



Commentaries

A Nudge by the Government?

Educators and reformers disagree over whether mandatory tests could improve higher education.

By Jane S. Shaw (editor)

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Editor's note: In this dialogue Andrew Gillen, Neal McCluskey, George Leef, Kevin Carey, Lee Fritschler, and Jane S. Shaw discuss whether government-mandated standardized tests could improve higher education. Or should parents and students be the monitors of colleges and universities? Previous dialogues were posted [here](#) and [here](#).

A Dialogue

Andrew Gillen

Research Director

Center for College Affordability and Productivity:

Is there a non-governmental solution to the problem of inadequate information in higher education? I'd like to share this passage from page 201 of *Market Education* by Cato's Andrew Coulson.

The parents of Zavala Elementary in East Austin, Texas had accepted their children's grades (A's and B's for the most part) at face value for years when a newly appointed principal decided to have the students' scores on state-mandated standardized tests read aloud at a PTA meeting. As it turned out, Zavala was among the lowest achieving schools. . . . Teachers at the school had refrained from informing parents of the poor scores If such an unusually forthright and dedicated principal had not been appointed at Zavala, there is no reason to expect that parents would ever have been disabused of their misapprehensions.

The other requirement for change, beyond the "forthright and dedicated principal," was the state-mandated standardized test. Without it, it wouldn't have been possible to demonstrate that the school was terrible.

I'm sure some higher ed institutions are just like Zavala. But how will we ever know which ones without the equivalent of the "state-mandated standardized test"? In higher education, not only is the standardized test missing, but we've essentially given veto power to each institution over what "tests" to reveal, ensuring that nothing embarrassing will be made public.

I can imagine a world where all institutions used privately controlled "tests" because refusal to do so would signal such low quality that their demand would evaporate. But I don't see how we get from here to there without government involvement. The elite schools have nothing to gain and everything to lose from such tests, and they are the only ones in a position to change things (even

if all non-elite schools participated, the elites could still refuse with impunity because, well, they're elite).

Essentially, I'm saying that there are multiple equilibria, and we are stuck in a bad one characterized by low information. Government action could "nudge" us out of that one, and to a better, more information rich one. Note that the government involvement need not be permanent; once you're at the new equilibrium, it is self-sustaining. For instance, suppose that the government required schools to report information on some combination of National Survey of Student Engagement-type surveys, as well as on new tests measuring value-added learning designed by ACT, the College Board, and others (Carnegie, Lumina, Gates, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, National Science Foundation, Collegiate Learning Assessment, etc.). Even if the government mandate ended after a few years, the negative connotations from dropping out unilaterally would most likely provide enough incentive for schools to continue to subject themselves to evaluation, thus sustaining a new, information-rich, equilibrium.

Neal McCluskey

Associate Director

Center for Educational Freedom, Cato Institute:

I feel duty bound to respond to this, since a Catoite's writing was just used to endorse the totally un-Cato-like idea of government testing.

Neither Andrew Coulson nor I would conclude that government testing is the solution to educational failure. Why? Because the same interests that controlled the schools and tried to keep the people ignorant before testing would do it after testing, by controlling or otherwise gaming the test. I beg you all to examine the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act for real-world evidence. Evasion of the law is rampant, and state standards-and-testing regimes scrape the bottom of the achievement barrel, defining "proficiency" at levels few objective people would actually consider proficient.

Furthermore, as Diane Ravitch and others have made clear, when one standard is to be imposed on people with diverse ideas and values—a description I would say applies to higher education—the resulting standards are often lowest-common-denominator swill. The reason is that such standards are all you can get diverse people to agree on.

So the answer is not government regulation, in large part because government is designed to fail, especially because the people it would regulate have the greatest incentive and ability to affect the regulations and bend them to favor themselves.

No, the main problem isn't insufficient government regulation or forced "transparency" (which is itself a highly deceptive term when one considers testing under the No Child Left Behind Act). The main problem is third-party payments. Why should professors or schools focus on satisfying students when so much of their funding comes from elsewhere, especially government? And why shouldn't students demand frills far beyond mere "learning"—including lots of leisure time, celebrity professors who may not be the best teachers, and, of course, climbing walls—when others pay so much of their bills? And why should employers demand something else of colleges, when school attended is a pretty good proxy for what employers want, and more direct measures like employer testing are de facto verboten.

