ABOUT EDUCATION SECTOR

Education Sector is an independent think tank that challenges conventional thinking in education policy. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to achieving measurable impact in education policy, both by improving existing reform initiatives and by developing new, innovative solutions to our nation’s most pressing education problems.

The ultimate beneficiaries of our work are students. Our mission is to promote changes in policy and practice that lead to improved student opportunities and outcomes. To pursue this mission, we combine our written work—including research reports, policy analyses, smaller complementary products such as “Charts You Can Trust,” and op-eds in national news publications—with a multi-dimensional communications strategy. This combination of research and analysis with strategic communications creates numerous opportunities to present our policy proposals in testimony, hearings, legislative briefings, and a wide range of exchanges with policymakers and policy influencers.

The immediate audiences for our work include federal, state, and local policymakers; national, state and local education associations; educators; the press; public policy organizations; and other thought leaders and policy actors. Our experience shows that these leaders embrace reform when it is justified by thoughtful analysis and solid, independent evidence.

Most of the organizations that come to mind when one says “education policy” either conduct research, represent constituents’ interests, or advocate fixed policy agendas. Too often the research is written in language that’s hard for policymakers to understand, and thus they don’t use a lot of it. And much of the work produced by membership organizations and traditional education advocacy groups is less than objective.

This lack of credibility and clarity in research and analysis hurts the cause of education improvement: policymakers make important decisions on the basis of biased information; good ideas don’t reach the people with the power to implement them; and it becomes harder to create and sustain an intellectual climate that supports reform.

Education Sector was designed to address these problems. Since our founding in 2005 (we launched publicly in January 2006), Education Sector has established our expertise in key issue areas—including educational choice, human capital, K–12 accountability, and higher education—and gained credibility as an independent leader in the field. Our co-founders, Andrew J. Rotherham and Thomas Toch, envisioned a hybrid institution, formed at the intersection of public policy, research, and journalism. We believe that by marrying the methodological rigor of sound research with the communications excellence of the best journalism and the real-world impact of policy analysis, Education Sector is uniquely positioned to both make a compelling case for fundamental reform and to promote change directly with policymakers. For a fuller explanation of our hybrid model and its consequences for our operations, and to read our values statement, see “The ES Way” and “What We Believe,” available on our website.

Now with a proven track record for producing high-quality research and analysis in each of these areas, Education Sector has further coordinated our K–12 strategies, and we have expanded our higher education work to reflect new opportunities for impact.

Education Sector is unique in our focus on both K–12 and higher education. Many educational issues transcend the boundaries of K–12 and higher education. The need for data systems that generate better, clearer, and more accessible information to improve teaching and learning is as important in higher education as it is in K–12 schools. Similarly, the theme of informed educational options is present in both our K–12 and higher education work.

We also recognize that there are emerging policy debates and research topics that lend themselves particularly well to Education Sector analysis but that are outside of our planned program of work. We have reserved about 15 percent of our organizational capacity to respond to them. These projects present significant opportunities to improve student opportunities and outcomes.

Read more about our K-12 and higher education strategies on our website, www.educationsector.org.
## CONTENTS

### ABOUT THE ES REVIEW  2

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MESSAGE  3

### K-12 EDUCATION  5

1. Putting Data Into Practice: Lessons From New York City  
2. A Measured Approach to Improving Teacher Preparation  
3. Unlikely Allies: Unions and Districts in the Battle for School Reform  
4. A Portrait of School Improvement Grantees  
5. Lessons for Online Learning  
6. Growth Models and Accountability: A Recipe for Remaking ESEA  
7. The Road to Autonomy: Can Schools, Districts, and Central Offices Find Their Way?  
8. Inside IMPACT: D.C.’s Model Teacher Evaluation System  

### HIGHER EDUCATION  28

1. Are You Gainfully Employed? Setting Standards for For-Profit Degrees  
2. Washington Monthly Annual College Guide  
4. ‘Trust Us’ Won’t Cut It Anymore  
5. Why 529 College Savings Plans Favor the Fortunate  
6. Two Cheers for Virginia’s Higher-Ed Proposal  
7. Reconstructing Higher Education  
8. Bad Job Market: Why the Media Is Always Wrong About the Value of a College Degree  
9. Debt to Degree: A New Way of Measuring College Success  

### BEST OF THE QUICK AND THE ED  48

### ALSO FROM EDUCATION SECTOR  51

### OUR FUNDERS  52
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PRODUCTION NOTE

This fifth edition of the ES Review brings together, in one setting, some of our best work from 2010–11. The items included in the ES Review appear in an abridged format. To read the full content, including charts, data, and citations, please visit our website at www.educationsector.org. We also encourage you to visit our website to read all of the work that we have published to date, learn about upcoming events, watch video footage, and listen to Education Sector podcasts.
Dear Reader,

Anniversaries give us a reason to reflect on and celebrate the past as well as an opportunity to pause to plan the future. Education Sector marked its fifth year of operation this year, and so we’ve been doing some of both.

Looking back, it’s astonishing to see the changes in education policy that have come about in such a short time. Ideas that were nascent, or were taking place only at the margins of schooling, have now entered mainstream policy discussions, legislation, and practice. A generalized concern about teacher quality has become a tight focus on teacher effectiveness, and with it has come an emphasis on teacher evaluations, compensation, training, and seniority rules. Also prominent in today’s education reform agenda are improvements in the quality of educational data, blended learning, and other uses of digital technologies; turning around our most persistently ineffective schools; getting more students ready for success in college and careers; the development and adoption of national standards; and increasing attention from policymakers to matters of quality, equity, productivity, and accountability in colleges.

Education Sector has contributed to all of these discussions and influenced the course they’ve taken, demonstrating what it means when we say our mission is to create new ideas and to improve existing reforms in the pursuit of equity, efficiency, and quality in education from kindergarten through college.

The work in this year’s ES Review demonstrates both the range of issues we work on as well as the variety of ways we communicate our ideas. For example, Policy Director Kevin Carey and Senior Policy Analyst Erin Dillon collaborated on a Chart You Can Trust that created a new index of college performance, which combines overall student debt and the number of degrees students earn. The piece, “Debt to Degree,” got a lot of attention and, importantly, generated dozens of stories by journalists who used the index to examine the performance of their local colleges. Carey also found an entertaining way to make the point that reporters often exhibit a “sky is falling” bias in looking at the value of college degrees during economic recessions. The article appeared in The New Republic online, where Kevin is now a regular contributor, and it illustrates that not only do we use the usual policy channels to get our work out, we also work as journalists to reach a broader audience.

In another example, Susan Headden, a senior writer, spent months reporting on the inner workings of the Washington, D.C., school system’s innovative and controversial teacher evaluation process. “Inside IMPACT,” a highly readable and engaging account, went beyond the usual “fer it or agin it” positions to praise the system where praise was due, criticize it where warranted, and also suggest ways to make it better. Managing Director Bill Tucker’s report from last fall on “Putting Data Into Practice” also illustrates our solutions-oriented perspective. In addition to the report, Tucker discussed his findings in a video, wrote an op-ed about it for Education Next, and hosted a well-attended event in D.C. that was keyed to the paper.

I’ve had the honor and pleasure of working closely with these and other talented and committed members of the Education Sector staff since becoming executive director full-time in April. I had admired the organization and the quality of its work since it was founded by Andrew Rotherham and Thomas Toch, who created a hybrid organization that combined journalism, policy research, and analysis. They understood that it’s not enough to come up with ideas; to influence the process of change, ideas have to reach the right audience at the right time and in the right format and must be communicated repeatedly. We will continue to be innovative in how we use the new and powerful communication tools that are now widely available to do just that.

I’ve been writing about education for most of my 34 years as a journalist, and I’ve watched the media struggle to adapt to changing technologies and consumer habits while continuing to produce high-quality coverage and analysis. The situation in education from kindergarten through college is analogous. Despite tremendous changes in technology, demographics, social conditions, and economic demands, most schools are much like they’ve been for 50 years and remain devastatingly
unequal. Even at our colleges and universities, which have produced unimaginable breakthroughs in science, medicine, and other fields, there has been little change in how they are operated and financed.

At Education Sector, we will continue to press our schools and colleges to come closer to delivering on the transformational potential of education for all. For starters, we will be working on promoting innovation in higher education, better transitions from high school to college and beyond, improved teacher support policies, new technologies, the role of the private sector in education, policy issues related to the STEM fields, and the implementation of new Common Core standards and better assessments.

We’re also undertaking a strategic planning effort so that, over the next five years, we remain as agile, creative, and bold as we’ve been so far. Stay tuned on Twitter (@EducationSector), Facebook (www.facebook.com/EducationSector), the Education Sector website (www.educationsector.org) and wherever else you encounter our work. Comment on it, disagree with it, help us make it better.

Thanks,

Richard Lee Colvin  
Executive Director  
October 2011
Putting Data Into Practice
Lessons From New York City

Bill Tucker

REPORT • OCTOBER 2010

Stephanie Ring is an educator who loves numbers. And it’s not just because she’s a high school math teacher. She also serves as her school’s data specialist, a savvy analyst who monitors things like course credits, test scores, and attendance records to make sure students are on track to graduate and getting enough attention from teachers who instruct as many as 150 students a day. For Ring, who teaches at Brooklyn, N.Y.’s High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology, data is valuable only when she can act on it—not when a student is a senior and hopelessly far behind, but when he’s a freshman and just starting to fall short of the credits he’ll need to graduate on time.

Data in hand, Ring and her colleagues can then refine instructional practices and prescribe interventions, addressing the problem soon after it starts. For Ring, data drives action. “What are we doing for these kids?” it prompts her to ask. “Did we talk to them? Did we move them?”

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls data “the driving force [behind education] reform.” With stronger data, the reasoning goes, policymakers can expose problems, identify effective teachers, more smartly allocate resources, and build political will for reform. In the classroom, better data can help educators identify learning gaps and behavior patterns so they can tailor instruction to individual students.

Such is the promise of data that, nationwide over the past decade, school districts and states have spent more than $1 billion to build and implement data systems to track and analyze statistical information about students and their learning. Data systems were a key criterion of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top competition, and by 2011, all 50 states will have systems to track individual student progress from year to year. Many school districts have built data systems as well.

But while there have been impressive advances in the collection and management of data used for purposes of accountability, a 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that “even in districts with a reputation for leadership in using data, electronic data systems are rarely influencing classroom-level decision-making.” Many systems aren’t designed to provide data to teachers, let alone students. All too often, the preoccupation with data collection has overshadowed the ways in which data is—or isn’t—used.

Progress, however, is being made, and few districts have embraced the use of data like New York City, the nation’s largest district with 1.1 million students and 90,000 educators. Data is a vital component of New York City’s aggressive strategy to hold educators accountable for student performance and to make sure they have all the tools and support they need to succeed. The district’s “inquiry teams,” groups of teachers who collaborate to help students based on shared information, rely heavily on data produced by an $80 million information storehouse called the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System, or ARIS, a repository of statistical information about students.

With a couple of mouse clicks, classroom teachers can now get such data as interim test scores, subject grades, attendance records, and English language learner status on a single computer screen. Thanks to ARIS, a high school instructor who may have a student for just one period a day can now see how that student is progressing across all courses, and can identify students at risk of academic failure.

Teachers are now also able to spot long-term learning trends, even for students who have moved often among schools and who have only just arrived in their class. After initial resistance, ARIS has won the cautious support of the local principals union, and more than 65 percent of the district’s teachers now participate in inquiry teams.

But ARIS has been fraught with problems, as well. Developers have confronted a tangle of antiquated...
systems that can’t talk to each other—information silos that prevented any one person from getting a complete picture of a student. And they continue to struggle with making the data timely and accurate and giving educators the time and training they need to use it well. In the process, they have learned that technology holds little value unless it is flexible, relevant, and provides the fine-grained information that teachers really need. Above all, the district has realized that building a data system is only the first step—what educators do with the data is the critical second. Building the conditions and demand for data-based analysis is often more difficult than collecting the data itself.

While New York’s size and the scope of its initiative make it unique, the district provides a rich and timely illustration of how data is being used in an urban school system—and how it can be employed in smaller districts, as well. Seen from the perspective of both its obstacles and successes, New York’s experience holds valuable lessons for all school districts about how to succeed with the critical second component of the drive for data—using the information to improve student performance.

New York City’s Data Strategy

Individual teachers can benefit from access to analytical tools like ARIS. But New York City’s goal—to build evidence-based school cultures—is even more ambitious and requires both the tools and collaborative processes to use the information to improve student performance. Shael Suransky, deputy chancellor for the Division of Performance and Accountability, identifies the two key components of the district’s strategy: regular collection and analysis of assessment data—much of which can be found in ARIS—and the use of teacher inquiry teams. The best teachers have always used information about their students to help them improve instruction.

The inquiry teams focus intensively on small groups of students. A team of teachers and administrators looks at school-wide data to identify a focus group—say, sixth-graders with scores of two or less on last year’s state English Language Arts test, which is graded on a scale of one to four. The team then studies both the students’ work and the data, and reviews instructional approaches: “How are these students being taught?” they ask each other. “How are they being grouped?” After answering these questions, the team develops a theory about why the students are not succeeding and begins to implement changes. Periodic or interim assessments, such as those from Columbia University’s Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, which measure recognition of letters and their corresponding sounds, are meant to help teachers gauge progress along the way. (See Figure 1.)

Recommendations: Design Principles for Smarter Data Systems

The country is now entering the second phase of a costly and concerted push to use data to improve
educational outcomes. The challenge is no longer whether to build institutional data systems, but how to use the data that the best of these systems provide to make a difference in the classroom. Thus, a focus on actual educator use of data must drive the next decade of investment. And, considered in this regard, as an essential ingredient of good teaching, the nation’s investments in data appear to be seriously lacking. Five principles should inform these initiatives:

1. **Systems must change from being institution-centered to learner-centered**
   Designing learner-centered systems means moving from compliance-focused data, such as that required by federal programs, toward information that students, families, and teachers can actually employ to shape day-to-day instruction.

2. **Information must flow across institutions**
   Students are increasingly mobile, and not just across schools, districts, and states. They also span a number of different learning opportunities both during and after the school day. But a teacher can’t use information about a transfer student when it’s trapped in another district’s data system.

3. **Usefulness and usability must drive adoption**
   To be successful, data initiatives must have an impact on the working relationships, incentives, and day-to-day practices of educators, without forcing them into uniform or standardized solutions. And unless systems are designed to be of obvious value to these educators—to give them insights into students—then their use will be limited.

4. **Systems must be common, yet open**
   Data initiatives in the health field, such as the use of electronic medical records to improve care, provide the education business with an important lesson: Good governance is essential to ensure that common policies, technical standards, privacy protections, and usage protocols across institutions are enacted and monitored.
5. **The data must fit the goal**

The best data allows users to not only assess performance—of students, educators, or administrations—but also to understand the processes that could improve learning. Its message should be not just “You’re failing.” It should be “Here’s where you are. Here’s where you need to go. And here are the suggested actions for getting you there.”

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**A Measured Approach to Improving Teacher Preparation**

Chad Aldeman, Kevin Carey, Erin Dillon, Ben Miller and Elena Silva

Keeping in mind that the problem is immense. The nation will need more than a million new teachers in the next five years and will rely almost exclusively on the existing 1,434 colleges that are approved by states to train elementary and secondary teachers. These new teachers will have enormous influence on their students’ success. Research proves the critical effect of individual teachers on student learning. As such, policymakers and major philanthropies are moving on a variety of fronts to improve the effectiveness of teachers once they are in the classroom, from strengthening evaluation systems to proposing new compensation schemes. But without ensuring the best possible preparation for beginning teachers, these efforts are likely to fall short.

