

[The Failure of American Higher Education](#)

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Attend any policy discussion in Washington that deals with education and the standard line you will hear is "the American K-12 system is a failure, but thank God we still have the world's greatest higher ed system." Let me suggest that this is fundamentally wrong. Higher ed is failing almost as much as K-12.

Let me offer two pieces of evidence of this. One is purely personal. As president of a DC-based think tank, I have over the years hired many recent college graduates and interviewed many more. Because the quality of so many of the graduates was so poor, ITIF has taken to giving the small share of the most promising applicants (based on their resumes and cover letters) a short test that we email them to complete at home in one hour. The questions are pretty simple: "Go to this person's bio online and write a three or four -sentence version of their bio for us to include in a conference packet," or, "Enter these eight items in a spreadsheet and tell us the average for the ones that end in an odd number."

What is amazing, at least to me, is how few can do even these very simple tasks adequately. In our current hiring process (for an office manager/research assistant) we have so far given the test to approximately 20 college grads. Only one did well enough to merit an interview. And most of the 19 are not from "second tier" colleges, but rather, from top-ranked institutions. One applicant, a recent Princeton grad, submitted a test that was full of spelling and grammar mistakes. Didn't they teach "spell check" at Princeton? A Boston University grad couldn't accurately complete a simple excel spreadsheet. (By the way, I am not picking on these particular schools but just citing actual examples.)

But it's not just my own experience over the last decade that worries me. It is [findings from national tests](#). Strikingly, among recent graduates of four-year colleges, just 34, 38 and 40 percent were proficient in prose, document, and quantitative literacy, respectively. Just to be clear, these are among 24 year olds who have graduated from college. The bar, by the way, is not all that high. The questions are actually pretty easy.

As the report from the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, better known as the Spellings Commission, noted several years ago, "There are ... disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined."

In our knowledge-driven global economy, high-quality higher education is an important driver of economic competitiveness. We all have a stake in improving higher education. So why can't colleges turn out graduates who can write basic sentences and do basic

math? The conventional answers are that colleges need to focus more on teaching, or they need more money, etc. Or that in the Internet age kids don't read or think anymore.

Let me suggest a more fundamental reason. Colleges are focused on teaching kids content, not on teaching them skills, and too many students are focused on passing the multitude of tests in the multitude of classes they take, rather than really learning. One of the best college grads I ever hired (a graduate of Dartmouth) majored in history. In his job at ITIF (a technology policy think tank) he didn't need to know history. What he needed to know was how to think, how to write, how to speak intelligently, how to find information and make sense out of it, how to argue coherently, and how to do basic math. Fortunately, he had acquired these skills. But other graduates of colleges such as Kenyon, Bowdoin, Bates, or the University of Pennsylvania, whom I have hired over the years, clearly had not, or at least not nearly as well.

Most colleges aren't interested in teaching these skills for the simple reason that most faculty aren't interested in teaching these skills. The vast majority of faculty go into academia, not because they like teaching, but because they like their academic subject (Why else would they spend 6 years or longer getting a doctorate in it?). They don't want to teach logic, debate, writing, research, or any of other myriad skills. They want to teach the subject of their passion: European history in the Middle Ages, or English romance novels, etc.

Unfortunately, for most college graduates and for most jobs (one exception being science and engineering jobs), it really doesn't matter if they learn English literature or 20th century comic books. What does matter is if they acquire needed skills. And this kind of 21st century skill acquisition is at best something they pick up by chance in the course of learning about French literature or 20th century American politics. The result is that too many graduates have grown in knowledge on various subjects but not developed practical skills.

So, how do we change this? Here are three ideas. First, we need a national test that all college grads should take to measure skills competency. This wouldn't measure whether you know that Adolph Hitler was Chancellor of Germany or other "facts," but rather skills like logic, reasoning, basic writing and math, etc.

Second, most college students don't even know the types of skills that are valued by the industries they want to work in. For example, do managers in accounting firms prefer young workers who can quickly and accurately proofread a spreadsheet or give a persuasive power point presentation? One reason for this is there is no national employer survey on what are the specific skills employers are looking for in recent graduates. The Department of Education should launch an annual survey of employers that asks such questions and make it available to the public. The survey should also ask employers which U.S. colleges and universities have provided their best employees. Doing so would help parents and prospective college students make decisions on which school is best for them.

Finally, we need radical experimentation in college design. It's time for a foundation or wealthy individual to endow an entirely new college founded on teaching 21st century skills, not 20th century subjects. A few years ago, the Olin Foundation endowed a new kind of college (Olin College outside of Boston) to fundamentally change how engineering is taught. And by all accounts it's a great success. Let's create a new college focused on teaching the kinds of skills young grads actually need.

