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The Spellings Commission and the Case for Professionalizing College Teaching

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BY STEVEN BRINT

If we ourselves reconstruct teaching as a profession, we'll head off those who advocate external control.

Today we face a challenge to the organization of higher education that, however it is resolved, will transform the enterprise. That challenge goes under the name "learning outcomes," or sometimes "accountability." It is a challenge brought largely by those outside higher education and is based on criticisms of the performance of college and university instructors in the face of heightened public expectations. One resolution to the challenge may be the adoption of standardized testing for learning outcomes; another may be the establishment of greater professionalism in college teaching.

Taking steps to professionalize college teaching can improve the quality of teaching while leaving intact three essential features of higher-level teaching and learning: (1) the centrality of discipline-based knowledge systems; (2) the plurality of approaches that contribute to the formation of well-educated adults; and (3) the transformative potential of the college teacher who joins reason to creative insight. If we take the initiative to enforce standards of professionalism, the faculty itself, rather than external regulators, will be in charge of accountability in higher education. It will not be easy to bring greater professionalism to college teaching, because graduate education has, understandably, focused on research rather than teaching. But the future of higher education may ride on our willingness to make the effort.

Calls for Accountability

In 2006, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's Commission on the Future of Higher Education issued a report highly critical of the performance of America's colleges and universities. The report proposed incentives for the adoption of standardized testing to make higher education accountable to "consumers." Although the implicit model for the commission's recommendations, the No Child Left Behind Act, had by 2006 already failed to deliver on its promises for continuous growth in student language and math proficiency and had provoked a bitter, if largely unpublicized, backlash among classroom teachers, the Spellings Commission's report has not faded away. Learning outcomes are on the agenda of virtually every public educational system and nearly every institution of higher education in the country. Two of the leading higher education associations, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, have begun a voluntary system of accountability, which authorizes six competing test instruments as sources of information on learning outcomes.

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A large part of the success of the Spellings Commission must be attributed to the growing opposition of much of the American public to continuing "business as usual" in higher education. Americans are very concerned about escalating tuition costs and want to be assured that they are spending their money on something of value. They like the idea of "accountability" and measured improvements in learning and are not confident that higher education will provide such accountability without outside pressure. In a 2002 survey commissioned by the Educational Testing Service, a near majority of Americans said they wanted "more accountability" for student learning in college. Slightly larger proportions of respondents said they considered "low standards" a "very serious" issue in higher education and wanted a role for government in ensuring "cost and quality." Accountability was on the higher education policy agenda of many states long before the Spellings Commission issued its report. The commission only pushed accountability closer to the top of that agenda and made it a national issue.

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The CLA

Few anticipate a future for postsecondary accountability that looks like K–12 accountability. The most widely praised of the current learning outcomes instruments, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), aims to assess capacities much higher on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills than the state K–12 tests. It tests capacities for analysis and synthesis, and not simple recall.

Specifically, the CLA asks students to complete a performance task and two analytical writing tasks. Each performance task has its own document library that includes a range of sources, such as letters, memos, summaries of research reports, newspaper articles, maps, and photographs. The performance task requires students to answer open-ended questions about "a hypothetical but realistic situation." One sample question asks students to evaluate whether available data tend to support or refute claims about weaknesses in the construction of the wing of an airplane that a fictitious company is planning to purchase for its sales force. The analytical writing tasks require students to make and critique arguments. One sample question asks students to make an argument that responds to the following claim: "There is no such thing as 'truth' in the media. The one true thing about the information media is that it exists only to entertain." Another asks students to evaluate whether fast-food restaurants contribute to childhood obesity based on a report about a research study.

As a measure of learning outcomes, the CLA is not without weaknesses. The CLA is highly correlated with the SAT, suggesting that the CLA primarily measures the same interpretive and reasoning abilities as the SAT and, further, that performance on the CLA (like performance on the SAT) is influenced by socioeconomic factors. But the CLA is less a problem than what is likely to come after it. The K–12 experience with accountability suggests that Gresham's Law applies to schooling—bad tests tend to drive out good. At the beginning of the accountability era in K–12 education, respected educators like Lorrie Shepherd of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Brian Rowan of Indiana University Bloomington insisted on "authentic assessments" and "growth models," but multiple-choice-based outcomes assessments that were easy to score and rank emerged instead as the currency of the realm.