Fortunately, the need to reform teacher education is gaining attention and momentum on both federal and state levels. The focus is on moving beyond just inputs, or counting program graduates and placement rates, to measuring outcomes, or how well graduates are performing in the classroom. In a 2009 speech at the University of Virginia, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan lamented the fact that teacher education programs often “act as the Bermuda Triangle of higher education—students sail in, but no one knows what happens to them after they come out.”

Similarly, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education recently issued a report arguing for more rigorous accountability of teacher preparation programs, writing, “All teacher education programs should be accountable for—and their accreditation contingent upon—how well they address the needs of schools and help improve P–12 student learning.” NCATE (now merged with a rival accrediting agency, TEAC, to create the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) has pledged to develop stronger standards and close programs that don’t meet those standards. Finally, a handful of states
have launched initiatives to track the student learning outcomes of program graduates, and 31 states included plans to track such outcomes in their applications for federal Race to the Top funding.

But these efforts alone will not suffice. Strong federal action is needed to accelerate and scale these reforms. In 1998 Congress amended the federal Higher Education Act to require states to hold teacher preparation programs accountable by publicly identifying (and then improving) low-performers. When the law was reauthorized in 2008, Congress went a step further, requiring institutions to provide “assurances” to the secretary of education that their teacher preparation programs meet the recruitment needs of local districts and the instructional demands of new teachers. And yet, struggling institutions like Union College continue on without signs of improvement, and thousands of ill-prepared new teachers enter classrooms every year.

When Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, followed soon after by a new Higher Education Act, it will have an opportunity to do better. Past experience proves that relying solely on states to set and enforce high standards for teacher preparation will not work. Thus, a new federal approach is needed. This would include:

1. A new federal framework for assessing and improving teacher preparation programs, one that encourages accurate and honest reporting on outcomes-based indicators of quality.
2. A new set of competitive grants that will encourage states and institutions to make ambitious changes

Figure 1. Over Half of All States Have Never Identified a Single Teacher Prep Program as At-Risk or Low-Performing, 2001–09

<table>
<thead>
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<th>States that identified 20 or more low-performing programs</th>
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Source: Authors’ calculations from https://title2.ed.gov/default.asp.
to how, and how rigorously, they monitor, evaluate, and improve their teacher preparation programs. The grants should focus on both systemic improvement for all programs and immediate action for programs that consistently fail.

3. A new strategy to streamline existing financial aid programs and better align those programs with current efforts to improve the quality of the teacher workforce. This should involve eliminating TEACH Grants, an ineffective pre-service grant program, and using those resources to expand debt forgiveness benefits for high-quality classroom teachers.

Combined, these strategies will create the right conditions for states and institutions to reform poor-performing teacher preparation programs, improve preparation as a whole, and help keep more well-prepared teachers in the classroom after they graduate.

The Current State of Teacher Education

With more than 1,400 institutions in the United States offering education degrees, there is no shortage of options for prospective teachers to earn their teaching credentials. Programs vary in almost every way imaginable—in selectivity, design, duration, and course and fieldwork requirements. Most are housed in schools of education, but a substantial number of “alternative route” programs, where teachers can bypass university-based pre-service preparation, have emerged in recent years.

All these choices might seem like a good way to meet the diverse education needs of our nation. After all, these programs combined produce plenty of teachers—nearly 300,000 each year—to meet the overall demand. They don’t, however, produce the right kind of teachers in the right places.

Programs pay almost no attention to the labor needs of states or local districts, much less the nation. As a result, teacher education produces a glut of elementary teachers; too few subject experts in science, math, and special education; and insufficient numbers willing and able to teach in high-need communities. And at a time when minority students are growing fast in number and are soon to be the majority, graduates of teacher education programs are still disproportionately female and white. Research has found no conclusive link between the race of a teacher and the performance of students, but the absence of male minority teachers is staggering. As the achievement of black male students dips to a crisis point, with dropout rates now double that of their white peers, less than 2 percent of the nation’s teachers are African-American men. And since most programs accept nearly all applicants, new teachers are also unlikely to be among top performers academically. According to a recent analysis of beginning teachers, only 14 percent teaching in high-poverty schools come from the top third of college graduates.

Teacher education programs, then, are good at churning out teachers, but far less successful at ensuring that those teachers are effectively meeting the needs of public schools and students. The two existing mechanisms for holding programs accountable, state approval and voluntary accreditation, have done little to solve this problem. State departments of education set requirements that teacher preparation programs must meet for their graduates to be eligible to teach in the state. But state program approval is largely pro forma, and examples of states revoking approval—or even mandating significant changes—are scarce. The value of accreditation, where programs voluntarily choose to seek the imprimatur of national accrediting bodies like NCATE, has been the subject of debate in recent years. Research has found no difference in the student achievement outcomes of teachers educated at accredited programs versus those educated at non-accredited programs, and half of all institutions are not accredited at all.

Since 2001, when states began reporting teacher preparation program performance information (as required by the 1998 Higher Education Act), most (27) have never identified a single program as low-performing. Another 12 have named five or fewer institutions as low performers. (See Figure 1.) On
average, less than 2 percent of colleges offering state-approved teacher preparation programs nationwide are reported each year to be low-performing or at-risk, despite overwhelming evidence that significant numbers of new teachers are ineffective and ill-prepared.

Unlikely Allies
Unions and Districts in the Battle for School Reform

Elena Silva and Susan Headden

Providence, Rhode Island, is one of those gritty eastern mill towns that wears its centuries-old history on its sleeve. Dozens of monuments, parks, and streets, as well as a middle school, are named after its founder, Roger Williams, the 17th century theologian who was banned from the Massachusetts colony for sedition and heresy. The city is lined with converted brick factories reminiscent of its manufacturing heyday, when it made jewelry, silverware, and shoes for the country. Interstate 95 cuts a noisy swath through the city's downtown, with signs announcing New York City to the south and Boston to the north, as if Providence itself were just a place to pass through. But if a bold new reform effort succeeds, the capital of the Ocean State may soon become its own destination on the education map.

Like many American cities, Providence is home to a struggling public school system with chronically low-performing schools. They include the founder's namesake, Roger Williams Middle, where last year only 17 percent of eighth-graders scored at or above proficient in math, compared with the state average of 53 percent. In reading, only 31 percent crossed the proficiency bar, compared to 65 percent statewide. As for science achievement at the 77-year-old southside institution, it could not, quite literally, be any lower: In 2008, the percentage of students who scored proficient on the state test in science was zero.

These scores have put Roger Williams—along with three other Providence schools—in the forefront of national educational reform, among the first group of failing schools whose efforts to radically improve are being supported by federal stimulus funds. The U.S. Department of Education gives these schools three choices: “turnaround” or replace the principal, fire all the teachers, and rehire no more than half of them; “transformation” or replace the principal and significantly change structures and instruction; or “restart,” meaning bring the school under new management by a charter or outside organization.

More than 90 percent of schools are pursuing the first or second option. Providence has selected the third—but with a significant twist. In what is believed to be the first such arrangement in the country, it has created a novel union-district alliance in which the two factions will develop the reform plan together and share the responsibility of making it work.

Those factions, of course, are notorious for not getting along. Unions complain that the demands put on teachers continue to rise as job security declines; districts protest union rules so rigid that they prevent even small changes to teacher hiring practices, evaluation procedures, and work schedules. It is a singularly antagonistic relationship that has made cooperation, thus any kind of substantive reform, all but impossible.

Yet in Providence, where the labor-management relationship has been worse than most, both sides now find reason for encouragement in the newly forged partnership of two unlikely allies in the battle for school reform: District Superintendent Tom Brady, a retired Army colonel with a background in operations management, and Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith, a former teacher and state legislator with deep working class roots in the city. Working together, the two have laid out an ambitious “restart” plan for the four failing schools, under which the principal and a union teacher will share control, and the union contract—and many of the securities and protections that come with it—will no longer apply.

In Brady and Smith, who just a year ago were battling each other from opposite sides of a lawsuit, reformers...
see a promising new brand of school leadership, one that is collaborative rather than confrontational, characterized by problem-solving rather than fingerpointing.

Pushed together by federal and state demands, and the promise of additional funds, Brady and Smith are leaders who are willing to toss out old models even when change comes at a significant risk, both for themselves and the factions they represent. They have shown a willingness to change strategies when the new approaches don’t work. And they have demonstrated a trust for each other despite their differences. “We say that ours is an arranged marriage,” says Smith. “We know that divorce would be very expensive.”

To be sure, success is by no means guaranteed. Collaboration, a popular but still fuzzy idea in reform circles, has been tried to some extent before in Providence and has largely failed. And with the stakes even higher this time, plenty of conflict points remain. Teachers, facing longer hours, new leaders, even reassignments, could subvert the process. Principals, whose jobs will also be on the line, may be reluctant to share control. And any revival of tensions between Brady and Smith could open old wounds.

The Plan in Detail

The restart plan, with all its promise and peril, is now taking shape at the four schools. In addition to Roger Williams, they are Lillian Feinsteinn Elementary at Sackett Street, Charlotte Woods Elementary, which has merged with Sergeant Cornel Young Jr. Elementary (not on the restart list), and William B. Cooley Sr. Health and Science Technology High School, which has merged with an adjacent high school, the Providence Academy in International Studies or PAIS (also not on the restart list) to form a combined institution.

Under the plan, each school will establish a leadership team that will be chaired by the principal and a “chief learning representative,” presumably a teacher, who is selected by the UP! executive board with input from the principal. Disputes are to be resolved by the leadership team. If they can’t be, the principal will settle the matter. If the leadership team is not satisfied with the principal’s decision, the matter swings back to UP!

Not surprisingly, the most controversial provision of the restart plan is the requirement that teachers reapply for their jobs. In February 2011, teachers must submit a formal application, including a resume and an essay. Hiring decisions will be based on a performance review conducted by the principal, an interview conducted by a leadership team—including the principal, a union board member, and at least one other teacher from another school—and an additional essay on why they want to teach in a turnaround school.

The district has agreed to rehire displaced teachers at other schools or place them in its pool of long-term substitutes. Some argue that this policy simply perpetuates “the dance of the lemons,” in which the worst teachers are passed from one struggling school to the next. The Rhode Island Department of Education has pushed Brady and Smith to address the dismissal policy, but both men say that it is teacher evaluation, not rehiring, that must serve as the lever for improving teacher quality. A new statewide teacher evaluation system, under development for the past year, will be piloted at the four schools at the start of the 2011–12 school year. “If a teacher fails to perform,” says Brady of the new system, “there’s no protection in the contract that ensures their job.”
The Challenges Ahead

Meanwhile, at the four schools, expectations for faculty performance are high. Teachers can no longer invoke the union contract to resist longer hours or to protect their spot at a school. “Enough with the teachers saying, ‘I can only take 26 students,’” says Valerio. “If there is a student who needs help at that moment, you help. You pitch in.” Teachers will also be judged by how well they communicate with parents; for instance, attendance at parent conferences, which the contract does not now require, will be mandatory.

With many of them effectively starting over, Providence teachers are still taking the changes in. They have watched other reforms—and other reformers—come and go, so predictably, a measure of cynicism has infected the ranks. “It’ll be back to the way it was in a few years,” says one teacher who spoke only with the promise of anonymity. “But there aren’t a lot of people who want to hear that.” Yet this time in Providence, there is a sense of inevitability about the changes. If there is not yet universal enthusiasm from teachers, there is at least acceptance, along with an appreciation that the turnaround plan could have come from outside, and that, from their standpoint, it could have been much worse.

“Systems have to change. Just talking, railing, being emotional is not going to do it.”
District Superintendent Tom Brady

For Providence, the real test of collaboration is putting the plan into school-level practice, and that means working through the disagreements and discord that surely lie ahead. For starters, the lawsuit over criterion-based hiring remains unsettled, awaiting an agreement between the teachers union and the school board. If the parties can’t come to an agreement, another lawsuit could follow. That, in turn, could threaten not only the new UP! compact, but any further union-district agreement.

Already, Brady and Smith are wrestling with scheduling designs for each school, trying to find ways to expand learning for students without breaking the budget or losing teacher support. The two leaders fully expect such challenges. “I am not foolish enough to think that just because I’m working through this with Steve that it all will automatically be absorbed and endorsed at every level overnight,” says Brady. “But I know that if we don’t work together on this, it will be three years and done.” Smith, too, is frank about the plan’s difficulties and its stakes. “Look,” he says, “nothing is simple or straightforward about this. We have to fix this together. We can’t walk away.”

A Portrait of School Improvement Grantees

Padmini Jambulapati

In the last year, the federal government has invested $3.5 billion dollars in an effort to fix the nation’s bottom 5 percent of public schools. In the coming months, it will roll out another $546 million dollars to do the same. The initiative is known as the School Improvement Grant, or SIG, program. It is the largest pot of federal funds ever aimed at improving a discrete set of the worst-performing schools. Whether this huge federal investment will pay off remains to be seen. There is nothing easy about reforming schools.

SIG grantees are eligible for up to an unprecedented $6 million dollars per school over a three-year period to implement one of four prescribed models: school closure, restart as a charter school, turnaround through replacing the principal and 50 percent of the instructional staff, or transformation, which requires...
implementing a slate of reforms. None of the SIG reform models has an unvarnished track record, and none has been implemented at this scale. The timelines for implementation and improvement are demanding and, given the history of federal school turnaround efforts, arguably unrealistic.

This Education Sector Chart You Can Trust takes an early look at how the $3.5 billion has been allocated and how it is being used. So far, 843 schools from 49 states and the District of Columbia have been selected as SIG grantees, and the combined grants are expected to serve 594,117 students. What do these schools look like? What reform models have they chosen?

A Closer Look at the SIG Schools

In their applications to the federal Department of Education, state education agencies compiled a list of the lowest-performing schools based on self-chosen (but approved by the department) definitions that combined growth and achievement. They had to prioritize and sort these schools into three different tiers. Tier I represents the lowest-achieving 5 percent of Title I schools or the five lowest-performing Title I schools in some stage of improvement or restructuring under NCLB, whichever number was higher. Tier II includes schools that are Title I–eligible, but do not receive funds. This category was meant to deliberately include high schools and middle schools that often do not receive funds in district distribution, but are technically eligible to get them. Tier III includes the remaining Title I schools that were in improvement or restructuring, but were not identified as Tier I and Tier II schools. This interactive map (Map 1) shows the distribution of the 843 SIG grantees across the country, including demographic data for each school, the reform model chosen, and the amount of SIG funds awarded, if that information was available.

Using the list of states on the right side of the map, select a state by checking the box next to the state’s name. Once the map has changed to show the state, dots for each SIG school will appear. Scroll over each dot to see specific information about each school. To see only those schools that chose a particular model (i.e., only the restart schools), select the model and click on the highlight button in the left hand corner. To return to the original map, unclick the highlight button.

The Reform Model of Choice

Despite their diversity, roughly 73 percent of SIG schools selected the same model — transformation. (See Chart 3.) In fact, transformation was the exclusive model in 15 states: Arkansas, Delaware, Iowa, Montana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Districts are required to justify their choice to state education agencies in their applications. Often, districts cited the use of research-based strategies as the
primary reason, but given the short time frame for applications (states had as little as three months to apply), and the difficult and seemingly drastic nature of the other models, many districts may have seen the transformation model as the easiest one to implement. Indeed, only 21 percent of the schools chose the turnaround model, which required a major staffing overhaul. Bringing in help from the outside through the restart model was an even less popular choice, accounting for only 4 percent of the total.