In K-12, we have learned the hard way what happens when we act too slowly to shake up how we teach our kids. Let's act more quickly when it comes to higher education and preserve and strengthen this pillar of our economic strength and source of future prosperity. We owe it to the young people often paying over \$50,000 a year and we owe it to ourselves as a nation.

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Fixing Higher Education and Restoring the Value of the Bachelor's Degree
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The press and the blogosphere have devoted significant coverage recently to a report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce which predicted that the United States is on “collision course with the future.” The report estimated that within a mere eight years, the nation will suffer a shortfall of at least 3 million workers with college degrees and 4.7 million workers with postsecondary certificates. The authors of the report concluded that to meet the challenges of a global economy in which 59 to 63 percent of domestic jobs require education beyond the high-school level, America’s colleges and universities “need increase the number of degrees they confer by 10 percent annually, a tall order.” Although numerous commentators have responded to the report by echoing its call for increased access to higher education, it seems to me that few have focused on a key term in the report’s call to “develop reforms that result in both cost-efficient and *high quality* postsecondary education.” Producing millions of more baccalaureate-educated workers will do nothing to address the competitiveness of the U.S. workforce if those degrees are not *high quality* ones. Sadly, it is pretty clear that far too many college degrees aren’t worth the paper on which they are printed.

In 2006, the Spellings Commission reported disturbing data that more than 60 percent of college graduates were not proficient in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In other words, significantly more than half of college degree holders in the United States lack the “critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces.” Dr. Robert Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, cited these findings in his recent editorial “The Failure of American Higher Education.” He shared stories about recent college graduates, many from prestigious universities, who had applied for jobs at his think tank who were unable to complete basic tasks such as summarizing a person’s credentials into a short biographical sketch or calculating an average using a spreadsheet. Dr. Atkinson argues that one of the primary reasons for the inability of so many college graduates to think, write, speak, argue, research, or compute proficiently is that colleges “are focused on teaching kids content, not on teaching them skills.” His explanation for this is that members of the professoriate are not interested in teaching these important skills, but rather are interested in exploring the content of the subject matter in which they specialize. Dr. Atkinson then advocated several “solutions” to his perception of the problem which included a requirement that all college graduates take a national test to measure skills competencies and “radical experimentation” in college design that focuses “on teaching 21st century skills, not 20th century subjects.” Although Dr. Atkinson raises some good points, his explanation of the problem and his proposed solutions miss the mark.

Dr. Atkinson could not be more wrong about faculty members not wanting to teach their students “how to think, how to write, how to speak intelligently, how to find information and make sense out of it, how to argue coherently, and how to do basic math.” On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of college instructors care deeply about honing their students’ critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills. The problems they confront in doing so, however, are staggering.

First, college and university faculty members often lack the ability to teach basic reading, writing, and math skills. Why? Because most professors are not trained to do so. With few exceptions, doctoral programs focus on teaching disciplinary content and methods of inquiry, not pedagogical skills. Even in universities that provide their doctoral students with a “preparing future faculty” program to help Ph.D. candidates develop some teaching skills, such programs focus on teaching and learning *at the college level*, not on basic reading comprehension, the fundamentals of composition, or elementary quantitative skills. The K-12 educational system is supposed to teach these abilities. By the time students get to college, faculty members rightfully expect that they will already know how to calculate an average or summarize the main points of a newspaper article, a book chapter, or a journal article. Accordingly, faculty members see their role as then honing students’ critical thinking abilities within the context of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information, often within a disciplinary framework. These assumptions were fair ones once upon a time. Sadly, though, far too many students who have earned a high school diploma are unable to meet such expectations. Absent a handful of specialists in English departments, most college faculty members are simply ill-equipped to know how to teach students how to *begin* writing coherently. Professors expect to provide students with feedback on writing more efficiently and persuasively, not teach about tenses, subject-verb agreement, or basic punctuation. Yet, these are types of problems with which faculty routinely try to cope, at least for a while. And that leads to my second point.

Given the woefully inadequate preparedness of high school graduates to engage in college-level work, many professors quickly become burned out attempting to teach skills that they never expected they would need to teach at the postsecondary level. And perhaps that is where Dr. Atkinson has a point. I have heard dozens of colleagues from across the country at different types of institutions of higher education say, “I didn’t earn a Ph.D. to teach what should have been taught in elementary and high school.” Many such instructors give up; rather than teaching the skills that should have been learned before students arrive in college, they focus on content because it’s easier to do so. Content can be tested on objective exams, whereas critical thinking and problem-solving skills typically require professors to develop and grade sophisticated assessment instruments. While there are certainly some lazy professors who simply cannot be bothered to do so, they are the exception, not the rule. Many the ones who have given up spent years of their careers trying to be the type of professor who helps underprepared students rise to the occasion. But there is only so much that can be done over the course of a college quarter or semester. Worse yet, they fear holding students to high standards for a myriad of reasons, which is the third problem I wish to discuss.

