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Your So-Called Education

By RICHARD ARUM and JOSIPA ROKSA

COMMENCEMENT is a special time on college campuses: an occasion for students, families, faculty and administrators to come together to celebrate a job well done. And perhaps there is reason to be pleased. In recent surveys of college seniors, more than 90 percent report gaining subject-specific knowledge and developing the ability to think critically and analytically. Almost 9 out of 10 report that overall, they were satisfied with their collegiate experiences.

We would be happy to join in the celebrations if it weren't for our recent research, which raises doubts about the quality of undergraduate learning in the United States. Over four years, we followed the progress of several thousand students in more than two dozen diverse four-year colleges and universities. We found that large numbers of the students were making their way through college with minimal exposure to rigorous coursework, only a modest investment of effort and little or no meaningful improvement in skills like writing and reasoning.

In a typical semester, for instance, 32 percent of the students did not take a single course with more than 40 pages of reading per week, and 50 percent did not take any course requiring more than 20 pages of writing over the semester. The average student spent only about 12 to 13 hours per week studying — about half the time a full-time college student in 1960 spent studying, according to the labor economists Philip S. Babcock and Mindy S. Marks.

Not surprisingly, a large number of the students showed no significant progress on tests of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing that were administered when they began college and then again at the ends of their sophomore and senior years. If the test that we used, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, were scaled on a traditional 0-to-100 point range, 45 percent of the students would not have demonstrated gains of even one point over the first two years of college, and 36 percent would not have shown such gains over four years of college.

Why is the overall quality of undergraduate learning so poor?

While some colleges are starved for resources, for many others it's not for lack of money. Even at those colleges where for the past several decades tuition has far outpaced the rate of inflation, students are taught by fewer full-time tenured faculty members while being looked after by a greatly expanded number of counselors who serve an array of social and personal needs. At the same time, many schools are investing in deluxe dormitory rooms, elaborate student centers and

expensive gyms. Simply put: academic investments are a lower priority.

The situation reflects a larger cultural change in the relationship between students and colleges. The authority of educators has diminished, and students are increasingly thought of, by themselves and their colleges, as “clients” or “consumers.” When 18-year-olds are emboldened to see themselves in this manner, many look for ways to attain an educational credential effortlessly and comfortably. And they are catered to accordingly. The customer is always right.

Federal legislation has facilitated this shift. The funds from Pell Grants and subsidized loans, by being assigned to students to spend on academic institutions they have chosen rather than being packaged as institutional grants for colleges to dispense, have empowered students — for good but also for ill. And expanded privacy protections have created obstacles for colleges in providing information on student performance to parents, undercutting a traditional check on student lassitude.

Fortunately, there are some relatively simple, practical steps that colleges and universities could take to address the problem. Too many institutions, for instance, rely primarily on student course evaluations to assess teaching. This creates perverse incentives for professors to demand little and give out good grades. (Indeed, the 36 percent of students in our study who reported spending five or fewer hours per week studying alone still had an average G.P.A. of 3.16.) On those commendable occasions when professors and academic departments do maintain rigor, they risk declines in student enrollments. And since resources are typically distributed based on enrollments, rigorous classes are likely to be canceled and rigorous programs shrunk. Distributing resources and rewards based on student learning instead of student satisfaction would help stop this race to the bottom.

Others involved in education can help, too. College trustees, instead of worrying primarily about institutional rankings and fiscal concerns, could hold administrators accountable for assessing and improving learning. Alumni as well as parents and students on college tours could ignore institutional facades and focus on educational substance. And the Department of Education could make available nationally representative longitudinal data on undergraduate learning outcomes for research purposes, as it has been doing for decades for primary and secondary education.

Most of all, we hope that during this commencement season, our faculty colleagues will pause to consider the state of undergraduate learning and our collective responsibility to increase academic rigor on our campuses.

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