Least popular of all was the choice for school closure, which amounted to a mere 2 percent of the total, revealing the reluctance of most school districts to shut down their lowest-performing schools. Wisconsin has the most closures, with Milwaukee Public Schools shutting down four high schools, including three charter schools. Notably, the Milwaukee School Board had already decided to close two of those schools, W.E.B. DuBois High School and Foster and Williams Visual Communications Campus, before the state announced its list of SIG grantees. Out of the 19 schools across the country shutting down, most requested help with transition costs like transferring student records, moving, community notification and outreach, scheduling, and severance payouts for teachers. South Carolina’s Spartanburg School District Seven, for instance, plans to close Myles W. Whitlock Junior High due to low achievement and declining enrollment and plans to use half of its requested funds for severance pay and benefits for eight teachers and three aides who will not be placed in positions within the district.

Two districts chose a combination of the models to fit their particular needs. Thornridge High School in Dolton, Ill., for example, combined closure and transformation models. It will reassign students in grades 10–12 next year to other schools and will reopen as a freshman academy for all district students.

A Few Surprises

Most SIG grantees are traditional public schools, but the 843 schools selected so far also include 56 charter schools in 15 states as indicated by this interactive map, which filters out the charter schools and plots their location. Charter schools are often touted as the solution to fixing low-performing schools. They are granted greater autonomy, or the ability to implement a variety of reforms, in exchange for greater accountability and sanctions. Thus, in theory, it should not only be easy to shut down a low-performing charter, but it should be expected that low-performing charters will be closed. Yet, the presence of charter schools among a state’s worst performers illustrates the variability in their performance. And their presence among SIG grantees illustrates an overall resistance to closing schools, regardless of how or by whom they are governed. Milwaukee Public Schools, for instance, is the only district that moved to close its three lowest-performing charter schools. Around 75 percent of the identified charter schools chose the transformation model, subscribing to many of the same reforms (such as extended learning time or more rigorous school evaluations) that charter schools often deploy to differentiate themselves from public schools in the first place. Notably, of the 56 charter schools receiving funds, 22 (nearly 40 percent) are charter schools from Texas, which has seen tremendous growth in charter schools over the last decade, but also varying degrees of performance.
Advocates for virtual education say that it has the power to transform an archaic K–12 system of schooling. Instead of blackboards, schoolhouses, and a six-hour school day, interactive technology will personalize learning to meet each student’s needs, ensure all students have access to quality teaching, extend learning opportunities to all hours of the day and all days of the week, and innovate and improve over time. Indeed, virtual education has the potential not only to help solve many of the most pressing issues in K–12 education, but to do so in a cost-effective manner. More than 1 million public education students now take online courses, and as more districts and states initiate and expand online offerings, the numbers continue to grow. But to date, there’s little research or publicly available data on the outcomes from K–12 online learning. And even when data are publicly available, as is the case with virtual charter schools, analysts and education officials have paid scant attention to—and have few tools for analyzing—performance. Until policymakers, educators, and advocates pay as much attention to quality as they do to expansion, virtual education will not be ready for a lead role in education reform.

Virtual education is in a period of rapid growth, as school districts, for-profit providers, and nonprofit start-ups all move into the online learning world. But without rigorous oversight, a thousand flowers blooming will also yield a lot of weeds. Real accountability, including the means to identify and end ineffective practices and programs, must be constantly balanced with the time required to refine new, immature technologies and approaches to learning. Both virtual education advocates and education policymakers should learn from nearly two decades of experience with charter schooling, another reform movement predicated on innovation and change within public education. After nearly 20 years of practice, the charter school movement provides important lessons on how to ensure that improved student outcomes remain the top priority.

Focus on Outcomes

At present, virtual education lacks a firm understanding of what high performance looks like. The situation is not unlike that faced by the charter school movement just a few years ago. In 2005, after a decade of rapid growth in the charter school sector, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) was formed to increase the availability of high-quality charter schools. NAPCS soon published “Renewing the Compact,” a statement by its Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability. “Renewing the Compact” came on the heels of an August 17, 2004, lead story in the New York Times, which highlighted findings from a simplistic, and controversial, study of charter school achievement sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, “Charter School Achievement on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).” According to the Times, in “virtually every instance, the charter students did worse than their counterparts in regular public schools.” The NAPCS task force did not mince words about the need for a sharper focus on quality within the charter school movement. The report challenged the charter community to “fully ‘own’ the issue of how well its schools perform” and also challenged charter advocates “to embrace rigorous measures of quality and accountability for our own schools’ success.”

But the wide range of education options within charter schooling makes “owning” quality difficult, and the variety is even greater for virtual education. Virtual public education can be delivered by all types of providers, including charter schools, for-profit companies, universities, state entities, and school districts. Types of online schools and programs range from state-run programs like Florida Virtual School, where each year 100,000 students take one or two courses online as a supplement to traditional schools, to “blended” models, which allow schools to combine online and classroom-based instruction. The most controversial virtual schools are so-called “cyber” charter schools—fully online public schools that students “attend” on a full-time basis. Funded with public dollars but independently run, many of these cyber schools are managed by private, for-profit companies such as K12 and Connections Academy.

John Watson, author of the annual “Keeping Pace” report on the status of K–12 virtual learning, notes that
virtual education is “several times more complex than charter schooling.”

Such diversity brings challenges. While the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) has published program quality standards, virtual education lacks a commonly accepted set of quality outcome measures. Quality can’t be defined by the design of a school or by inputs alone; instead, it must focus primarily on outcomes. Traditional measures, such as attendance and instructional contact hours, do not fit the virtual model. And while federal and state accountability systems, which focus on school-level accountability, provide data on and oversight of the performance of full-time cyber schools, there’s little data and few mechanisms for evaluating supplemental and blended programs, in which students take only a portion of their schooling online. Moreover, it’s the supplemental and blended courses, increasingly offered by school districts, where growth is likely to be fastest.

Still, complexity can’t be an excuse for inaction. Unless providers rise to this task, outside groups, whether supporters or opponents, will define success and the lack of it for them. Once again, the charter experience is worth noting. Less than two years after publishing “Renewing the Compact,” the NAPCS, in partnership with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which was established in 2004 to push for more professionalism and higher standards among authorizers across the country, convened a working panel on charter school quality with the goal of establishing a “common set of basic quality expectations and performance measures” to assess charter school success. Without these measures, the panel noted, “it is no wonder that judgments about the performance of charter schools are so frequently ill-informed.” The result of the working panel was “A Framework for Academic Quality,” which provides a list of indicators, such as student achievement levels and growth measures, to which schools should be held accountable, metrics that can be used to assess school performance.

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Randolph had improved more than their peers, the state’s data also indicated that overall achievement at Bruce Randolph was not good. Forty-three percent of its students scored “proficient” in reading in 2010, near the state average. But only 16 percent were proficient in writing, and only 13 percent hit the mark in math. The state also acknowledged that although achievement growth at Bruce Randolph was above average in every subject, those growth rates were inadequate to put students on pace to catch up and learn what they needed to know before graduating. Nearly every student in Bruce Randolph’s first class of freshmen earned a diploma and went to college, a remarkable achievement. But it’s likely that many of them arrived on campus with serious learning deficits that will hamper their ability to stay in college and earn a degree.

Bruce Randolph epitomizes the challenge of incorporating information about student growth into educational accountability—a challenge that every state and school district in America will face if ESEA is revised as the administration proposes. Measuring growth is a delicate balancing act. Policymakers need to be fair and constructive with educators working in immensely difficult school environments. But public officials must also hold fast to the end goal of helping students thrive in a world that makes ever-higher demands on workers and citizens. As the political will and technical capacity to hold schools accountable for student academic progress converge, growth models appear to be an idea whose time has come.

Looking Back: Growth and Accountability

The modern standards- and testing-based school accountability movement began in the late 1980s and accelerated in 1994 when President Clinton and a bipartisan group of legislators in Congress reauthorized ESEA. That version was called the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA). For the first time, the federal government required states to create common academic standards for all students and hold schools accountable for student scores on standardized tests. It wasn’t easy work. In 1998, the National Education Goals Panel (a nonprofit group originally created by President George H.W. Bush and a bipartisan collection of reform-minded governors) recognized the limitations of relying solely on bottom-line measures of academic proficiency and spoke to the promise of measuring annual growth.

Educational accountability, in other words, isn’t just a matter of identifying which schools have the most failing students. It also requires some response to that information that will help fewer students fail. It’s unfair to blame educators for test scores that are substantially caused by external SES factors. And while the Goals Panel didn’t say so explicitly, it’s also unfair to blame educators for the failures and shortcomings of other educators who previously taught their students. Unfair accountability systems are unlikely to spur improvement.

To date, responsibility for wrestling with this dilemma has fallen primarily to the states. IASA mandated standards, tests, and accountability, but it also gave states a great deal of flexibility in deciding how to implement such a system. Some took to the project with more enthusiasm than others.

These early adopter states made two decisions that were crucial to the development of growth models. First, they tested students annually, allowing for the calculation of year-to-year growth in student achievement. Second, they created sophisticated statewide repositories of student data, allowing them to calculate annual learning growth in an accurate, consistent manner for every school. These large data systems also allowed states to estimate learning growth for students who moved among different Figure 2. Denver School Performance, 2010
schools, something beyond the capacity of local districts.

The final version of the law, No Child Left Behind, held schools almost exclusively accountable for absolute levels of student performance—the percentage who passed state standardized tests. In a small concession to growth, low-performing schools could escape potential sanctions if the percentage of students who failed the test in a given grade declined enough relative to the percentage of students who had failed the test in the same grade in the previous year.

The NCLB accountability model was based on tests tied to academic standards—"criterion-referenced" tests, in education-speak. In such a system, the government decides that students need to know some things—how to factor polynomials, that World War I ended in 1918—and administers a test of such knowledge and skills. The passing score, or "proficiency" level, indicates whether students had learned enough.

Supporters of criterion-referenced tests were leery of the relativity inherent to norm-referenced scores. Certain things had to be learned, they believed, irrespective of what other students know. And growth models were just another kind of relativity. Instead of showing where students stood relative to other students, like the Stanford 10, growth models showed where students stood relative to themselves at an earlier time. This left open the question of how much growth was sufficient to label a student—and thus, his or her school—a failure or a success. This question of how to interpret growth measures, as opposed to merely calculate them—to decide how much growth is enough growth—would come to dominate the growth model debate.

Combining Growth and Proficiency: The Colorado Model

Colorado had planned to use a "Student Growth Percentiles" model, which combines elements of the "Projection" and "Trajectory" models by determining whether a student’s relative level of growth matched historical patterns of students who successfully grew toward proficiency within a certain amount of time. But when education officials there saw the results come in from other states, they realized that it wasn’t worth the effort—the new system would likely identify almost exactly the same schools as the old system. So Colorado officials scrapped their growth model pilot plan and focused on creating a state-specific accountability system that puts a premium on communicating accountability information to the public and making meaningful distinctions between different kinds of schools.

Figure 2 shows 2010 performance results for the 182 public elementary, middle, and high schools in Denver. Each circle is a school. The circles are proportional to school size: The more students, the larger the circle. The vertical axis on Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who scored “proficient” on the state standardized test, the standard NCLB metric. The horizontal axis shows the “median student growth percentile.” That means that the Colorado Department of Education calculated how much growth each student made in math since the previous year. They compared that growth to other students with similar academic performance histories, yielding a percentile for each student. The horizontal axis on Figure 2 is the median such percentile for all students in a school.

The “C” school is Bruce Randolph, the school singled out by President Obama in his State of the Union. The leader of the free world thinks that Bruce Randolph is a model for the nation to follow. The Colorado Department of Education says its growth is unusually good, but still not good enough.

How should we understand schools like Bruce Randolph? And having understood them, what should we do? These are the questions that Congress must answer as it reauthorizes ESEA.

Remaking ESEA: How to Accommodate Growth

There are a number of specific challenges to confront and opportunities to take in remaking ESEA to accommodate and promote growth models.

Better Testing

Growth models, like all test-based measurement systems, are only as good as the test on which they rely. Many of the standardized tests used in K-12 education are inadequate, and their flaws can be magnified by growth calculations. A key problem is the scope of what tests try to assess. Unsurprisingly,
tests designed for eighth-graders focus on eighth-grade standards and eighth-grade skills. But a significant number of eighth-graders aren’t learning at that level, or even close to it.

**More Grades**

Growth models also need to incorporate information about students beyond what is mandated by NCLB—testing in grades three through eight and once in high school. States designing accountability systems should be required to administer a 12th-grade test in reading and math, as well as include results from standardized “end-of-subject” tests that states are increasingly requiring students to pass in order to graduate from high school. States should also incorporate information about what happens to students after they finish high school.

**Tougher Standards**

The Common Core standards were designed to identify what students need to know and be able to do in order to succeed in college and careers. While the new tests that will assess student mastery of the common standards are still being developed by the two consortia, it is widely expected that they will be more rigorous and difficult than what is typical among states today.

Raising state standards to meet the level of rigor established by the Common Core will increase the challenge of balancing growth and proficiency. Fewer students will score as proficient and the growth trajectory of underperforming students toward proficiency will be even steeper. Projection models will deem more students unlikely to succeed. Schools like Bruce Randolph will have to do even better in order to achieve adequate growth.

**Different Models for Different Things**

The growth model pilot program launched by the U.S. Department of Education in 2005 has provided valuable information about growth models. The experiences of the pilot states show the
The Road to Autonomy
Can Schools, Districts, and Central Offices Find Their Way?

Erin Dillon

The success of internet giant Google is a tribute to the philosophy that workers work best if left to themselves. Employees at the search engine’s headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., are famously given 20 percent of their workweek to brainstorm ideas for new projects, free of management restraint and central office interference. White boards throughout the campus invite employees to share random ideas and suggestions, and perks like beach volleyball and electric scooters help keep the creative juices flowing.

Drawing a lesson from the business world, many educators and policymakers have decided that to do their best work, schools need the luxury of freedom as well. Just as autonomous cultures in the business world have improved employee morale, increased innovation, and encouraged a more nimble, customer focused workforce, greater autonomy can free educators to try new approaches with instruction, staffing, and schedules so they can respond quickly and more effectively to student needs. With expanded autonomy, districts let the schools themselves—the principals and the teachers—make big decisions like how to spend the budget, what curriculum to use, and how to hire and train teachers. Those who know students best, the theory goes, are best able to direct resources and take actions on students’ behalf.

Experience with charter schooling and other autonomous school reforms has shown that granting schools more flexibility can yield more innovation in school management, staffing, and instruction, bringing high-performing schools to neighborhoods that greatly need them. But experience has also shown that not all schools have the capacity to fill the space created by autonomy with actions that actually improve student learning.

And so school districts entertaining this increasingly popular strategy for school reform face a dilemma: Should autonomy be limited to already successful schools, thereby reducing the risk that schools will crash and burn as they try to govern themselves? Or, should districts use autonomy as a spur to get low-performing schools to improve? Put another way, should autonomy be a catalyst or a reward?

More Freedom for More Schools
Increasing school autonomy as a reform strategy is not new. The many districts that are experimenting...
The District of Columbia’s “Autonomous Schools” are given flexibility in several areas, such as textbook adoption, budget allocation, scheduling, professional development, and curriculum, as a reward for past success. Success is determined by test scores and an on-site quality school review. In 2009–10, four schools were designated as Autonomous Schools and in 2010–11, another three earned that designation.

with it are continuing at least three decades of reforms that have cycled regularly between centralization and decentralization. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, districts that included Chicago, New York City, Prince William County, Va., and Jefferson County, Ky., implemented “site-based management,” a strategy that called for the central office to cede control of many functions to school-based councils. In the early 1990s, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) joined this movement and gave schools more power over their operations. But enthusiasm for site-based management waned in the wake of concerns over balkanized curricula and standards, lack of accountability, bureaucratic encroachment from the district, and general confusion among teachers, principals, and central office staff over their responsibilities.