Accountability testing would have predictable negative consequences for public colleges and universities. Widespread adoption of the CLA or similar instruments would inevitably lead to the reconstitution of many college classrooms around document-based performance tasks and tasks that involve making or breaking an argument. Every widely adopted test brings a focus on the skills and content it privileges and only on those skills and content. Indeed, the designers of the CLA have acknowledged that they would be happy if colleges and universities taught to their test.

The CLA and similar assessment instruments focus on important cognitive abilities related to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. But this strength of the CLA is oddly misaligned with the traditional aims of higher education: to provide general education in basic fields of knowledge and advanced training in a specialized discipline. The skills the CLA privileges are no substitute for the mastery of subject matter. The development of higher-order cognitive capacities has always been an aim of higher education, but within the context of the variety of distinctive additional skills and understandings required for mastery of a discipline.

Consider what types of disciplinary skills and understandings the CLA leaves out. A teacher of history will want her students to see the interplay

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between and among personality, event, and larger social and political forces; to think through specific themes of particular interest to her; to appreciate the range of interpretations of an event; and to consider why dominant interpretations have changed over time. She may be interested also in teaching more technical skills, such as how to evaluate a bibliography in a subfield or how to construct an expository footnote. To develop these skills is to begin to think like a historian. Similarly, a teacher of drama may want his students to be able to discuss staging, critique performance, design a scene, and embody a character through reading a part while learning basic principles of dramaturgy and rhetoric through the study of plays. All of this is possible in a class taught by well-trained and self-reflective teachers, but little or none of it is encouraged in the types of exercises commended by the CLA.

If the CLA or a similar assessment instrument takes hold, college teachers will face pressures to help their institutions raise student test scores. Institutions might expect even their best teachers—perhaps especially their best teachers—to change their practices in the service of institutional aspirations to score high. This will reduce the freedom of great teachers to teach as they see fit. Indeed, as currently constituted, the learning-outcomes movement shows a more or less complete lack of interest in the transforming power of the gifted teacher. But such people make a big difference to the students they touch. Students who strive for better understanding and outstanding performance often find it very important to identify with the personality and élan of their teachers. The future of science and scholarship—and the possibility of creative interventions in many other fields—consequently depends on teachers who can express with the full measure of their personalities the possibilities of disciplined inquiry joined to creative insight. If the exposure to these types of teachers is limited only to those paying premium prices at a few private institutions that are beyond the jurisdiction of "accountability," the cause of upward mobility in the United States could be compromised. But preserving the freedom for professors to teach as they choose may require broader diffusion of methods to elevate the level of performance of those instructors who compromise the educational quality of the college classroom.

Professionalism

Professions are distinctive ways of organizing and performing work, based on occupational control rather than bureaucratic-managerial control. Professions have historically developed where asymmetries in knowledge prevent consumers from knowing whether they are receiving high-quality services. The way to produce people competent to perform these services has been through selection, training, and licensing. Professions require rigorous academic training and, sometimes, lengthy apprenticeships. Most professions require licensing examinations as a qualification for practice. They also require continuing education so that practitioners remain current with the literature in their fields. Through these mechanisms, professions create market shelters that allow only qualified members of the profession to perform the work. These market shelters tend to raise pay above what might otherwise obtain, but they also protect consumers against incompetent practitioners and foster commitment to work. Professions provide additional guarantees for clients through their promulgation of service ideals and codes of ethics. In return for quality control and self-policing, professionals typically enjoy freedom from close supervision and autonomy to exercise their trained judgment in the conduct of their work.

The words "professor" and "professional" come from the same Latin root: *profiteor* (to speak before people). But relatively little in the professional model informs the college teaching function. Most instructors are unceremoniously dropped in front of classrooms once they have been qualified as researchers by virtue of their scholarship. They are required to demonstrate no skills in pedagogy, no understanding of the relation between specific types of pedagogy and subject matter content, and no understanding of the aims or purposes of education. For most, college teaching is, in short, an amateur activity, performed with limited regard to effectiveness, as long as teaching evaluations are acceptably high, by people whose real training is for something else.

