



July 10, 2014, 06:30 am

# Latest accountability move another sign of traditional higher ed's decline

The academic term just completed could turn out to be a watershed in the national movement to increase accountability in American higher education. Over the past school year, roughly 200 American universities began measuring what students gain in fundamental academic skills over the course of their time invested in college. The tool they are using to measure learning is the **Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)**.

But wait — don't universities verify learning already, through awarding grades and degrees? Aren't these reliable indicators of student progress? Unfortunately, all too often, the answer is no.

We know this after the 2011 publication of the landmark national study of collegiate learning, "Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses." The study employed the CLA to measure how much undergraduates increase their skills in college. Of the students across the country it surveyed, 45 percent showed "small or empirically non-existent" gains in "general collegiate skills" — critical thinking, complex reasoning and clear writing — after two full years in college. After four years in college, 36 percent continued to show only small or empirically nonexistent gains. The dirty little secret of higher education today is that too many students learn too little, while paying too much: Over the past quarter-century, college tuitions have jumped 440 percent, a rate of increase surpassing general inflation and even healthcare costs.

If you've been a student or student's parent in the last couple of decades, you're likely surprised to read of these depressing results in student learning. That's because, during the same period, you or your children have brought home college report cards that boast a vast majority of As and Bs. It must be *other* kids who are learning next to nothing while in college. But wait — how do I know that you've been awarded such stellar grades? The answer reveals another dirty little secret in American higher education: Grades have become so inflated that they virtually have lost their meaning.

A national **study** documents that, in the 1960s, 15 percent of all college grades awarded were As. Today, that percentage has nearly tripled; 43 percent of all grades are As. In fact, an A is the most common grade given in college today; As and Bs together now account for 73 percent of all grades. This is how I know of your or your child's stellar transcript — virtually everyone has one, which is why prospective employers have for years warned that college grades are increasingly unreliable indicators of workforce readiness.

This lament was recently **repeated** by Michael Sweeney, a senior vice president of a national architectural firm with 3,600 employees. Sweeney finds that grade inflation has produced graduates whose high grades, even when received from prestigious schools, mask the fact that they may lack the ability to "be able to write well or make an argument." Michael Poliakoff, vice president of the nonpartisan American Council of Trustees and Alumni, **agrees**: "For too long, colleges and universities have said to the American public, to students and their parents, 'Trust us, we're professional. If we say that you're learning and we give you a diploma it means you're prepared.' But that's not true."

With grading standards having been debased by American universities, where are employers, students and their parents to look in hopes of finding a measure that truly indicates how much progress a student has made while in college?

Enter "CLA+," an individualized update of the CLA released last year. Whereas the CLA in the past was open for use only by institutions, the CLA+, a 90-minute examination, is open to individual students to take. While the 200 universities currently using the CLA (among them, the University of Texas System and the State University of New York) pick up the \$35 per student charge for the test, it could be in the interest of students to shell out the sum if their university is not as generous. Why? New graduates can use CLA+ to verify for prospective employers the progress they made while in college. And students taking unaccredited classes via Massive Open Online Courses — and there are a **growing number** of them — will likewise be able to provide objective, benchmarked proof of academic progress when they look for a job or seek a promotion in their current position.

This happy news for students and employers should not blind us to the mix of farce and tragedy that too much of higher education has become over the past few decades. Think about it: The country now needs an external test like the CLA to perform a task — measuring what college students actually learn — that should be the central responsibility of the universities on which students, their parents and taxpayers spend so much.

It shouldn't be this way. But, because it is, we can at least rest content in the knowledge that something might now be in place to educate the educators.

*Lindsay directs the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and is editor of SeeThruEdu.com. He was deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under President George W. Bush. He recently published Investigating American Democracy (Oxford University Press) with Gary D. Glenn.*

**TAGS:** Higher education in the United States, Grade inflation, Collegiate Learning Assessment, CLA, CLA+

Like Share 34 Tweet 12