In the end, just as in health care, if people were paying the cost of their own education they would be much more likely to demand efficiency. But they aren't, so to paraphrase the president, speaking about the lack of cost incentives in health care, why not take the more expensive red pill (especially if it tastes a little better)?

That said, even if students paid much more of the full cost of their education, we could neither be assured, nor should we hope, that all students would demand the best teachers as demonstrated by "metric x." Why? Because all people are different, and do not all want—nor should we want them all to want—the exact same things out of college.

Some people go to be the best engineer, and that's great. Some go to build their social networks, and in so doing bring people together who might very well collaborate on big ventures during or after college. Some go to get broad liberal arts training, become well-rounded, and contemplate big philosophical issues with little interest in immediate financial gain. Some go to study accounting to get a good job right out of college, and businesses need them.

In other words, people pursue myriad different things that offer benefits for themselves and others, but would render a single metric

of school “effectiveness” of little or no value. And letting such diversity work freely, I should add, is what has been the key to a very successful American economy, including against old “threats” like Japan and its highly centralized education system.

And now, I’m done defending Andrew Coulson’s honor.

George Leef

Director of Research

Pope Center for Higher Education Policy:

Many students don't want good teaching. They want easy college credits and are quite happy with what Murray Sperber calls the faculty-student non-aggression pact. I can't say what percentage that is, but I suspect it's pretty high. At non-selective schools, it can be overwhelming. A few years ago, Tom Reeves wrote a piece for Academic Questions on the problem of teaching history to students at University of Wisconsin-Parkside (a campus near Kenosha) where few wanted to be bothered with reading, writing, thinking. I got to know Tom when he spoke at a Pope Center conference in 2002 and have every reason to think that he was an excellent teacher. But that made no difference to most of his students.

Some students do want good teaching, however. They want education rather than just course credits. Can they find it? From what I understand about campus information these days, it's not hard to find out about the characteristics of professors and their courses. Is a course challenging or a breeze? The students can find out and choose according to their preferences.

Information somewhat ameliorates the problem, but only somewhat. What if a student chooses to major in x and later finds out that most of the profs in the X Department are dead-beats? The ability to scrounge around and find a few electives that are well taught is unsatisfying.

I think that we should aim at increasing the ratio of good (challenging, engaging) professors to bad (indifferent, lazy) profs as much as possible. Those “non-aggression” pact courses are wasteful and encourage kids who ought to be learning a trade to pursue bachelor's degrees. How do we do so?

Yes, we need some means of separating the wheat from the chaff. If that can be done, I am sure it will be done without any governmental action. And then we need to find incentives for colleges and universities to prefer to employ people with a strong desire to teach as opposed to a career mainly devoted to cranking out research. Going back to a “heavy” teaching load (I used to teach at least 16 hours and often more, but since I didn't know much about higher ed in those days, I thought it was normal) would not be a panacea, but it would help.

There are some objectives in life that can't be accomplished directly, but only indirectly. Getting more good teachers in front of college classes may be one of them.

Kevin Carey

Policy Director

Education Sector:

I think George is correct to identify the “faculty student non-aggression pact” as a major detriment to standards and learning. But I don't think students and colleges play an equal role in striking that bargain. Many participants in this conversation, I suspect, are dismayed by higher education's retreat from its traditional role in making judgments about what well-educated students need to know and, instead, creating sieve-like “distribution requirements” that are nothing like a legitimate core curriculum. Personally, I share that view.

That is another, related example of mutual student and faculty interests resulting in a bad outcome—faculty are free to only teach courses they're interested in teaching, students can only take courses they're interested in taking, and the result is a lot of people walking around with bachelor's degrees who can't write a lick and know nothing about history or philosophy.

One of the main reasons colleges can get away with this is that there are no widely accepted, publicly available measures to really

underscore and prove the negative impact of these policies. We know that literacy rates for college graduates are poor overall but we don't know which colleges are really doing the worst job. Thus, there's no penalty for taking the easy way out—not for students or institutions--and so people take it. That's human nature. If colleges knew that their academic reputations would suffer because of poor teaching—and students knew that their degrees would be worth less--both sides would have different incentives. As Robert Martin notes in his paper, from an administrative standpoint getting into a fight with faculty about teaching standards, curricula, etc., exacts an enormous price in terms of time and perceived controversy. If there's nothing balancing the other end of the scale, people will act rationally and not go there.