DCPS and other districts attempting to expand autonomy must make two key determinations. First, over which areas should schools have control (budgets, staffing, etc.)? Second, how much control over those areas should they have (what percentage of their budget, what staff positions) and how much should be retained by the central office? Districts making these determinations also have to be mindful of how well schools are likely to be able use their newfound flexibility to boost student achievement.

Advocates of autonomy generally argue for as expansive a set of freedoms as possible. William G. Ouchi, professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management and a proponent of autonomy, says that to be truly autonomous, a school must have “four freedoms”: control over budget, control over staffing, control over curriculum, and control over scheduling.

Flexibility as a Reward: The Autonomous Schools Program

Among DCPS’s three initiatives that use autonomy, the Autonomous Schools program treats autonomy as a reward for performance, thereby minimizing the risk that low-capacity schools will be freed to make decisions or take over functions for which they are unprepared. Specifically, a school can apply for autonomous status if 75 percent of its students are proficient in both math and reading, or if the school has averaged 10 percent growth in reading and math over the previous three years. If the school also demonstrates strong teaching and learning, as determined by a district review based on the Effective Schools Framework, it wins increased control over funds, the option to forgo district-wide professional development, and the freedom to choose its curriculum.

As a reward, DCPS’s Autonomous Schools program is well-targeted. Both Murch Elementary and Key Elementary have the high test scores DCPS is seeking to reward through the program – over 80 percent of the students at both schools score proficient in both math and reading. And Ellis and Landeryou, by using student assessment data, teacher evaluations, and input from teachers and parents to guide their decisions, demonstrate the type of leadership that DCPS seeks to encourage through the program. But this sort of targeting can also minimize impact: Schools that were already successful under the old rules have less incentive to make dramatic changes under new ones.

Help for Low-Performers: The Partnership Schools Model

While the Autonomous Schools program gives D.C.’s high-performing schools the opportunity to try new, innovative practices, autonomy can be even more valuable for low-performing schools, even if it is counterintuitive. “We usually put more constraints on lower-performing schools and impose top-down solutions,” says Cohen, “but the challenges these schools face are much more complex. So we have to give them the flexibility to respond to their more turbulent and urgent needs.” In its 2007 report The Turnaround Challenge, Mass Insight argues for autonomy for these troubled schools, saying that success depends on changing the conditions under which they operate. Such conditions, the report says, include creating “a protected space free of bureaucratic restrictions and overly stringent collective bargaining agreements.” DCPS has tried to create these conditions under its “Partnership Schools” program by giving outside management organizations control of its lowest-performing schools and then granting them more flexibility to change instructional practices and select staff and leadership, and by exempting them from certain provisions of the union contract.
But here again, flexibility alone is not enough. Cohen notes that the lowest-performing schools also tend to lack experienced leaders and strong teachers. For autonomy to work at such schools, he says, “you have to do two things at once: completely revamp the operating structure and infuse human capital capacity.”

**Sharing Capacity: DC Collaborative for Change**

Bringing in outside management can be an effective strategy for boosting the capacity of a district’s lowest-performing schools, those headed for a turnaround. For other low-performers, those that need support but don’t warrant a complete takeover, districts must increase the schools’ capacity in other ways. The DC Collaborative for Change provides one such approach.

Early in her tenure, former Chancellor Michelle Rhee charged a select group of principals from high performing DCPS schools with finding innovative ways to spread their influence to other schools. Three of them came up with what has come to be known as DC3, a network of 10 schools (now nine) from across the city and across performance levels that are committed to working together to improve professional and leadership capacity at the schools. In exchange for a promise to improve results, the central office granted these schools expanded freedom over their operations.

Indeed, for many districts, telling schools what to do—by increasing centralization and *reducing* autonomy—*has* led to improvement. Boston Public Schools, which has seen notable increases in achievement, provides one example. Under Superintendent Tom Payzant, the district increased centralization, particularly in instruction and curriculum. According to Payzant, student success depends on common learning expectations across schools. “We won’t be able to reach the goals that standards-based reform have for all students by having 90,000 schools bloom by themselves,” Payzant told researcher Heather Zavadsky.

**Directions for the Future**

If autonomy is limited to being a reward, it is less important to have the entire central office take on this complex role: Autonomy as a reward necessarily limits the number of schools included by ensuring that schools themselves have the capacity to make decisions, thereby reducing the burden on the central office. But autonomy under the most recent iteration of decentralization reforms—“portfolio management”—is not limited to being a reward for a few schools. Instead, autonomy is viewed as a catalyst for improvement. Districts using portfolio management don’t directly manage all schools; instead, they contract with independent operators to run schools and grant them more flexibility. But the central office still plays an important role—it focuses on evaluating school performance, issuing requests for proposals for new schools, and closing down low performers.

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**MORE ON THE WEB**

- Op-Ed: More Autonomy Wrong Move for Weakest Detroit Public Schools
- Video: Interview with DCPS Director of School Innovation Josh Edelman
- Figures: Snapshots of Partnership Schools and DC3 Schools
- Sidebar: “Is Centralization Better?”
For public school teachers, June is traditionally a time to exhale. The requisite tests have been given, the last lessons delivered, the artwork torn from the walls, rolled up, and sent home to parents. In the best cases, there is a sense that most of what students needed to learn they did, allowing the teacher, if not riches or public recognition, at least the personal satisfaction of having done a hard job well. But this year, as classes wind down in the District of Columbia Public Schools, teachers will not be breathing freely until they see one final judgment of their pedagogical efforts—a report that, it is no exaggeration to say, has the power to end careers.

The anxiety comes from the new teacher evaluation system known as IMPACT, a rigid, numerically based process that rates teachers primarily on classroom observations and student test scores. As one of the first in the nation to link teacher performance, pay, and job security to such measures, IMPACT is the most polarizing of the bold reforms initiated by ex-schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee. In the two years since this high-stakes report card was launched, it has led to the firing of scores of educators, put hundreds more on notice, and left the rest either encouraged and re-energized, or frustrated and scared. It almost certainly cost the local union president his job, and it helped force the mayor who supported it, as well as Rhee, out of office.

IMPACT sets clear expectations for effective teaching, from probing students’ understanding to coming to work on time. Many teachers in the district welcome these standards and are motivated by salary bonuses of up to $25,000 to prove they can meet them. Others complain of being judged on elements of a craft that they insist can’t be measured. But whether they are critics talking bitterly of being “impacted” or boosters talking about “getting great feedback on my ‘Teach 1,’” D.C. teachers are speaking a new language—that of the rubric by which they are measured. And that is an unmistakable sign that IMPACT is changing the way many teachers teach.

As school districts around the country work to devise their own evaluation systems that include student test scores (so-called value-added measures) and classroom observations, they are closely watching how this high-profile prototype is playing out in the nation’s capital. As they do, they will find encouraging lessons in how codifying best practices can be used to objectively assess teachers and help them improve, and how greater accountability can considerably enhance the public’s faith in a school system. But they will also see how difficult it is to calibrate such a powerful tool so that it works in practice as intended. Nonetheless, multiple-measures teacher evaluation is the future of K-12 education. And in Washington, D.C., the future is happening now.

The View From the Classroom

Every teacher in the district is observed five times a year: three times by a school administrator (usually the principal) and twice by a “master educator,” an outside teacher trained in the same discipline who is seen as an impartial third party. The observations take 30 minutes—usually no more and never any less—and all but one of the administrator visits are unannounced. Based on these observations, teachers are assigned a crucial ranking, from 1 to 4. Combined with other factors, they produce an overall IMPACT
score of from 100 to 400, which translates into “highly effective,” “effective,” “minimally effective,” or “ineffective.” A rating of ineffective means the teacher is immediately subject to dismissal; a rating of minimally effective gives him one year to improve or be fired; effective gets him a standard contract raise; and highly effective qualifies him for a bonus and an invitation to a fancy award ceremony at the Kennedy Center.

It is a measure of how weak and meaningless observations used to be that these pop visits can fill teachers, especially the less experienced ones, with the anxiety of a 10th-grader assigned an impromptu essay on this week’s history unit for a letter grade. The stress can show up in two ways—the teacher chokes under the pressure, thereby earning a poor score, or she changes her lesson in a way that can stifle creativity and does not always serve students.

Teachers commonly protest that 30 minutes is an impossibly small window through which to view their ability to convey content and connect with students. Even though they recite the rubric in their heads and keep cheat sheets on Post-it notes around the classroom, they say their individual lessons cannot possibly hit everything on the IMPACT checklist—a word that district officials would disavow—in that time frame.

Another frequent complaint is that IMPACT fails to account for the stark differences in demographics among the district’s schools—from those educating the children of U.S. senators to those serving the offspring of welfare recipients—and the unique challenges that confront teachers in the city’s lower-income wards.

District administrators hear this objection routinely, and their response is both simple and frankly unsympathetic: If you are a good teacher—if your lessons are engaging, lively, and challenging—you will not have problems with classroom management. “Behavior and instruction always dovetail,” says Cynthia Robinson-Rivers, a master educator specializing in early childhood instruction. “When you hear a teacher say ‘1, 2, 3—eyes on me’ (a common ditty for getting children’s attention) then it’s often too late. You are reacting to an action; you are not preventing it.” This does not mean the evaluator can’t adjust the score if she learns, for instance, that a hyperactive child has forgotten to take his medication. “We’re not unreasonable,” Robinson-Rivers says. But she says administrators are insistent about the larger goal: “We must have high expectations for all students, regardless of their home experiences.”

A Receptive Audience

A case in point is the lively classroom of Andrea Stephens (not her real name), a first-grade teacher at a racially mixed elementary school in Northeast D.C. Master educator Robinson-Rivers is conducting an informal observation as Stephens teaches a lesson about capital letters, punctuation marks, and the short “a.” [Informal evaluation for feedback only.] Stephens is kind, firm, and engaging, and she wins points for gestures like asking a reluctant pupil if she could “get one of his smiles,” making him feel valued. But she is apparently not engaging enough. Several students are not paying attention; one is a mugger and a performer, and he can’t sit still. After several attempts to quiet him, Stephens gently pulls him up next to her, holding his hand while she addresses the rest of the class. The general atmosphere suggests to Robinson-Rivers a need for better management. “The children weren’t completely out of control,” Robinson-Rivers says. “But if they aren’t facing you, it can suggest a lack of interest.”

Stephens, whose overall score for the year was in the “effective” range, is open to evaluation and receptive to feedback—she even asked for an extra observation—and in this regard, master educators say she is fairly typical. Matt Radigan, another master educator specializing in elementary instruction, says he has been happily surprised by how willing teachers have been to engage with the evaluators even when the news is bad.

Teachers’ outwardly gracious attitudes about their evaluations likely has to do with two very different factors. One is simply that the master educator holds all the cards—the teachers have virtually no input in the evaluation, and appeals of the scores are rarely successful. But teachers, most of whom work in relative isolation, are also hungry for meaningful feedback. They get it from these energetic, highly credentialed educators who are carefully screened not only for their technical skills but for their bedside
manners. Of the 800 who applied for the job, only 32 were selected.

The teachers who spoke to Education Sector almost universally liked the people who evaluated them, finding them for the most part helpful, empathetic, and smart. Radigan says he always lets the teacher lead off the feedback session. “If they want to vent about how much they hate IMPACT,” he says, “I let them vent.” Master educators don’t see any pattern in teachers’ responses, particularly. “There is no generalizing or stereotyping that you can ever make,” says Robinson-Rivers, “because every time you do, you are [wrong]. There are older veterans who may be super-open about getting a tough score and young, bubbly ones that you assume are going to be open, and they are really tough and question everything.”

**Toward a Better IMPACT**

Even as teachers await their final scores for the school year that’s drawing to a close, IMPACT administrators are waiting for a report on the system’s implementation by an independent consultant group. The report is expected to make new recommendations for changes to the system.

To ensure objectivity and consistency, teachers and others have suggested some of the following changes:

1. Making the master educator observations longer or extending them over a few days in the same week.
2. Having teachers write an evaluation of their own classroom performance.
3. Meeting with the teacher prior to the evaluation so that the master educator can learn about any special issues with the class.
4. Taking better account of difficult classroom situations.
5. Making sure that master educators and school administrators are grading the same way.

The district is also starting to use data generated by IMPACT to improve instruction. In the first year, teachers district-wide consistently scored lowest on measures of rigor and probing for higher-level understanding. That finding led the district to further clarify and emphasize these skills in the revised framework and in professional development. The information drives improvements at individual schools, as well.

IMPACT may be an imperfect measuring tool, but, as many experts see it, it may be the best one out there right now. It is the product of a desperate problem crying out for an immediate, dramatic solution—a solution that DCPS says couldn’t wait to be piloted. The net may drag in teachers who didn’t deserve to be caught. But district administrators, along with a fed-up public, have essentially decided that it’s better that one teacher lose her job unfairly than many bad ones undeservedly keep theirs. “If teachers are anxious because they have low scores, I empathize,” says Jason Kamras, chief of DCPS’s Office of Human Capital Management. “But at the end of the day, we have to hold the line on quality. I believe with every fiber of my being that we can’t have different standards for other people’s children than we have for our own.” Evaluation has raised those standards. Thus, it’s no longer a question of whether teachers will be judged by an intensive system of test scores and classroom observation—only how.

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**MORE ON THE WEB**

- Figure 2: Comparing Evaluations
- Table 1: How a Highly Effective Teacher Might Score
- Op-Ed: Making D.C.’s Teacher Evaluations Work Better for Teachers
Are You Gainfully Employed?
Setting Standards for For-Profit Degrees
Ben Miller

EDUCATION POLICY EVENTS IN WASHINGTON, D.C., attract a familiar cast of characters: think tank representatives, members of organizations with eight-letter acronyms, and the occasional retired college professor. But an event at the New America Foundation this summer attracted a different crowd: organizations with names that ended in “markets,” “capital,” and “fund.” The questions from the audience weren’t about quality teaching or common curriculum standards; they were about income vs. earnings, access to federal databases, and student debt thresholds. Someone hearing just the audio feed might have easily mistaken the conference for the quarterly earnings call of a Fortune 500 corporation.

The subject of the event was for-profit higher education. Representatives from the financial sector had come to New America, a nonpartisan public policy institute, to hear a high-level Obama administration official talk about a regulatory controversy that could make them—or lose them—hundreds of millions of dollars. Just a few days before, the U.S. Department of Education had released a new proposal that would make it more difficult for for-profits to access billions of dollars in federal funds. At the center of the proposal is a rule called “gainful employment” that would penalize for-profit colleges and other vocational training programs for saddling students with more debt than they can pay back.

For-profits have grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, largely free of federal regulation. That freedom would be significantly curtailed if the gainful employment standard takes effect. Vocational training programs would be judged by the ratio of the debt that graduates assume relative to their current earnings and the rate at which they are able to repay it. If programs offered by for-profit colleges exceed certain thresholds on those measures, they risk losing eligibility for federal student aid. Given that many for-profit colleges receive close to 90 percent of their revenue from federal grants and loans, losing access to these dollars would be a death sentence.

With such high stakes, the proposed gainful employment standard has generated intense debate. While the owners of for-profits see a $29 billion industry that produces some of the best earnings ratios in the stock market, a group of well-funded short-sellers paints a picture of a fraudulent, overleveraged industry that’s poised for a subprime mortgage-style collapse. The institutions argue that they serve a class of students excluded from traditional higher education and that they are crucial for meeting the Obama administration’s college completion goals. But many lawmakers worry that in fulfilling that mission, for-profits have relied too heavily on federal aid, forced students to borrow too much money, and produced degrees of questionable worth.

Sen. Tom Harkin, the Iowa Democrat who chairs the Senate committee overseeing these schools, has warned that “even good actors in this industry are lured into the vortex of bad practices in order to compete and meet investors’ expectations.”

