

Texas Public Policy Foundation

Higher Education

Legislator's Guide to the Issues 2017-18



Higher Education Quality



The Issue

Texas higher education faces a quality crisis. Students receive higher grades now than ever before, even though studies show that too many students learn too little. Yet in spite of inflated grades and a diluted curriculum, fewer than half of the students at Texas' public four-year colleges graduate within six years of enrollment.

While this is a Texas problem, it is far from Texas' alone. The academic world was rocked by the 2011 publication of the landmark study of collegiate learning, *Academically Adrift*. *Adrift* tracked a national cohort of college students for four years, measuring their fundamental academic skills—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and clear writing—in both their freshman and senior years, using the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The results are alarming: *Adrift* found that 36% of college students nationally show little to no increase in fundamental academic skills after four years invested in college.

Feeding on and fostering the student learning crisis is the problem of college grade inflation. Research reveals that, in the early 1960s, 15% of all college grades awarded nationally were A's. But today, 43% of all grades are A's. In fact, an A is the most common grade given in college today. Moreover, 73% of all grades now are A's or B's, meaning that a majority of college transcripts now provide little context into how well the student in question performed academically, relative to their peers.

As monetary inflation devalues the dollar, so grade inflation debases the currency of higher education—student transcripts. Before grade inflation, the college transcript served as a useful tool for employers looking to assess potential hires. A recent survey commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities reveals that this is no longer the case, with two-thirds of the employers surveyed indicating that college transcripts are of either “limited use” or “no use” in determining whether a job applicant will succeed on the job.

Low graduation rates constitute the most visible symptom of the quality crisis in Texas higher education. The state performs poorly against the rest of the country, with Texas' graduation rate for public four-year universities ranked 32nd in the nation. Only 30.2% of students at four-year universities in Texas graduate within four years; even fewer, 24.4%, graduate within four years from the state's public four-year universities. An even lower graduation rate prevails at Texas' two-year colleges, where only 14.5% of students graduate within three years.

Diminished standards in higher education affect the economy. An easier curriculum and inflated transcripts pass the costs of evaluating and training new employees onto the business community. Low graduation rates wreak particular havoc on the state's economy, especially on the students themselves. Extra time in school cost students twice: first for the actual cost, and second because this time could have been spent earning income, had these students graduated on time. In even worse shape are the nearly two million students in Texas who have some college credit but no degree, having taken on debt and lost time in the workforce, but with no additional earning power to show for their efforts.

The Facts

- 57% of students believe a college degree costs more than it is worth.
- 36% of college students nationally demonstrate little to no increase in fundamental academic skills after four years in college.
- Grade inflation is real and measurable: College grade point averages have increased at a rate of approximately 0.15 points per decade since the 1960s.

continued on back

- 67% of employers consider college transcripts of either limited use or no use in predicting who will succeed at the company.
- Less than a quarter of students at public four-year universities in Texas graduate in four years (24.4%), and fewer than half graduate in six years (49.0%).
- 1.9 million adults in Texas have some college credit, but no degree.

Recommendations

- Encourage universities to institute regular learning outcome assessments, such as the updated Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency.
- Increase the visibility of data on student academic performance, graduation rates, average post-graduate debt burden, and average post-graduate earnings, in particular by making the reading of such information a mandatory step in the Apply-Texas application process.
- Pass legislation requiring contextualized grading, which provides, alongside the grade each student received for his/her class, the average grade given by the professor for the entire class.
- Ensure that any shift in formula funding toward a performance-based distribution balances the goals of higher completion rates and lower average graduation time with maintaining course quality.

Resources

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[“Graduation Rates of Texas Colleges,”](#) by Jolyn Brand (Brand College Consulting, 2015).

[Complete College Texas: Is Texas Utilizing Game Changer Strategies to Boost College Completion? Not Fully](#) (Complete College America, 2013).

[Combating the “Other Inflation”: Arresting the Cancer of College Grade Inflation](#) by Thomas K. Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Aug. 2014).

[How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers’ Views on the Accountability Challenge](#) (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2008).