College faculty members, especially those who are untenured, often fear setting course expectations too high, challenging students’ comfort levels too much, or being rigorous in their assessments of student performance. If students perceive a professor as being too hard, they will avoid their classes, which can lead to under-subscribed classes being canceled. Full-time faculty whose courses are cancelled may be reassigned to less desirable duties; part-time faculty members whose classes are canceled often find themselves without any courses to teach. In addition, students often “punish” faculty members they perceive as being too demanding by evaluating them poorly at the end of a course. Because low student evaluations can lead to both tenure-track and adjunct faculty being fired, untenured professors may keep workloads at levels

that students perceive to be reasonable and assess their performance more generously than may be actually deserved. Much has been written on this phenomenon as one of the leading factors contributing to the nationwide problem of grade inflation, the fourth issue I will address.

In one of the most comprehensive studies of college grading practices, Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy documented that the average grade point average at U.S. colleges and universities rose from 2.35 in the 1930s, to 2.52 in the 1950s when a bifurcating trend in public and private institutions emerged. After sharp increases in the 1970s and 1980s, GPAs currently average an astonishing 3.00 and 3.30 at public and private schools, respectively. This trend could be explained by better students achieving at ever higher levels. But, as discussed above, that is simply not the case when more than 60 percent of college graduates are not proficient in basic reading, writing, and math. Rojstaczer and Healy contend that grade inflation surged in the 1980s with “the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education.” And the growth of the for-profit sector of higher education has only compounded this problem in higher education since corporate-based education is built upon the faulty premise of delivering a product (an “education” or a “degree”) to paying consumers (what we used to call “students”).

Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase. In this culture, professors are not only compelled to grade easier, but also to water down course content. Both intellectual rigor and grading standards have weakened. The evidence for this is not merely anecdotal. Students are highly disengaged from learning, are studying less than ever, and are less literate. Yet grades continue to rise.

Professors who resist the pressures of grade inflation find themselves in the position of having to defend their rigorous teaching in a variety of forums, ranging from resolving complaints lodged against them with their department chairs to participating in pseudo-adversarial grade appeals proceedings and formal grievance hearings. Contemporary college students hold intense senses of consumer-based entitlement in which they see the default grade as an “A.” Recently, I defended a professor who had awarded a “D” to a student who, by my assessment, should have failed the course. During the heated discussion, the complaining student obnoxiously referred to the professor as “incompetent” and “unrealistic.” At one point, she said, “I pay your salaries!” I replied to her, “Then we want a raise for having to deal with snotty, entitled brats like you.” Notably, the professor involved in this grade dispute was a tenured member of the faculty. For the reasons summarized above, untenured faculty (who comprise more than 70 percent of college instructors nationwide) may have caved into the student’s demands and changed the student’s grade to avoid a confrontation in which the department chair became involved. But even when faculty members stand their ground, administrators often cave in to student demands because they are concerned with retention rates, time-to-degree completion statistics, complaints from helicopter parents (some of which escalate into lawsuits), and angry students who may turn into alumni who want nothing to do with their alma maters instead of happy alumni who become financial donors. The recent case of Professor Dominique Homberger illustrates how college and university administrators contribute to grade inflation. The dean of her college recently removed Dr. Homberger from teaching an introductory biology course at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge in the middle of semester after students complained about her harsh grading on the first exam in the course, even

though grades on subsequent quizzes and exams were higher (students appear to have gotten the message that they really needed to up their levels of performance). Dr. Homberger's case may be an extreme situation, but it illustrates the pervasive nature of the consumer-based culture about which Rojstaczer and Healy wrote. Clearly, grade inflation produces a perverse reality in which transcripts suggest graduates are well prepared to meet the challenges they will face in the workforce when, in fact, they are incredibly ill-prepared to do so.

What do we do about the sad state of affairs in higher education? I respectfully disagree with Dr. Atkinson that national testing of college graduates is a viable solution. One only needs to look at the shortcomings of "No Child Left Behind" to see the negative consequences of national testing on teaching and learning. It's bad enough that K-12 teachers "teach to the test"; that sorry excuse for education need not be reproduced at the college level.