Critics of the gainful employment standard, meanwhile, have claimed the proposal “will eliminate quality programs while doing little or nothing to address the issue of excessive student debt.” Some have even gone so far as to say it “will attack our freedom and individual liberty to make decisions that have consequences.”

Yet despite all the noise and controversy, important questions have been left unanswered: Which institutions are most vulnerable to the proposed rules? What types of programs are most likely to be affected? This report tries to answer these questions, using publicly available data to present, for the first time, a picture of what effect the gainful employment proposal could have at more than 12,600 vocational programs at colleges and universities across the country. This includes more than 2,350 bachelor’s degree programs.
Much of the focus in Congress and in the media has been on institutions, particularly those that are publicly traded. But this analysis suggests that individual programs within those institutions may vary widely in how they perform under the proposed gainful employment standard. An institution could very well offer both programs that are unaffected and programs that become ineligible for federal student aid. This analysis also finds that the type of programs that could lose eligibility under the gainful employment standard vary significantly. For instance, there are a large number of ineligible programs for medical assistants, but these programs only exceed the proposed debt-to-income standard by a few thousand dollars, meaning they could avoid penalties if they slightly reduced their costs. Others programs, like those in culinary arts, are less likely to be ineligible, but those that miss the mark often miss by a wide margin.

Out of more than 12,600 programs, about 4 percent, or just over 500 programs, would lose eligibility because of the new standard. This includes 8 percent of bachelor’s degree programs, 6 percent of associate degree programs, and 1 percent of programs that are generally certificate programs of two years or less. Overall, the programs most likely to be affected are those tied to high-tech fields, such as e-commerce or graphic design, or those tied to jobs with low expected starting salaries, such as medical assistant or chef.

Although these programs cover a range of different jobs, they employ similar marketing tactics. Colleges are forbidden by law to make false promises of jobs or to inflate salary data, so they play on emotions, appealing to students’ desires to be valued in their careers. TESST College of Technology in Beltsville, Md., a school owned by Kaplan Higher Education, tells would-be medical assistants that they are joining a “growing field that allows [them] to assist others in need.” Students looking at Le Cordon Bleu Institute of Culinary Arts, owned by Career Education Corporation, are encouraged to “follow [their] passion” and “explore [their] creativity.” Kaplan advertises its information technology degrees as a chance for students to “be the most valued person at work.” And at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh’s Online Division, the ads for the interior design program tell prospective students that they can have a “profound impact on people’s lives.”

These marketing pitches also often tout the benefits of an entire industry, like health care, rather than the realities of the specific job for which the program is preparing students—jobs that are entry-level with low pay and typically have little opportunity for advancement. And as this analysis shows, many of these programs are poor investments for students.

While these at-risk programs comprise only a small minority of all programs at for-profit colleges, it would be wrong to conclude that most for-profit programs will emerge from the new federal standards unscathed. A much larger number—some 65 percent—are likely to fall in a middle ground between full eligibility and total ineligibility called “eligible with a debt warning,” which requires colleges to, among other things, post prominent cigarette pack–style “debt warnings” alerting potential students to the likelihood that enrolling could be hazardous to their financial health.

The gainful employment standard would not lead to a wholesale shutdown of the for-profit sector. But it would probably force many for-profits to substantially change their pricing and approach to student debt. More broadly, it would establish a new federal perspective on higher education, involving close examination of college prices relative to graduates’

### Table 2. Most Common Types of Ineligible Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional category</th>
<th>Ineligible programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical/Clinical Assistant</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culinary Arts/Chef Training</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce/Electronic Commerce</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting Technology/Technician and Bookkeeping</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Information/Medical Records/Technician</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior Design</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Assistant and Secretarial Science, General</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baking and Pastry Arts/Baker/Pastry Chef</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and Visual Communications, General</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Insurance Coding Specialist/Coder</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion Merchandising</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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future earnings, an idea that was first contemplated decades ago but is only now seeing the light of day.

An Important Step Forward

The proposed gainful employment regulation is a significant departure from existing laissez-faire policy on federal student aid, policy that requires little accountability for the use of funds or outcomes for students. Formally acknowledging the link between training and earnings is an important codification of the promises about jobs and salaries that for-profit institutions highlight in their marketing materials. The standard also represents a first step in better engaging employers in discussions about higher education. It means that before an institution can offer a new program it must provide assurance from local companies that the curricula are aligned with needed skills and that sufficient job demand exists. Restricted programs must provide the same information. Local companies hire area graduates and can recognize a quality training program. Seeking their feedback recognizes the valuable role they can play in helping to ensure that students are entering a program that is likely to produce jobs.

The gainful employment standard is also a gain for students as consumers. Publishing repayment rates, debt ratios, and cost warnings gives potential enrollees information that, using a set formula, can be compared across all institutions. This information is more useful than job placement data, which can be calculated in different ways and is not easily verifiable. It is also more helpful than graduation rate information, which doesn’t give an accurate picture of student success at schools with large numbers of non-traditional or part-time students. But perhaps the greatest consumer benefit is providing this information on a program-by-program basis, rather than aggregating it across an institution. For-profit colleges offer a wide variety of training programs in completely unrelated fields, so breaking apart the information by program ensures that a nursing student, for example, can see how his or her program actually performed without getting results conflated with business programs that serve students seeking very different careers.

MORE ON THE WEB

• How to Determine If a Program Meets the Gainful Employment Standard
• Blog Post: “What to Think About Gainful Employment”
• Webinar: Are You Gainfully Employed?

The Mayo Clinic of Higher Ed

Kevin Carey

On a cold Friday afternoon in February, Chelsea Griffin walked through the fading winter light of downtown Rochester, Minnesota, past old-style restaurants and stores filled with balloons and flowers, into the marble-clad halls of the Mayo Clinic. An elevator and staircase led her to a windowless laboratory, with a stainless steel sink on her left and cabinets filled with medical equipment on her right. In the center of the room, lying prone on a table, was the corpse of a middle-aged man. His chest was split open and his ribs were splayed to either side. Chelsea put on a white laboratory coat and pulled a pair of blue latex gloves over her hands. As a group of students watched, she reached into the cavity and pulled out the heart, feeling the weight of it in her wrist and arm. Her index finger traced a path to a spot just above the right ventricle. She knew this part of the internal human anatomy better than any other. Twice, she had undergone surgery to repair a hole there that threatened her life.

The thought of it brought her up short, and her eyes welled with tears. For a moment, her perspective shifted up and out. She saw herself, standing in a lab coat with a stranger’s heart in her hands. This, she thought, is where I’m meant to be.

And yet, if it were up to the norms and conventions of American higher education, Chelsea wouldn’t...
have been there. Chelsea is not a doctor or a nurse, or an intern or a researcher or even an upperclassman studying pre-med. She was, at that moment, an eighteen-year-old college freshman. Instead of sitting bored in the back of a cavernous lecture hall or starting another weekend bacchanal, she’s been getting the kind of education that most undergraduates only dream about: modern facilities, small classes taught by tenure-track professors, a cutting-edge interdisciplinary curriculum, and access to the best minds of science and industry. Instead of reading about human anatomy, Chelsea Griffin sees it firsthand.

Chelsea’s school has an unremarkable-sounding name but a groundbreaking approach to education. She is a student at the University of Minnesota Rochester, a campus based on the idea that most of what we know about how a public university should operate is wrong, that it can be done better, for modest amounts of money, right away. States across the nation could solve many of their higher education problems by replicating this effort—if they can overcome the entrenched interests of existing colleges and their own failure of imagination.

This article originally appeared in Washington Monthly’s 2010 Annual College Guide.

College Dropout Factories
Ben Miller and Phuong Ly

It was money—or the lack of it—that determined where Nestor Curiel chose to go to college. The third of six children in an immigrant Mexican family, Nestor grew up in Blue Island, a gritty working-class suburb near Chicago’s South Side. His father worked, and still works, two jobs—machine operator and restaurant dishwasher—and his mother makes and sells crocheted gifts. Nestor, a polite twenty-one-year-old with black-rimmed glasses, graduated from Eisenhower High School with a 3.6 GPA and dreams of becoming an engineer. (As a child he was inspired by Discovery Channel documentaries about engineering marvels, and he also enjoyed helping his dad repair automobiles on weekends.) He particularly wanted to help his parents pay off the mortgage on their weathered gray house, which is two doors down from a corner store with a large “WE ACCEPT WIC” sign in the window.

Nestor was an above-average high school student who generally made the honors list, and he was diligent in his non-school hours as well, holding down a part-time job as a busboy and line cook at the restaurant where his father worked. His ACT score was 18, equivalent to about 870 on the SAT, which wasn’t high enough to gain him admission to a selective college. (This was typical for his school—41 percent Hispanic, 38 percent black—where only 31 percent of kids meet or exceed standards on state tests, versus 76 percent for the state.) And, apart from a career fair, Eisenhower High School didn’t provide much in the way of college guidance. One time, a guest speaker had urged students to expand their horizons and apply to schools out of state, but Nestor worried about going somewhere unfamiliar. Also, if he could live at home, he would save money.

Ultimately, Nestor wound up narrowing his choices down to two nearby schools: Purdue University Calumet and Chicago State University. Each seemed to have advantages and disadvantages, but Chicago State offered one extra perk: $1,000 in scholarship money if Nestor enrolled in its pre-engineering program. That sealed the deal. The stipend, combined with federal and state grants and a private scholarship from Chicago’s George M. Pullman Educational Foundation, meant that Nestor could get a college education with most of his expenses paid.

With its tree-lined campus and gleaming new steel and glass convocation center, Chicago State certainly looked impressive. But within his first month there, Nestor wanted to leave. Advisers in the engineering department seemed clueless about guiding him to the right courses, insisting that if he wanted to take programming he first needed to enroll in a computer class that showed students how to turn on a monitor and operate a mouse. (Nestor required no such training.) The library boasted a robot that retrieved books, but Nestor would have preferred that it simply stay open past eight p.m., since class sometimes ended at nine p.m. or later, leaving him without a useful place to study or do research before going home. Trash littered the classrooms and grounds, and during class many of the students would simply carry on conversations among themselves and ignore the
instructors—or even talk back to them. Nestor was appalled. “It was like high school, but I was paying for it,” he says.

Several students he knew dropped out, but Nestor stayed. “I wasn’t going to give them my money and let them kick me out,” he says. For the next two years, Nestor encountered a ceaseless array of impediments to getting through school.

This article originally appeared in Washington Monthly’s 2010 Annual College Guide.

America’s Best Master’s Universities and Baccalaureate Colleges

Erin Dillon

In 1852, four French Marianist missionaries arrived by stagecoach in San Antonio, Texas, and founded a school called the St. Mary’s Institute, hoping to “regenerate the people” through education. The school, now St. Mary’s University, has been steadfastly serving the citizens of San Antonio ever since: 69 percent of St. Mary’s students are Latino, 53 percent receive Pell Grants, and many are the first in their family to attend college. Unlike most colleges with similar demographics, which often struggle with student retention, St. Mary’s graduates nearly 60 percent of its students. Graduates of its School of Science, Engineering and Technology boast a 50 percent acceptance rate when applying to medical or dental school, whereas the average acceptance rate of all students applying to medical and dental school is 35 percent. And St. Mary’s ranks sixth nationally in generating Mexican American applicants to medical school—supplying the same number as Stanford University, an elite institution with an undergraduate student body almost three times as big.

And yet, there’s a good chance you’ve never heard of St. Mary’s if you’re not from Texas or aren’t focused on the world of Catholic higher ed. Despite all that it does well, St. Mary’s has several things working against it when it comes to shining nationally. For one thing, the school is designated by the nonprofit Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a “master’s university,” a classification encompassing schools that offer a range of undergraduate and some master’s-level programs, but few doctoral degrees. That obliges any organization that ranks schools based on Carnegie’s widely followed classification scheme—as do U.S. News and the Washington Monthly—to evaluate master’s universities in a separate category, which makes it unclear how the best of them compete with national universities and liberal arts colleges.

This article originally appeared in Washington Monthly’s 2010 Annual College Guide.

America’s Best Community Colleges 2010

Kevin Carey

In 2007, Washington Monthly combined CCSSE results with graduation rates published by the U.S. Department of Education to create the first-ever list of America’s best community colleges. This year, we have updated the list with all-new CCSSE data, ranking more than 650 community colleges nationwide in order to identify the fifty best community colleges of 2010. As usual, they’re all over the map: there’s a small, science-oriented tribal college in New Mexico (at number thirty-five), a job-focused technical institute in rural Hazard County, Kentucky (number eighteen), a midsized suburban college in Washington State that prepares students to transfer to four-year universities (number seventeen), and a college built on the rainy side of an island paradise (number twenty-four). Many of the 2007 colleges reappear on this year’s list, underscoring the reliability of the CCSSE survey. Others stand out for the first time.

This article originally appeared in Washington Monthly’s 2010 Annual College Guide.
More Is Less
Extra Time Does Little to Boost College Grad Rates

Ben Miller

In the 2002 film Van Wilder, Ryan Reynolds plays the title character, a hard-partying seventh-year college senior who enjoys riding around campus in golf carts and engaging in hijinks, rather than attempting to graduate. But after his father refuses to keep paying his tuition, Wilder gets his act together in time to graduate just before the credits roll. The movie suggests that many college students just need more time to complete their degrees: time to get themselves together, or perhaps for the many students today who balance college with work and family, time to finish their classes at their own pace. But new graduation rate data from the federal government indicate that off the big screen this is not typically the case.

Since 1991, the federal government has required colleges to track and report graduation rates for all first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students. The most widely used figure tracks students for 150 percent of the “normal” time, or the time they are expected to take to graduate. For bachelor’s degree programs, students are considered graduates if they finish in six years; for two-year colleges, within three years; and for students in one-year certificate programs, 18 months. The extended time frame makes a significant difference in graduation rates. Just 36 percent of students pursuing bachelor’s degrees finish within four years; after six years, the rate is 57 percent. Among two-year schools, tracking students for that third year boosts graduation rates from 18 percent to 31 percent.

But some higher education leaders still claim that the measurement window is too short and that the statistics present a biased and incomplete picture. The figures, for instance, do not count students that transfer, are part-time, or that do not start college in the fall. Critics also point to the presence of thousands of real-life Van Wilders, students who finish eventually, but just not in time to be counted.

When asked by the New York Times in 2006 about Northeastern Illinois University’s six-year graduation rate of 16.9 percent, a figure well below the national average of 57 percent, then-President Salme Harju Steinberg argued that students did finish but needed more time to graduate. She said that students came in unprepared and then had to balance academics with family and work responsibilities. “That it takes another year or two years longer should be a mark of distinction,” she said. Earlier this year, Ricardo Maestas, the president of Sul Ross State University in Texas, echoed Steinberg’s claims, telling the Fort Worth Star Telegram that one reason for his college’s 18.7 percent graduation rate is that his students balance work and school and need more than six years to finish.

In 2008, the federal government moved to extend the graduation time frame even further, offering critics a chance to verify their claims. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that year required schools to report graduation rates at 200 percent of time enrolled—as long as eight years or four years depending on whether it is a four-year or two-year institution. This data, for the first time, presents a better picture of long-term college completion trends by institution. That picture shows there are very few Van Wilders in real life, especially at four-year institutions.

As Chart 1 shows, despite the addition of as many as two years to the measurement window, institutions overall showed only modest increases in their graduation rate. Two-year institutions showed the greatest gains: Their graduation rate increased by 5.4 percentage points, going from 31.4 percent to 36.7 percent. Next, less-than-two-year schools showed a gain of 3 percentage points, from 68 percent to 71 percent. Four-year institutions registered the smallest gains, with a change of only 2.8 percentage points, going from 57.4 percent to 60.2 percent.

