professional” come from the same Latin root: *profitor* (to speak before people). But relatively little in the professional model informs the college teaching function. Most instructors are unceremoniously dropped in front of classrooms once they have been qualified as researchers by virtue of their scholarship. They are required to demonstrate no skills in pedagogy, no understanding of the relation between specific types of pedagogy and subject matter content, and no understanding of the aims or purposes of education. For most, college teaching is, in short, an amateur activity, performed with limited regard to effectiveness, so long as teaching evaluations are acceptably high, by people whose real training is for something else.

Twenty years ago, Lee Shulman argued that *subject matter knowledge* is only one of seven types of knowledge used by expert teachers. Two others are *pedagogical knowledge* (how to manage classrooms and present material) and *pedagogical content knowledge* (how to connect subject matter understanding with teaching strategies that are most effective in communicating content). Shulman also emphasized knowledge of students, knowledge of institutional contexts, and knowledge of educational aims and purposes.¹⁰ College teachers may have a fine grasp of content knowledge, but they are not required to show expertise in any of the other six domains identified by Shulman.

Some encouraging signs exist of greater institutional commitment to the preparation of teachers. More than half of institutions require at least some peer evaluation of teaching prior to tenure.¹¹ But other plausible guarantees of teaching competence -- from training in teaching methods during doctoral study to post-tenure review of teaching -- are still rare. According to a recent survey, about one-third of college teachers report that they received "training in teaching methods during their doctoral study."¹² For those who receive it, this training varies markedly in length, content, and quality. In many institutions, assessments of teaching effectiveness rest entirely on student evaluations, a useful but incomplete measure.¹³

If we do not hold ourselves to professional standards in college teaching, we will be playing into the hands of the advocates of external control of teaching through standardized testing. But even without this threat, the failure of professionalism in college teaching would be problematic, because the work of academia lies as much in the classroom as in the library or laboratory. Only about one-quarter of full-time professors say they are "leaning or highly oriented to research," while three-quarters say that they are "leaning or heavily oriented to teaching." Moreover, teaching is typically the only responsibility of contingent (non-tenure-track) instructors, who now constitute nearly half of the faculty.¹⁴

The Reconstruction of College Teaching as a Profession

We can use the example of K-12 teachers to imagine what a program to bring greater professionalism to college teaching might entail. First, graduate students would be required to take a practicum on teaching in which pedagogical theory, cognitive theory, and studies of effective teachers would be discussed and critiqued and in which students would be required to demonstrate effectiveness in presenting lecture and discussion materials. Development of both subject matter mastery and higher order thinking skills would be given special attention in these courses. Second, teaching assistants would be evaluated and advised by experienced peer mentors or by their professors based on visits to their classrooms. Third, pre-tenure peer review of teaching would occur on more than one occasion, including de-briefing sessions for feedback and reflection. Fourth, as part of the tenure file, professors would be asked to reflect on their teaching practice and to discuss the relationship of their practices in the classroom to their aims for student learning. Finally, teaching would continue to be monitored through post-tenure review and those in need of mentoring would receive it. Contingent faculty would be able to boost their salaries through participation in high-quality programs run by universities to improve undergraduate teaching.

It will not be easy to persuade administrators or, for that matter, most professors that such a system would be desirable. Enacting such a system would require overturning the surprisingly durable myth that any person who has proven a capable scholar or researcher knows how to teach. It would also require challenging the myth that student evaluations are an acceptable check on teaching quality. Students certainly know when they see poor preparation or disorganization, but they cannot judge whether instructors are offering courses with decent standards or whether they are being taught by reflective practitioners who are using the best available pedagogical knowledge.

Many will argue that the first order of business should be to improve the economic conditions of faculty members – and particularly the conditions of part-time faculty. It is true that salaries of full-time tenured and tenure-track professors have barely kept pace with inflation over a generation. Part-timers accounted for more than 70 percent of the increase in the number of faculty employed in the 1990s, and most part-timers are paid piecework, by the course, at wages that barely cover the rent.¹⁵ Unionization has shown some positive effects for college teachers who are otherwise at the mercy of the cost-cutting imperatives of their institutions.¹⁶ But the road to *significantly* higher wages for part-time college teachers and full-time term professors will likely go through the market shelter created by professionalism, rather than around it.¹⁷

A comprehensive program to professionalize college teaching is not yet on the horizon, and the higher education community would certainly want a thorough debate of any policies that added time to the already lengthy process of attaining the doctorate. However, some good first steps toward professionalism are possible now. These include: the development of institutional norms requiring part-time instructors to demonstrate that course content and expectations are at a decent college standard; the introduction of teaching demonstrations and teaching interviews as elements of the hiring process for tenure-track faculty; and supplementation of student evaluations with peer evaluations of teaching. Post-tenure peer review of teaching is another step that can be taken immediately, where it does not already exist.

For the next generation of college teachers, the price could be steep if the current generation stares resolutely into the sand while the accountability movement gains force. Higher tuitions have brought public concerns about educational quality into sharper relief. Thus far, many of America's colleges and universities have failed to insist on pedagogical training or meaningful peer evaluation and mentoring of those they place in front of students. College teaching consequently remains, in too many places, the special province of amateurs trained for the related, but different job of scholarly research. In so far as the quality of the teaching staff remains highly variable because of this failure, the prospects grow brighter for bureaucratic-managerial control of the classroom.

ENDNOTES

¹ National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). 2006. *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, p. 15.

² Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. 2006. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Course of the Future of Higher Education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, p. 4.

³ See Steven Brint and Sue Teele. 2007. "Professionalism Under Siege: Teachers' Views of the No Child Left Behind Act." In Alan R. Sadovnik et al. (eds.) *Federal Legislation, No Child Left Behind, and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Education Policy*. New York: Routledge.

⁴ www.aascu.org/accountability.

⁵ John Immerwahr. 2004. "Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003." *Public Agenda* (February).

⁶ Educational Testing Service (ETS). 2003. *Quality, Affordability, and Access: Americans Speak on Higher Education*. Princeton: ETS. www.ets.org/media/2003/report.pdf.

⁷ Collegiate Learning Assessment. 2007. *CLA Institutional Report 2006-2007*. New York: Council for Aid to Education.

⁸ Stephen P. Klein, personal communication.

⁹ See Eliot Freidson. 2004. *Professionalism: The Third Logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Lee Shulman. 1987. "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform." *Harvard Educational Review* 57: 1-22.

¹¹ Charles E. Glassick, Mary Taylor Huber, and Gene I. Maeroff. 1997. *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Table 3-1.

¹² Martin J. Finkelstein and William S. Cummings. 2007. "The Changing Academic Profession in the United States: 2007." Unpublished paper, presented at the Hiroshima Conference on the Changing Academic Profession. Hiroshima, Japan. December.

¹³ Glassick, Huber and Maeroff, *op cit.*: Table 3-1; Finkelstein and Cummings, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein. 2006. *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 85-92.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 263.

¹⁶ *Ibid*. pp. 260-263.

¹⁷ It is possible that teachers' unions, which represent roughly one out of four college teachers, will object to placing professional qualifications above pay equity. But there is room for optimism on this score in so far as professionalization can be seen as an extension of the principle of pay for demonstrated merit, already widely accepted by college teachers' unions. See Gary Rhoades. 1996. *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor*. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 259.