As for "radical experimentation" with different approaches to college education, why not? But Dr. Atkinson's example of "radical experimentation" is not likely to fix the problem. He points to Olin College of Engineering as an experiment that has successfully implemented a fundamental change to the way engineering is taught. In addition to the traditional foci on math, science, and technology, Olin also provides its engineers with business and entrepreneurship skills, creative problem-solving abilities, and an understanding of the social, political and economic contexts of engineering. But such experimentation is neither novel nor a panacea. There are dozens if not hundreds of traditional colleges and universities which have implemented similar reforms to the study of disciplines ranging from education and nursing to criminal justice and business. The critical difference between Olin and many of these schools is access. Olin accepts only 85 students each year through a highly competitive admissions process and then provides a highly custom-tailored education at a cost of more than \$38,000 in tuition each year per student (plus another \$19,000 or so in room, board, books, fees, and incidentals). In contrast, state college and university systems, which collectively educate 62 percent of the roughly 11.6 million students earning four-year degrees in the United States, cost an average of \$4,307 for in-state tuition (plus an average of \$7, 271 in room, board, books, fees, and incidentals). But cost is not the biggest difference. By selecting only the best qualified students for admission, Olin College professors are able to do what they want to do in their classes: teach engineering from transdisciplinary perspectives. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of colleges and university professors who would love to challenge their students to perform at the highest levels within their courses are trying to do the best they can with students whose primary and secondary educations have not prepared them to engage in college-level work. The radical changes that need to occur in education must take place at the K-12 levels. College faculty could do their jobs much more effectively if college students actually arrived appropriately prepared to succeed.

There are, however, some changes that we could make at the college level that could go a long way in improving the quality of higher education. First, no one should be able to earn a Ph.D. and secure a faculty position in an institution of higher education who has not taken graduate-levels courses that prepare them to teach effectively at the college level. Graduate education must provide the next generation of college instructors the pedagogical toolkit to be more effective teachers, as well as more effective assessors of student learning. This is especially important with regard to teaching prose, information, and quantitative literacy.

Second, professors who rely exclusively on textbooks must change their ways. Of course, there are many fine textbooks out there, but no college course should rely on a textbook exclusively. Primary source materials from scholarly books and peer-reviewed journals, as well as material from popular culture media (newspapers, magazines, blogs, films, television shows, etc.), when applicable, should be assigned to compliment textbook readings. But even more importantly, professors must jettison the “supplements” provided by textbook publishers. Today, many textbooks come with canned lecture notes, study guides, exams, PowerPoint presentations, and other supplementary materials designed to make professors’ lives easier. With few exceptions, most of these materials are targeted at the lowest common denominator. For example, canned PowerPoint presentations and study guides boil-down the information in a textbook chapter to a series of bullet points. But “test bank” questions are the worst offenders. These question focus exclusively on content and are targeted at low levels of cognitive achievement in Bloom’s taxonomy of learning domains: mere recall of data or information. These assessments do not provide any basis for professors to test students’ ability to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information in a manner that demonstrates critical thinking, writing, or problem-solving abilities. Some may point to reliance on these materials as evidence that professors are lazy or that they are only interested in teaching content, as Dr. Atkinson suggests. Although that may be true for some, I think the real explanation for over-reliance on canned supplemental materials has to do with my first suggestion: professors are not trained to developed meaningful assessments of student learning in their doctoral programs. If they knew how to create valid, reliable, high-quality assessments, I am confident that the overwhelming number of college faculty members would do so and would, therefore, abandon the all-too-common reliance on substandard commercial supplements. Not only would this facilitate the development of the skills Dr. Atkinson correctly points out are lacking in many college graduates, but also would help professors better discern nuances in student performance levels which would allow them to assign grades commensurate with actual achievement.

Third, we must get serious about confronting grade inflation. College professors are not just teachers; they also should be serving as gatekeepers as generations of professors did in the past by awarding grades commensurate with student performance. For this to occur, the consumer-based culture that pervades higher education must be changed. Professors, parents, and administrators must stop coddling students. If a student is not performing satisfactorily, then college instructors must be able to award “D”s or “F”s without worrying about whether doing so will cost them their jobs. Moreover, faculty rewards policies (e.g., reappointment, tenure, promotion, merit raises, etc.) must be changed to reward professors who teach and grade with rigor. Such assessments must not just focus on the content of professors’ courses, but also on how they develop critical thinking, writing, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. Conversely, professors who give away high grades that are not actually earned by students should not be retained. This is not to say, however, that only those professors who award “A”s to 10 percent or fewer of their students are necessarily effective teachers. Rather, we need to develop better ways of assessing a college instructor’s performance than student evaluations and grade distributions. Reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions should be based on holistic assessments which include qualitative evaluations by several peers who have observed the instructor teach and of teaching portfolios containing exams, writing assignments, grading rubrics, cooperative learning exercises, and the like. Rigor and transparency should be rewarded.

Finally, to effectively combat both grade inflation and a consumer-based culture in the college student–professor dynamic, politicians, accrediting bodies, and senior administrators must stop worrying about graduation rates and time-to-degree-completion. These artificial metrics miss the mark. The obsessive focus on what percentage of students graduate in four or six years only reinforces grade inflation and a consumer-based culture in higher education. If it takes a student eight years to graduate because professors actually hold that student to high levels of achievement before certifying that student as worthy of a degree, so be it! That, at least, would help to restore the value of a college degree rather than perpetuating the disturbing trend of the past few decades in which the value of baccalaureate degree has deservedly diminished.