In other words, it is a good idea to measure graduation rates for longer than the amount of time a program is expected to take to complete. After all, many students take longer than four years to finish a four-year degree. But of them, the vast majority finishes within the next two years. Graduation rate returns beyond 150 percent of the expected time diminish rapidly.
Four-year colleges with very low graduation rates did show a larger improvement than other colleges when measured over eight years. But the gains are still small. As Chart 2 shows, schools with a graduation rate at or below 30 percent—representing the roughly 200 worst institutions on this measure—increased their completion rates by 4.7 percentage points on average. Schools with graduation rates over 30 percent saw a gain of only 2.6 percentage points. Still, after eight years of enrolling, just 25.5 percent of students at these low-graduation-rate institutions have earned a bachelor’s degree. Northeastern Illinois and Sul Ross both had graduation rate increases that were slightly above average, going from 18.6 percent to 26.1 percent and 18.7 percent to 24.9 percent, respectively. Admittedly, both schools did improve—but those gains mean they graduated one out of every four students instead of less than one out of every five. The story still holds that the vast majority of students who enter Northeastern Illinois or Sul Ross do not graduate from there.

Colleges in the two-year sector demonstrated a similar pattern. As Chart 2 shows, colleges with a graduation rate at or below 30 percent when measured after 150 percent of time increased their completion rates by 6.2 percentage points on average. By contrast, institutions with a graduation rate above 30 percent raised their graduation rate by 4.1 percentage points on average. Again, the institutions with lower graduation rates show greater improvement, but at 23.1 percent, their overall completion rate is still low.

Meeting the President’s Goal

In his 2009 State of the Union address, President Obama laid out a new goal—to have the United States become first in the world again in the percentage of its population that has a college degree or certificate. With college-going rates already at an all-time high, this goal is unlikely to be met by simply getting more students into higher education. Instead, American colleges must do a better job retaining and graduating the students they already have. In particular, efforts should focus on those institutions that take in large numbers of students and produce comparatively few graduates—namely the non-selective public four-year institutions and community colleges that educate over half of all students in higher education.

The longer-term graduation rate data provide a hopeful indication that efforts aimed at improving outcomes at these schools can succeed. As Chart 3 shows, public colleges and universities still have lower outcomes than their nonprofit peers under the longer measurement window, but in every instance, public colleges showed greater average gains from 150 to 200 percent of time than their peer colleges of similar length. Community colleges, for example, raised their graduation by 6 percentage points from 150 to 200 percent of time, compared to gains of 4.8 percent at private nonprofits and 3.2 percent at for-profits. At institutions of less than two years, public colleges registered gains of 5.5 percentage points versus 3.1 percentage points for private nonprofits and 2.7 percentage points at for-profits. Similarly, public four-year institutions raised their graduation rates by 3.4 percentage points versus 1.9 percentage
points at for-profits and 1.5 percentage points at private nonprofits.

There is much room here for improvement, because as Chart 4 shows, most colleges only produce a few additional graduates from 150 to 200 percent of the time expected to complete. Of the 4,614 schools reporting, 4,094 added 50 or fewer additional graduates to their ranks. The notable exception to this are schools like California State University, Long Beach, which produced 430 additional graduates, the most of any school in any sector. That institution could offer some lessons on retention and completion for others that struggle with low graduation and high dropout rates.

Extending the measurement window recorded another 87,000 additional graduates, including 33,000 bachelor's degree recipients. But the fact remains that more than 1.1 million students still fail to complete college at their original institution. Of the bachelor's degree-seeking students who did not finish within six years of enrolling, just 6.5 percent graduated within eight years. Among two-year schools, 7.8 percent of students who failed to earn a degree during the 150 percent measurement period graduated within the longer window; the rate at institutions with programs of less-than two years was 9.3 percent. The fact that the greatest marginal increases occur at programs in which students may need an extra few months or a term to finish, not additional years, indicates that policy efforts are better directed toward getting students to finish as close to on-time as possible.

The few students that do finish seven or eight years after entering college would be better served by getting through faster. Taking longer to graduate means delaying the earnings benefits associated with completing college. And individuals who take longer than necessary often end up earning more credits than needed to graduate, a significant expense to state and federal governments that must provide subsidies and grants for these unnecessary classes.

Taking substantially longer than expected to earn a degree lessens the chance of finishing at all since it provides more opportunities for life or work to intervene. Though there are students who persist as long as eight years to earn a credential, these students are an exception, not the norm. We can measure students for as long as we want, but if they aren’t graduating close to what’s considered “on time,” it’s unlikely that they are ever going to finish.

**More on the Web**
- Chart 2: Schools with low graduation rates still fare poorly…
- Chart 3: Public colleges benefit most …
- Chart 4: Most schools graduated only a handful more students …
- Methodology

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‘Trust Us’ Won’t Cut It Anymore
Kevin Carey

“Trust us.” That’s the only answer colleges ever provide when asked how much their students learn.

Sure, they acknowledge, it’s hard for students to find out what material individual courses will cover. So most students choose their courses based on a paragraph in the catalog and whatever secondhand information they can gather.

No, there’s isn’t an independent evaluation process. No standardized tests, no external audits, no publicly available learning evidence of any kind.

Yes, there’s been grade inflation. A minus is the new C. Granted, faculty have every incentive to neglect their teaching duties while chasing tenure—if they’re lucky enough to be in the chase at all. Meanwhile the steady adjunctification of the professoriate proceeds.

Still, “trust us,” they say: Everyone who walks across our graduation stage has completed a rigorous course of study. We don’t need to systematically evaluate student learning. Indeed, that would violate the academic freedom of our highly trained faculty, each of whom embodies the proud scholarly traditions of this venerable institution.
Now we know that those are lies.

Richard Arum, a professor of sociology and education at New York University, and Josipa Roksa, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, recently completed a study of how much 2,300 statistically representative undergraduates—who enrolled as freshmen in a diverse group of 24 colleges and universities in 2005—had learned by the time they (in theory) were ready to graduate, in 2009. As a measuring tool, the researchers used the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a respected test of analytic reasoning, critical thinking, and written communication skills. Their findings were published this month in Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (University of Chicago Press) and in an accompanying white paper. It is, remarkably, the first study of its kind.

Their finding? Forty-five percent of students made no gains on the CLA during their first two years in college. Thirty-six percent made no gains over the entire four years. They learned nothing. On average, students improved by less than half a standard deviation in four years. “American higher education,” the researchers found, “is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students.”

The results for black students were particularly sobering. It turns out that the racial achievement gaps that shock the conscience in K–12 education get worse when students go to college. Those who see affirmative action as the defining issue for minority-student opportunity should look again. The biggest injustice falls on the majority of black students, who attend nonselective colleges—and thus don’t engage with affirmative action—and all too often fail to learn.

Critics like Charles Murray will probably say those students should not have gone to college in the first place. But that would amount to condemning them for the failures of their institutions, because the study found that how much students learn has a lot do with how much colleges ask them to work. After controlling for demographics, parental education, SAT scores, and myriad other factors, students who were assigned more books to read and more papers to write learned more. Students who spent more hours studying alone learned more. Students taught by approachable faculty who enforced high expectations learned more. “What students do in higher education matters,” the authors note. “But what faculty members do matters too.”

The study also found significant differences by field of study. Students majoring in the humanities, social sciences, hard sciences, and math—again, controlling for their background—did relatively well. Students majoring in business, education, and social work did not. Our future teachers aren’t learning much in college, apparently, which goes a long way toward explaining why students arrive in college unprepared in the first place.

Financial aid also matters. The study found that students whose financial aid came primarily in the form of grants learned more than those who were paying mostly with loans. Debt burdens can be psychological and temporal as well as financial, with students substituting work for education in order to manage their future obligations. Learning was also negatively correlated with—surprise—time spent in fraternities and sororities.

Some will question whether learning can be fairly measured with a standardized test. But the Collegiate Learning Assessment has been validated by numerous independent studies. The fact that the results are sensitive to academic and curricular rigor tells us that the instrument measures more than just innate aptitude. Students who are asked to work harder learn more than similar students who are not.

Others might argue that students gain specific knowledge in the disciplines not picked up by the CLA. But as college leaders constantly emphasize, the most important part of higher education is learning how to think, not accumulating facts and figures. In any event, I’m sure those who disagree with Academically Adrift’s findings will provide counterevidence that meets the high standards of scholarship and empiricism embodied by their own institutions of higher learning.

The study makes clear that there are two kinds of college students in America. A minority of them start with a good high-school education and attend colleges that challenge them with hard work. They
learn some things worth knowing. The rest—most college students—start underprepared, and go to colleges that ask little of them and provide little in return. Their learning gains are minimal or nonexistent. Among them, those with a reasonable facility for getting out of bed in the morning and navigating a bureaucracy receive a credential that falsely certifies learning. Others don’t get even that.

Consider too that the study measured the growth of only those students who were still in college two and four years later. The all-too-common dropouts weren’t included. It’s a fair bet their results were even worse.

Who is hurt the most by all this? Students saddled with thousands of dollars in debt and no valuable skills, certainly. Even worse, workers who never went to college in the first place, languishing in their careers for lack of a college credential. To them, the higher-education system must seem like a gigantic confidence game, with students and colleges conspiring to produce hollow degrees that nonetheless define the boundaries of opportunity.

This study should be a wake-up call for the Obama administration. The president’s goal of substantially increasing college completion by 2020 is admirable. But the students on the margins of college completion are much more likely to fall into the danger zone of poor preparation, low admissions selectivity, and lack of academic rigor. New federal policies need to ensure that they don’t just earn a degree, but actually learn something along the way.

Fortunately, the way forward is clear. The students who learned the most in the study came from all manner of academic backgrounds. Nobody is doomed to failure.

This article originally appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education on January 18, 2011.

Why 529 College Savings Plans Favor the Fortunate
Chad Aldeman

College costs have skyrocketed 82 percent over the past decade, prompting more and more families to turn to private savings accounts, or 529 savings plans, to pay for higher education. These plans allow parents to put away money for their child’s college expenses in accounts where investment earnings are allowed to grow tax-free until the child is ready for college. Today, every state sponsors at least one 529 plan, and families have more than 10 million accounts, assets of which have increased from $14 billion to $135 billion in the last decade.

Despite their popularity, 529 savings plans have a remarkably poor track record. The plans rely on the power of compounding stock market returns to finance higher education. But the recent collapse in stock market prices diluted that power, as parents who had been carefully putting away money for years suddenly watched those account balances plummet in a matter of months. The Great Recession made clear what should have been obvious all along: Market rises and falls create huge winners and losers, based solely on luck and timing. Thus, for 529 savings account owners, when their child enters college matters far more than how much they have saved for it.

In their present form, 529 savings plans have been in use nationwide only since 2001; so, no one has had a full 18 years for the plan to mature. But using a hypothetical family’s contributions, along with real college costs and the average annual rate of return for the Standard & Poor’s 500, we can calculate the value of savings plans over time and illustrate the influence of market volatility and the importance of timing. These calculations represent more accurate depictions of what might happen to real investors than simply looking at long-term market averages, which mask swings in either direction.

Chart 1 assumes 529 savings plans have been in existence for the past 40 years and shows the number of years a student could afford to attend a public or private four-year university using only the savings account. The chart assumes families will make annual contributions of $1,000 (in 2010 dollars) from the time a child is born until age 18, when he is expected to enroll in college. For costs, the chart uses the actual
529 plans favor the lucky

18 years of investing $1,000 a year in a 529 plan would have earned enough for...

It’s all about timing...

Investors starting in 1979 would have earned enough by 1997 for

- 4.27 years of public college
- 1.84 years of private college

But investors starting in 1990 would have enough by 2008 for only

- 0.72 years of public college
- 0.32 years of private college

Tuitons rise when students can least afford it...

2000 grads saw their tuition increase

- 13.6% for public college
- 14.5% for private college

But the market grew money by

- 236% for private college

2010 grads saw their tuition increase

- 19.0% for public college
- 18.0% for private college

But the market grew money by only

- 14.0% for private college

Note: Chart assumes families will make annual contributions of $1,000 (in 2010 dollars) from the time a child is born until age 18. It uses real inflation rates and real annual returns for the S&P 500. For costs, it uses the actual unadjusted cost of tuition, fees, room, and board at the average four-year public and private university as calculated by the College Board’s 2009 "Trends in College Pricing" report.

* For future years, the chart uses 2009–10 college costs and assumes no change.
unadjusted cost of tuition, fees, room, and board at
the average four-year public and private university.
The results vary greatly depending on the year a
student enters college. A student entering a public
college in 1997, for example, could have paid for
as much as 4.27 years of college, while a student
entering in 2008 could have paid for only .72 years.
The figures for private colleges show a similar pattern.

Why the large differences? The first reason is that
states deal with recessions by cutting contributions
to public colleges and universities. This leads to
rising tuition and fees for students at a time when
they can least afford it. For example, 2010 public
and private graduates saw their tuition rise 19 and
18 percent respectively. Compare that to the 13.6

and 14.5 percent increase 2000 public and private
grads faced. Second, and far more importantly, 2000
graduates witnessed the market grow their money
by 236 percent since birth, while 2010 graduates had
only gained about 14 percent on their investments.
Ideally, 529 savings plans would have helped to defray
the unexpected cost increases. In reality, students
attending college at the “wrong” time get both higher
costs and less money to pay for them.

In other words, inherently unpredictable events
dramatically affect 529 results. Students graduating
in 1990 would have attended school during the
savings and loan crisis of the late 1980s, and their
accounts likely would have taken a significant hit. If
those same students had graduated 10 years later,
in 2000, their 529 accounts would have been buoyed
by the technology boom and the longest bull market
in modern history. The market’s rise would have
completely covered their college costs. Compare
those students’ experience to the public college
freshman whose parents sat her down at the kitchen
table in the fall of 2008 to explain that the 529 account
they had been diligently contributing to for 18 years
would be exhausted by March of the following year.

As states decrease their investment in higher
education, more of the burden of paying for college
shifts to individuals and families. The result is a
greater reliance on 529 savings plans. But this option
depends on key assumptions to work as planned,
such as the belief that the stock market, based on
historical averages and given enough time, will always
rise. This assumption is touted by the 401(k) industry,
which encourages long-term investments in the stock
market as a way to pay for retirement. But saving for
college is not like saving for retirement. The shorter
time horizon of saving for college—18 years for
traditional college students compared to 40+ years
for retirement—increases risk and volatility. And,
unlike retirement, college typically cannot (and often
should not) be delayed for a year or two if investments
turn sour. Students who enter college immediately
after high school have a greater chance of eventual
graduation.

As with 401(k) plans, in order to protect their savings
from the harsher swings in the market, 529 plan
owners are advised to park their investments in more
conservative options as the time the money will be
needed nears. But the most recent stock market crash
made clear that even state-sponsored “conservative”
investment options lost vast amounts of money in
assets that were riskier than advertised. In the midst
of the Great Recession, 529 funds sponsored by
Maryland and Virginia lost as much as 30 percent
of their value in less than a year. In North Carolina, a
fund that promised to automatically decrease the risk
of its investments as participants neared college age
lost 30 percent of its value in the first 11 months of
2008, even though plan members were only a year
from college.

Even with their unpredictable nature, 529 plans remain
popular because of their tax benefits. In addition
to the roughly $600 million annual federal income
tax subsidy, 34 out of 43 states with income taxes
provide their own incentives through deductions
or credits. A 2009 Treasury report found that tax
incentives matter most for middle- and high-income
households. The value of tax deductions correspond
to tax rates, meaning individuals paying higher taxes
see greater benefits. For high-income households, the
tax advantages of financing college expenses through 529 plans can amount to as much as a 39 percent advantage over traditional taxable savings accounts. For middle-income families, the advantage was 35 percent, but for low-income families, it was only 22 percent.