As to the third-party payer issue—let's not forget that there are a significant number of less selective private colleges out there that collectively enroll hundreds of thousands of students and are essentially running on a tuition-only revenue model. They don't have large endowments and they're not getting direct government subsidies, so third-party payments are limited to tax preferences and what comes through federal student aid, which is a whole lot less than the going market rate. Yet there is no evidence that I know of to suggest that if one were to isolate these institutions, they're really any better about spending money efficiently, restraining net price increases (they're doing a lot of tuition discounting but they're also raising nominal tuition a lot), or freely providing more information to consumers about teaching, learning, etc. Instead, they're just part of the same larger information-starved status hierarchy that gives institutions a million reasons to spend more money and none to spend less.

George Leef:

Just a brief comment on Kevin's point about small, private schools. He's right that quite a few of them are hardly different from the low-standards/non-aggression pact model that we see so often in public higher ed. But you also find a considerable number of schools where the emphasis is on good teaching, serious academic standards, and affordability. Being in a competitive market and having to obtain your funds without going to the legislature “wonderfully concentrates the mind,” as Dr. Johnson said about an eventuality even worse than going bankrupt. It looks as though higher ed is going into a lean period that will cause many of those private schools, and perhaps some public ones, to orient themselves more towards educational efficiency.

Jane S. Shaw

President

John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy:

Kevin's helpful comments are leading me to make an audacious statement—to raise the possibility that many of us (including me) don't really want or need student learning outcomes—that is, we don't need measurements of educational results. (We might want information about how graduates do financially, which I consider to be somewhat different).

Don't we already have a good handle on student outcomes, and haven't we already found them disappointing? For many of us in the reform movement, we don't need student outcome measures to know that mediocre students graduate not knowing much, and good students graduate having learned the wrong things.

We have the National Survey of American College Students that Kevin refers to, plus others, that show low literary proficiency and poor writing skills among average graduates. We have persuasive anecdotal information showing that even the “better” campuses give short shrift to knowledge about free markets, that the Great Books have gone underground, and that English departments are spawning women's studies professors rather than Shakespearean scholars.

For many of us, the problem is that nearly all schools are following the same trends.

In theory, providing outcome measures will lead to competition. But what if all the schools are alike on the fundamentals? (To refer to our previous discussion, perhaps they are frogs of all the same size?)

Roger Ream says that he has found pretty much all that he needs to know about colleges. Yes, but that doesn't mean that he can find the school that he and his daughter really want. He could find a high-prestige liberal arts school with smart students, well-paid professors, in a warm climate, with an outstanding sports team—but he would search in vain to find a school with all those and the Great Books or a traditional core curriculum or a free-market orientation beyond the economics department. (If I'm wrong, name it—and we may be on our way to a new rating system.) In fundamentals, all

are too much the same.

So, forcing learning outcomes might end up telling us nothing important that we don't already know.

Lee A. Fritschler
Professor
George Mason University

At the base of our discussions is, in my view, one set of facts that are ignored. They are those data that show huge growth in higher education in the last 50 years. In the days of my youth, around 25 percent of high school graduates went on to something called higher ed, which was mostly the classic curriculum. Today the percentage is close to 70. We have over 15 million people enrolled in higher education.

So, when I hear that we teach women's studies instead of history and no Shakespeare, I have to wonder. Should we be teaching the Bard to all enrolled? How would we do that? Why should we do that? (And I am surprised to hear that we do not teach market economics anymore. Not true in my classes or at my university. What we don't teach is alternatives to markets, or in many cases the limits of market economics. On the other hand, perhaps we do not need to teach these things today. The media is taking care of that.)

There is not sufficient attention to current student populations and their reasons for attending what we call higher education. We lump together all that goes on across a huge spectrum as if there is one thing called higher education. Some are studying auto mechanics in community colleges, some majoring in business in universities.

My own feeling is that we expect too much of higher ed. I am more comfortable with thinking about it in the old ways, namely the classical curriculum. But my day has passed on that score.

Jane S. Shaw:

This wonderful conversation is at last winding down. Perhaps the differences are irreconcilable, but we have all learned from the views articulated here. Readers, thank you for joining us.

The issue of transparency in higher education and who will bring it about will be taken up again on October 6, 2009, at a joint<http://popecenter.org/events/event.html?id=739>*"TARGET="_blank">Cato/Pope Center Forum. Kevin Carey, George Leef, Robert Martin, and Neal McCluskey are featured speakers. Mary Beth Marklein, education editor of USA Today, will moderate.*

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