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Twenty years ago, education scholar Lee Shulman argued that *subject matter knowledge* is only one of seven types of knowledge used by expert teachers. Two other types are *pedagogical knowledge* (how to manage classrooms and present

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material) and *pedagogical content knowledge* (how to connect subject matter understanding with teaching strategies that are most effective in communicating content). Shulman also emphasized knowledge of students, knowledge of institutional contexts, and knowledge of educational aims and purposes. College teachers may have a fine grasp of content knowledge, but they are not required to show expertise in any of the other six domains identified by Shulman.

There are some encouraging signs of greater institutional commitment to the training and evaluation of teachers. More than half of institutions say they require peer evaluation of teaching prior to tenure. But other plausible guarantees of teaching competence—from training in teaching methods during doctoral study to post-tenure peer review of teaching—are still rare. According to a recent survey conducted by Martin Finkelstein and William Cummings, only about one-third of college teachers report that they received "training in teaching methods during their doctoral study." For those who receive it, this training varies markedly in length, content, and quality. In many institutions, assessments of teaching effectiveness rest entirely on student evaluations, a useful but incomplete measure.

If we do not hold ourselves to professional standards in college teaching, we will be playing into the hands of those who advocate external control of teaching through standardized testing. But even without this threat, the failure of professionalism in college teaching would be problematic, because the work of academia lies as much in the classroom as in the library or laboratory. Only about one-quarter of full-time professors say they are "leaning or heavily oriented to research," while three-quarters say that they are "leaning or heavily oriented to teaching." Moreover, in many disciplines, teaching is typically the only responsibility of contingent (non-tenure-track) faculty who now constitute more than half of the professoriate.

Teaching as a Profession

We can use the example of K–12 teachers to imagine what a program to bring greater professionalism to college teaching might entail. First, graduate students would be required to take a practicum on teaching in which pedagogical theory, cognitive theory, and studies of effective teachers would be discussed and critiqued and in which students would be required to demonstrate effectiveness in presenting lecture and discussion materials. Second, teaching assistants would be evaluated and advised by experienced peer mentors or by their professors based on visits to their classrooms. Third, pretenure peer review of teaching would occur on more than one occasion, including debriefing sessions for feedback and reflection. Fourth, as part of the tenure file, professors would be asked to reflect on their teaching practice and to discuss the relationship of their practices in the classroom to their aims for student learning. Finally, teaching would continue to be monitored through post-tenure review, and those in need of mentoring would receive it. Contingent faculty would be able to improve their salaries through participation in high-quality programs run by colleges and universities to improve undergraduate teaching.

It will not be easy to persuade administrators or, for that matter, most professors that such a system would be desirable. Enacting such a system would require overturning the surprisingly durable myth that any person who has proven a capable scholar or researcher knows how to teach. It would also require challenging the myth that student evaluations are an acceptable check on teaching quality. Students certainly know when they see poor preparation or disorganization, but they cannot judge whether instructors are offering courses with decent standards or whether they are being taught by reflective practitioners who are using the best available pedagogical knowledge.

Many will argue that the first order of business should be to improve the economic conditions of faculty members—and particularly the conditions of part-time faculty. Contingent faculty accounted for more than 70 percent of the increase in the number of faculty employed in the 1990s, and most part-timers are paid piecework, by the course, at wages that barely cover the rent. Unionization has shown some positive effects for college teachers who are otherwise at the mercy of the cost-cutting imperatives of their institutions. But the road to *significantly* higher wages for part-time college teachers and full-time term professors will likely go through the market shelter created by professionalism rather than around it.

For the next generation of college teachers, the price could be steep if the current generation stares resolutely into the sand while the accountability movement gains force. Higher tuitions have brought public concerns about educational quality into sharper relief. Thus far, many of America's colleges and universities have failed to insist on pedagogical training or meaningful peer evaluation and mentoring of those they place in front of students. College teaching consequently remains, in too many places, the special province of amateurs trained for the related but different job of scholarly research. Insofar as the quality of the teaching staff remains highly variable because of this failure, the prospects for bureaucratic-managerial control of the classroom grow more ominous.