It is no surprise, then, that wealthy families are more likely to participate in 529 plans. Chart 2 shows 529 plan participation by income in the state of Kansas. Although 80 percent of Kansas taxpayers earned less than $75,000 in 2007, they collected only 10 percent of the 529 tax deductions. In contrast, only 1 percent of Kansans earned more than $250,000, yet they claimed 37 percent of the total tax benefits for 529 plans. The average deduction for wealthy Kansans was nearly five times larger than the ones claimed by Kansas residents earning less than $50,000. Publicly available data from other states confirm that the benefits of 529 savings plans tend to be concentrated among the wealthy.

While helping families afford higher education is a worthy public policy goal, federal and state tax codes may not be the best way to accomplish it. Market volatility makes results vulnerable to luck and timing, and tax advantages mean such policies are more likely to benefit the wealthy. To pay for 529 savings plans, the federal government will be forgoing $2.9 billion in lost revenue from 2010–2014. That money would be better used to boost programs that directly help students afford college who would otherwise not be able to.

The U.S. Department of Education spends nearly $150 billion per year backing student loans and providing a variety of higher education grant programs primarily targeted to low- and moderate-income students. State governments directly subsidize public higher education for nearly three-fourths of the undergraduate students nationwide, in addition to offering their own grant and loan programs. Each of these options provides a better way to make college affordable than unpredictable and poorly targeted 529 plans.

Two Cheers for Virginia’s Higher-Ed Proposal

Kristen Amundson

In an otherwise contentious state budget negotiation, Gov. Bob McDonnell’s higher-education plan was one thing on which the Senate and the House could agree. The final budget authorizes $65 million in new general-fund spending to expand access to higher education and to encourage Virginia students to study the so-called STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering and math. The governor himself had requested $50 million, so the House and the Senate clearly signaled that they agreed with this priority.

That’s worth cheering about. But instead of a robust three cheers, I’d give the plan only two.

First cheer: The governor’s plan highlights the critical issue of increasing the numbers of Virginia college graduates. Today, according to the education reform organization Achieve, 81 percent of Virginia’s jobs are classified as high-skill, meaning they require some postsecondary education or training. But only 43 percent of Virginia’s adults have a postsecondary degree. Adding 100,000 new college degree or certificate-holders to Virginia’s workforce will help close that gap.

Second cheer: The plan will encourage students to pursue the majors that are most likely to help them find jobs. For 2010 graduates, the top 15 highest-earning college degrees all have one thing in common—they are in STEM fields. That’s according to a recent survey of average starting offers from the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

But here’s where the cheering stops. Because even if Virginia expands access to higher education, will Virginia’s high school graduates be ready to do
higher education

college-level work? Sadly, this is a place where there is no cause for celebration.

Too few of Virginia’s students earn a high school diploma. Recently, when America’s Promise, the philanthropic organization founded by Colin Powell, looked at graduation rates across the nation, it found that Virginians have shown “no significant improvement in their graduation rate over time.” Our graduation rate in 2008 (78 percent), showed virtually no change from the graduation rate in 2002 (76.7 percent).

As for the students who do graduate from high school, far too few arrive at college ready to do college-level work. Every year, 24 percent of Virginia’s high school graduates need remedial classes, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The dirty little secret about remedial classes is that they put students on a fast track to nowhere. They take students’ time and tuition money, but they don’t give them college credit. Only 30 percent of students who take a remedial reading class, and only 42 percent of those who need remedial math, will ever earn a college degree.

Yet those remedial classes are expensive for both the students and the commonwealth. The Alliance for Excellent Education predicts that Virginia could save more than $36 million a year if college students could actually do college work.

So if we’re going to achieve the goal of increasing the number of students who both get to college and graduate, here are three steps we should take: First, raise our high school graduation rate to 90 percent. While Virginia’s graduation rate was stagnant, 29 other states showed big, moderate or at least some gains. If our neighboring states like Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina and West Virginia can make this kind of progress, Virginia can as well.

Second, increase the number of students taking math and science courses. Today, Virginia students who earn a Standard Diploma or a Standard Technical Diploma can graduate from high school with just three years of math and three years of science.

Not surprisingly, that does not prepare them for college work. According to Change the Equation, an organization that encourages students to study the STEM disciplines, just 53 percent of Virginia’s high school graduates were ready to do college-level math, and even fewer 37 percent were prepared for college-level science.

Virginia’s Advanced Studies Diploma and the Advanced Technical Diploma both require students to take four years of math and science. Virginia should set a goal of eliminating the Standard and the Standard Technical Diplomas.

Students should also be able to learn whether they’re ready to do college work before they get to college. California gives students a chance to take the Early Assessment Program. Developed through a partnership among California’s state universities, the state board of education, and the California Department of Education, this assessment tells students whether they have the skills they’ll need to be successful in college while they’re still in high school.

The governor and the General Assembly should be congratulated for recognizing the need to increase the number of college graduates in Virginia, and to encourage them to study the STEM disciplines. The next step will be to ensure that Virginia’s high school graduates arrive in college ready to do college-level work.

That would be something to cheer about.

This article originally appeared in the Richmond-Times Dispatch on March 3, 2011.
Reconstructing Higher Education
Richard Lee Colvin and Forrest Hinton

We have long been proud of our colleges and universities, and rightly so. During the 20th century, the United States created the model of the modern research university that became the envy of the world. We invented the community college and built systems of high-quality, low-cost public institutions that made higher education accessible to soldiers returning from the war, baby boomers, low-income students, immigrants, and racial minorities.

Twenty years ago, the nation topped the world in the percentage of adults age 25 to 34 with college degrees. Our elementary and secondary schools might have been cause for concern but, with students from around the world wanting to enroll, our colleges and universities were above reproach.

No longer. Today, the United States ranks 10th among developed nations in the percentage of young workers holding a postsecondary credential or degree. It’s not that today’s young people are less educated than their elders. Rather, it’s that other nations are doing all they can to boost college participation and attainment and have surpassed the United States.

President Obama—backed by leading foundations, many economists, other politicians and education experts—argues the nation’s long-term economic competitiveness depends in large measure on increasing the percentage of the American workforce holding postsecondary credentials or degrees.

But the recession battered the public purse as well as private pocketbooks. Public colleges and universities, which educate the vast majority of Americans, will have to take on the president’s historic challenge with no near-term prospects of large revenue increases.

State appropriations per student fell in 30 states between 2005 and 2010, according to a report by the State Higher Education Executive Officers. Tuition increases covered the loss of state funds in only 12 of those states, leaving the higher education systems in 18 states with less revenue overall. Higher education was spared from much deeper cuts in 2010 thanks to extra funds provided through the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. ARRA funds, however, are running out and fiscal year 2012 is expected to be much worse.

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett, for example, wants to slash support for his state’s higher education system by $271 million or 54 percent even though a consulting company hired last year to find efficiencies identified only $1.5 million in potential cost savings.

“Without sitting down—almost with a blank piece of paper—and saying we start over again, there’s not much left on the efficiency side,” says John Cavanaugh, the system’s chancellor.

Rather than undertake such efficiency and cost-saving measures, however, most colleges and universities are responding to this fiscal downturn as they have in the past: lobbying states for more money, raising tuition and shrinking their offerings, even as more students than ever want to enroll.

Other hard-hit states include Oregon, Washington, and Georgia, which raised tuition for University of Georgia students by 46 percent over the past two years. Georgia also is restricting its popular Hope Scholarship program, which covers tuition and fees, to only the most highly accomplished high school graduates. The Center on Budget Priorities, a liberal Washington, D.C., policy research organization, projects that at least 17 states are considering “large, identifiable cuts in support for state colleges and universities with direct impacts on students” in 2012.
Neither the demand for increased postsecondary credentials and degrees nor the budget pressures are going to abate soon. But policy analysts and others who have long called on higher education to make fundamental reforms to reduce costs while maintaining high-quality programs and boosting graduation rates see the situation as an opportunity, rather than a tragedy. They say now is the time for legislatures to push colleges to make wider use of online instruction, re-examine degree requirements and give incentives to students to finish more quickly and to colleges to help them. They also need to ease the transition from community colleges to universities, re-examine spending on athletics, and even consider reducing health benefits and salaries.

Rather than undertake such efficiency and cost-saving measures, however, most colleges and universities are responding to this fiscal downturn as they have in the past: lobbying states for more money, raising tuition and shrinking their offerings, even as more students than ever want to enroll.

**Back to Basics**

The growing emphasis of online education is pushing colleges in 21 states to join with The National Center for Academic Transformation to fundamentally redesign their introductory and remedial courses. Participating academic departments will be able to teach more students at lower costs by using computer-based instruction and online forums to supplement or replace classroom lectures. This spring, 38 redesigned basic-level math classes will be part of a pilot project at community colleges across the nation as part of the center’s Changing the Equation program.

In California, the UC system is just beginning to experiment with large-scale online learning, announcing in April that it would take out a $2 million loan to pilot several online undergraduate courses by the start of 2012.

Yet, even for states that have made major changes to higher education in recent years, more transformative innovations may be on the horizon. An analysis by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems conducted for the Lumina Foundation on Education found that increasing the student-faculty ratio by 10 percent would save $10 billion annually over the next 15 years. Reconfiguring faculties and responsibilities could reduce the cost of instructional salaries by another $3.6 billion a year. Slimming down benefits packages, eliminating some extracurricular activities, creating institutional collaborations and offering incentives for students to take fewer courses not needed for graduation also would significantly cut costs.

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**Bad Job Market**

*Why the Media Is Always Wrong About the Value of a College Degree*

Kevin Carey

Sally Cameron thought she had done everything right. After studying French and Arabic at a toney liberal arts college, she knew that graduate school would help her career chances. But when she hit the job market, her Ivy League management degree didn’t seem to matter. The worst recession in decades had pushed the unemployment rate to nearly 10 percent and good jobs were scarce. Sally paid the rent by tending bar and filled her time with volunteer work.

Meanwhile, experts and government officials warned that the days ahead would be grim. For decades, a growing number of students had streamed into higher education assuming that their degrees would lead to prosperity. Now people were openly questioning whether college was really worth it. As one George Washington University labor economist said, “A surfeit of any commodity—a BA or an MA—means that eventually it will stop paying off.”

Sally’s story sounds like the kind of depressing story filling the pages of newspapers and the popular press these days. Two weeks ago, the *New York
Times published an article titled “Many With New College Degree Find the Job Market Humbling.” The piece immediately shot to the top of the Times’ “most emailed” list. Chemistry majors were tending bar, it noted, while labor economists were finding an alarming number of college graduates in jobs that did not require a college degree.

There’s only one difference: Sally Cameron earned her master’s degree from Yale in 1980. The Washington Post story that described her struggles was published in 1982. For going on four decades, the press has been raising alarms that college degrees may no longer be a sound investment. Two things about these stories have remained constant: They always feature an over-educated bartender, and they are always wrong.

Until the middle of the 20th century, relatively few people worried about a glut of college graduates because relatively few people went to college. But when the 1944 G.I. Bill was followed by a huge expansion of public university and community college systems in the 1950s and 1960s, the labor market changed dramatically. In 1940, less than 5 percent of adults over age 25 had a bachelor’s degree. That number nearly quadrupled over the next 40 years.

In 1976, Harvard University labor economist Richard Freeman published a book called The Overeducated American, which predicted that a surplus of diplomas would push the long-term wages of college graduates down. The New York Times wrote a front-page story about it that began: “After generations during which going to college was assumed to be a sure route to the better life, college-educated Americans are losing their economic advantage….” People magazine framed its coverage of Freeman’s book with a provocative question: “Is a college degree still a passport to white collar success?”

The answer, it turned it out, was unequivocally “Yes.” As Freeman’s book and others like it made the rounds, the labor market was embarking on what turned into a decades-long run-up in the value of college degrees. Students continued to matriculate in record numbers. The percent of adults with a bachelor’s degree passed 20 percent in the 1980s, 25 percent in the 1990s, and stands just below 30 percent today. Yet despite the increase in supply, the price that employers were willing to pay for college graduates went up, not down. The inflation-adjusted median wage of bachelor’s degree holders increased by 34 percent from 1983 to 2008. (The earnings for high school dropouts, on the other hand, fell by 2 percent during the same time.) People with graduate degrees did even better, increasing their earnings by 55 percent.

The biggest gains came at the high end of the income spectrum. In 1970, 37 percent of people with bachelor’s degrees were in the top three deciles of income. By 2007, that proportion had increased to 48 percent. Graduate degree holders went from 41 percent to 61 percent. People with only a high school diploma or less, by contrast, increasingly fell into poverty.

For going on four decades, the press has been raising alarms that college degrees may no longer be a sound investment. Two things about these stories have remained constant: They always feature an over-educated bartender, and they are always wrong.

None of this, however, has stopped the nation’s leading news outlets from regularly publishing terrifying stories about college graduates unable to find decent work, particularly during economic downturns when unemployment and insecurity were on the rise. The formula has been carefully refined over the years: Start with a grim headline, like “Grimly, Graduates Are Finding Few Jobs” (Times, 1991). Build the lede around a recent college graduate in the most demeaning possible profession (janitor, meter maid, file clerk) and living circumstances (on food stamps, eating Ramen noodles, moved back home with parents). Pull back to a broader thesis, like “The payoff from a bachelor’s degree is beginning to falter” (Times, 2005). Cite an expert asserting that this is
Higher Education

no passing trend, e.g., “We are going to be turning out about 200,000 to 300,000 too many college graduates a year in the ‘80s,” said Ronald E. Kutscher, Associate Commissioner at the Bureau of Labor Statistics” (Times, 1983). Finish with a rueful quote from the recent college graduate. “When I have to put my hands into trash soaked with urine or vomit, I say ‘What am I doing here? This job is the bottom. Did I go to college to do this?’” (Post, 1981).

The media get the story wrong every time for a number of reasons. People naturally tend to project current trends into the future, missing the up-and-down nature of the business cycle. Editors know that “Thing-you-thought-was-true-isn’t-actually-true” stories boost circulation. The college graduates who read newspapers like the Post and Times like to see their personal insecurities dramatized as national trends of great significance.

This article originally appeared in The New Republic on June 9, 2011.

Debt to Degree
A New Way of Measuring College Success
Kevin Carey and Erin Dillon

The American higher education system is plagued by two chronic problems: dropouts and debt. Barely half of the students who start college get a degree within six years, and graduation rates at less-selective colleges often hover at 25 percent or less. At the same time, student loan debt is at an all-time high, recently passing credit card debt in total volume. Loan default rates have risen sharply in recent years, consigning a growing number of students to years of financial misery. In combination, drop-outs and debt are a major threat to the nation’s ability to help students become productive, well-educated citizens.

The federal government has traditionally tracked these issues by calculating, for each college, the total number of degrees awarded, the percentage of students who graduate on time, and the percentage of students who default on their loans. Each of these statistics provides valuable information, but none shows a complete picture. A college could achieve a stellar graduation rate by passing students along and handing out degrees that have little value in the job market, making it difficult for graduates to earn enough money to pay off their debt. Alternatively, a college could keep tuition and loan default rates low while also providing a terrible education and helping few students earn degrees. Students choosing colleges and policymakers governing higher education need an overall measure of value, one that combines debt and graduation.

Education Sector has created such a measure, the “borrowing to credential ratio.” For each college, we have taken newly available U.S. Department of Education data showing the total amount of money borrowed by undergraduates and divided that sum by the total number of degrees awarded. The results are revealing:

• Nationwide, the overall borrowing to credential ratio has risen sharply in recent years.
• Certain segments of the higher education industry—in particular, for-profit colleges—are racking up far more student debt per degree than others.
• State policies matter a great deal, with seemingly similar public university systems achieving widely varying results for students.
• Among elite colleges and universities, some are making good on their pledge to help low- and middle-income students graduate without major financial burdens while others are riding a wave of student debt to fame and fortune.

Different Sectors, Different Trends
While the borrowing to credential ratio increased in every sector of higher education from 2006 to 2009, ratios in some sectors were much larger and grew much faster than others. The average ratio at four-year
institutions was $18,559 over the three-year period, more than double the $7,218 at two-year institutions. This is to be expected: four-year institutions provide a longer education and generally charge more per credit than two-year institutions, particularly low-cost community colleges where borrowing is still relatively uncommon.

But within the four- and two-year sectors, there are sharp differences in the borrowing to credential ratio. As Chart 2 shows, the average ratio at public four-year universities was $16,247. At private nonprofit colleges and universities, it was $21,827. For-profit universities, by contrast, produced $43,383 in debt for every degree. This difference is arguably even more significant than it seems. While public and private four-year institutions are overwhelmingly in the business of granting four-year degrees (90 percent of their undergraduate degrees were bachelor’s degrees in 2008–09), for-profit four-year institutions tend to grant significant numbers of two-year associate degrees and shorter-term credentials (56 percent of their degrees in 2008–09). These less-valuable credentials should presumably cost students less, yet the amount of debt taken on by students to obtain them is significant.

The same pattern exists among two-year and less-than-two-year institutions: borrowing to credential ratios at for-profit colleges are higher than elsewhere. In addition, these figures only show borrowing in the federal student loan program. So-called “private” student loans, which are made by banks and private lenders at interest rates that frequently run to the double-digits, are more prevalent among students attending for-profit colleges. If they were included in the calculations, borrowing to credential ratios at for-profit colleges would presumably look even worse.
Public universities receive direct government subsidies to keep tuition low, so it is to be expected that their students will borrow less. But private nonprofit colleges do not receive such subsidies, and their borrowing to credential ratios are still much lower than their for-profit competitors. There are several reasons for this. The for-profit industry expanded rapidly between 2006 and 2009, so there may be a disproportionate number of students in the system who have borrowed but not yet graduated. Overall graduation rates at many for-profits are very low—37 percent at for-profit four-year institutions, for example. Borrowing rates at for-profits are often very high. Large for-profits like The University of Phoenix and Kaplan University get over 80 percent of their revenues from federal grant and loan programs, and recruiters actively encourage students to take out loans. And while the “sticker price” at private nonprofit colleges is frequently substantial, those institutions also provide many students with tuition discounts that for-profits do not.

As Chart 3 shows, there are also significant differences in the borrowing to credential ratio within the for-profit industry. Among publicly traded for-profit higher education companies, American Public Education (which runs the American Public University System and American Military University) has a ratio of just $9,728. Tuition at these colleges is relatively low (in the range of $6,000), and a significant number of students are current and former members of the armed services who use military tuition assistance to help pay for college.

**State Policy Matters**

Traditional public universities produce lower borrowing to credential ratios than for-profit colleges, on average. But there is still much variation within the public sector. Consider Iowa State University and Florida State University. On the surface, they look very similar. Founded in the 1850s, both are large, public universities that conduct a significant amount of research but play second fiddle to their state’s flagship university. Both graduate just over two-thirds of their students within six years, most of whom attend college full-time and are of traditional college-going age. The average ACT scores of entering freshman are similar (mid-20s) as are the percentages of students who receive Pell grants. The total cost of attending each institution is very similar—Iowa costs $165 more.

But the borrowing to credential ratio shows that appearances can be deceiving. Iowa State students borrow $20,237 per degree earned. This is almost double the ratio at Florida State, which is $10,888. The difference is state policy. All states subsidize higher education, but some are more generous than others. Students who pay less borrow less, and that affects the borrowing to credential ratio. Map 1 shows the overall borrowing to credential ratio at public institutions in all 50 states.

**Stopping the Trends**

Borrowing is increasingly the norm in American higher education. The long-term consequences of floating colleges on a sea of debt have yet to be fully realized, as a growing number of students leave school with tens of thousands of dollars in loans that can take as long as 30 years to repay and cannot be discharged in bankruptcy. National graduation rates have been stagnant for decades, and many competitor nations are helping more adults earn valuable college degrees. The sharp increase in the national borrowing to credential ratio suggests that urgent action is needed to arrest these trends.

Fortunately, concrete steps can be taken to solve these problems. States and colleges can re-orient their financial aid policies toward students who need financial aid the most. They can also focus more attention on counseling and academic support for students who are at-risk of dropping out. States like Iowa can learn from more successful states like Florida. New regulations like the “gainful employment” rules recently put in place by the U.S. Department of Education can rein in for-profit colleges that load up students with unmanageable financial obligations. Without such reforms, colleges and students will increasingly be drowning in debt.

MORE ON THE WEB

- Map 1: There is wide variation in borrowing to credential ratios among states.
- Chart 2: Borrowing to credential ratios at for-profits are higher than elsewhere.
- Data Set: Raw data and ratios for all institutions
- Blog Post: “What Does the Borrowing to Credential Ratio Mean, Exactly?”
The Ugly Carrot
Anne Hyslop

One of the more clever parts of my favorite film this summer, *Bridesmaids*, put a name on an everyday phenomenon: the ugly carrot. The ugly carrot may be misshapen and shriveled, the runt of the bag or a colossus. And while it is certainly less satisfying in appearance, it still tastes alright.

In the policy game of sticks and carrots, Secretary Duncan’s announcement that he will use regulatory authority to promote President Obama’s education initiatives if Congress fails to reauthorize ESEA soon is the ugly carrot. Specifically, the Department of Education would grant waivers to states in meeting a handful of unspecified provisions of No Child Left Behind—most likely, the 100% proficiency by 2014 mandate—if states enact a series of Obama-endorsed reforms.

This administration has relied on and used carrots before to great effect. The level of state action in response to the voluntary Race to the Top competition is a shining example. Of course, there were billions of federal dollars at stake, while this plan would rely on regulatory relief alone as the catalyst for change. Just like the ugly carrot, the promise of waivers could get the job done in the end, but it’s not very appetizing on the way down.

Duncan’s announcement has generated near-unanimous criticism from both sides of the education reform debate. Some believe the proposal will impose more burdens—not less—on states, while others have the opposite fear and criticize “Plan B” for accepting states’ excuses for low achievement. At the extreme end, some are calling the move blatantly unconstitutional. And some experts worry that waivers could delay the reauthorization process and settle for piecemeal reform. And I agree, somewhat. Congress, not the Department of Education, must eventually reauthorize NCLB.

—a series of waivers to a select group of states—if designed and implemented thoughtfully and equitably—could provide temporary relief and encourage states to engage in challenging reforms, but it cannot address problems that require a national solution.

Carrots can work. Maybe even an ugly carrot can work. But sometimes, you just need a really big stick.

Rather than getting bogged down in distractions over whether Duncan’s proposal is constitutional, we should be focusing on what is best for those in the classroom: students and teachers. They are the ones who go to work and learn every day in schools that are labeled “failing.”

Wisconsin’s Teachers Union Faces New Political Reality
Richard Lee Colvin

The former longtime president of the teachers union in Toledo, Ohio, a progressive leader named Dal Lawrence, considers Wisconsin’s statewide union to be among the most “retrograde” in the country. “In Wisconsin, they think they invented labor-management relations in the 1920s and they don’t want to hear about anything new since then,” Lawrence told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* last fall.

Last week, however, the union’s leaders showed that they are very much aware of just how much has changed not only since the 1920s but from even as recently as last year. Saying “we believe good teachers should be rewarded,” the union made a sharp turnaround from its previous position and proposed that teachers be paid more when they earn promotions, just as assistant professors get a raise when they become associate or full professors. The union also proposed a new teacher evaluation system, which would consider student achievement as well as other factors, and speed up the dismissal of teachers who are perennially ineffective.

This was a big concession for the union. It no doubt is the result of an internal struggle within its
membership. But the details of the union’s plans don’t really matter because they are highly unlikely to be adopted. Gov. Scott Walker, who came into office last fall as part of a Republican sweep that saw the party also take over the majority in both houses of the Wisconsin legislature and defeat longtime Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold, will soon make public his own plan for boosting teacher effectiveness. But it’s almost certain to be far more radical than what WEAC has proposed. He already has proposed legislation that would strip public employee unions of the right to bargain for improved pensions or health benefits and require workers to pay a bigger share of the cost of those benefits, as is usually the case in the private sector.

Of course, the union in Wisconsin is not alone in recognizing the political headwind it faces. The National Education Association last fall formed a commission to study the union’s role in promoting teacher effectiveness. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, speaks a lot about why it is important for her union to take more responsibility for the profession and for student achievement. But nowhere has the union’s repositioning been as sharp as in Wisconsin.

Does Anyone at Home Really Care About This Report Card?
Sarah Rosenberg

As many in the education policy world know, the National Council on Teacher Quality is conducting a controversial review of the nation’s roughly 1,400 schools of education that will be published in U.S. News and World Report. While many schools are loudly refusing to participate, NCTQ and its supporters believe that clear standards and transparent evaluation will encourage schools to improve their teacher preparation programs and, in turn, their ratings. For that theory of change to work, a school’s rating must trigger market response: A school of education that receives a high rating should see more students apply as well as more districts interested in partnering with the school and hiring its graduates. The extent to which NCTQ’s national ratings matter will depend on whether districts and prospective teachers make decisions based on the ratings. The local nature of teacher labor markets makes it unlikely that this will happen in many parts of the country—will anyone in Weldon, NC, really care that their one nearby school of education was rated poorly?

Last Thursday at NCTQ’s Student Teaching report release, Kate Walsh, the president of NCTQ, noted that elite institutions—whose students may be more mobile than the average new teacher—have a lot to lose from national ratings and not a lot to gain. Many of these colleges and universities have excellent teacher education programs, but primarily retain their elite status based on the institution’s name and reputation. A bad rating could hurt their ability to recruit nationwide and tarnish the reputation of other programs. But for the vast majority of schools of education, students are local and teach locally.

A teacher is more likely to teach near their hometown and college. According to a 2005 study by Donald Boyd et al., 85% of beginning public school teachers in New York from 1999 to 2002 first taught in schools located within 40 miles of their hometown. As a result, a school of education’s location is likely more important to an aspiring teacher than a national rating.

In urban areas with multiple schools of education, however, NCTQ’s ratings will likely have greater value. In a crowded market, a trusted rating could help both aspiring teachers and school districts preference certain schools of education over others.

3 Universities, 12509 Master’s Degrees in Education
Kevin Carey

Yesterday I was poking around in the IPEDS database and ran a search for the total number of master’s degrees in education conferred, by college. The top three were Walden University, The University of Phoenix–Online, and Grand Canyon University, all of which are for-profit and operate
primarily online. In total, they conferred 12,509 master’s degrees in education in 2009.

There are two ways to think about this. On the one hand, a great number of master’s degrees in education are earned by women who have families and full-time teaching jobs. Union contracts and state laws require them to get a master’s degree in order to make more money. There are many ways to design rich, productive online learning environments. So it’s a boon for people to be able to pursue graduate training in their field without having to schlep off to the local public university in the evening while somebody else takes care of their kids. Online education can be more flexible, adaptive, and personalized.

On the other hand, research suggests little or no relationship between having a master’s degree and being a more effective teacher. Teachers get them because they have to, not because they want to. Master’s degrees in education are high-volume commodity credentials and so it’s unsurprising that for-profit companies have aggressively moved into a market where standardized curricula + economies of scale + federal student aid = gigantic profits. Top executives at publicly traded for-profit colleges made $2 billion selling stock over the last seven years. There must be better ways to spend all that time and money on behalf of K–12 schoolchildren.

Which of the two perspectives has more legitimacy depends in large part on whether the degrees in question are any good. And as with so many things in higher learning, we don’t have enough fine-grained information about the quality of the education being provided. If Grand Canyon’s online education master’s degrees are of very high quality then it’s fantastic that information technology is providing these new opportunities and ways of working. If not, then it’s a scam of massive proportions. Federal policy can help, but in the long run colleges themselves have to embrace the challenge of measuring quality in a public, comparable way. When demonstrable quality doesn’t sit at the center of the enterprise, other forces take hold.

What Does Complete College America Know That We Don’t Know?

Amy Laitinen

U.S. college completion rates are low. This is not news. Do we really need another report telling us this? If it’s the just-released report by Complete College America (CCA), then yes we do. While I have recently bemoaned the lack of public national data on critical student outcomes, Complete College America is actually doing something about it. They are (brace yourselves) collecting and using unprecedented amounts of data to help answer questions about how students are doing and where they are getting stuck. In less than two years, this new, small, and feisty group of go-getters has managed to get 33 states to provide unprecedented, comparable amounts of information about their students’ progress and outcomes.

By providing far more information than has been previously available, CCA makes the powerful, painful case that current data systems are failing—failing states, institutions, parents, taxpayers, and—most importantly—students. We currently don’t capture and/or identify huge student populations in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), including part-time, Pell, and those unprepared for college-level work. In an age of decreasing resources and increasing demand for more, better, college graduates, “flying blind” is a luxury we can’t afford. I am not saying CCA’s metrics or methodology are perfect (in my magical queendom, we would also collect workforce, transfer, and learning outcomes, we would better account for the non-linear trajectory of many students, and we would capture information on all institutions, not just publics) but CCA painstakingly demonstrates that that we not only need—but that we should and can—have better data.
Blog Series: Five Lessons From Ohio’s E-Schools
Bill Tucker, Erin Dillon, and Padmini Jambulapati
MAY 2011

While online learning is still new to the vast majority of K–12 students and schools, Ohio has operated “e-schools,” public charter schools that operate entirely online and which students “attend” on a full-time basis, for a decade. As policy debates around online learning grow, what do we know about these schools—who do they enroll and how well do they perform—and what can we learn from Ohio’s e-school experience?

In this blog series, Education Sector’s Bill Tucker, Erin Dillon, and Padmini Jambulapati provide insight into the many characteristics of these e-schools.

Accountability in American Higher Education
Kevin Carey and Mark Schneider
DECEMBER 2010

Three years after U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’s national commission on higher education and nearly a decade after No Child Left Behind revolutionized K–12 accountability, there is little agreement on what accountability in higher education should look like. While more students are enrolling in (and failing to complete) postsecondary education than ever before, scholars and policymakers have paid far less attention to questions of how well colleges are teaching students and helping them earn degrees while simultaneously contributing new research and scholarship. In Accountability in American Higher Education prominent academics, entrepreneurs, and journalists assess the obstacles to, and potential opportunities for, accountability in higher education in America. Key issues include new measures of college student learning, power education data systems, implications for faculty tenure, accreditation, for-profit higher education, community colleges, and the political dynamics of reform. Edited by Education Sector’s Kevin Carey, and American Enterprise Institute’s Mark Schneider, this volume provides insightful analysis that legislators, administrators, and consumers can use to engage institutions of higher education in the difficult but necessary conversation of accountability.

Reinventing Higher Education: The Promise of Innovation
Kevin Carey, Andrew P. Kelly, and Ben Wildavsky
APRIL 2011

The inspiration for this timely book, edited by Education Sector’s Kevin Carey, along with Andrew P. Kelly of AEI, and Ben Wildavsky of Kauffman Foundation, is the pressing need for fresh ideas and innovations in U.S. higher education. At the heart of the volume is the realization that higher education must evolve in fundamental ways if it is to respond to changing professional, economic, and technological circumstances, and if it is to successfully reach and prepare a vast population of students—traditional and nontraditional alike—for success in the coming decades.

This collection of provocative articles by leading scholars, writers, innovators, and university administrators examines the current higher education environment and its chronic resistance to change; the rise of for-profit universities; the potential future role of community colleges in a significantly revised higher education realm; and the emergence of online learning as a means to reshape teaching and learning and to reach new consumers of higher education.
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