

**Measuring College Success: The State of Assessment in Higher Education**  
**Address to the Aiken Rotary**  
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Good afternoon. I would like to thank the members of the Aiken Rotary and Chancellor Hallman for the opportunity to talk to you today about assessment in higher education. My colleagues in the field of assessment and educational measurement can quickly resort to technical language, and it can seem as though their very project is to have no jargon-filled expression left behind. But assessment is really nothing more than the project of measuring the extent to which we have done what we said we would do and then using what we discover in this process to make improvements. That's it.

In this respect, assessment is not unique to higher education. Further, measuring success in higher education is important because the strengths and weaknesses of colleges and universities intersect our lives as public and private citizens in numerous ways. So along these lines, I would like to continue by asking three substantive and pertinent questions. **[SLIDE]**

- First, how can I tell that my son or daughter will receive a good education at this college?
- Second, how can I tell that this job applicant received a quality education from his or her university?
- And third, how can I tell that tax dollars and my alumni contributions are being invested wisely in higher education?

I suspect that even at the end of 20 minutes, I will have provided only partial answers to these questions. In fact, it is only my aim to give an overview of some of the methods of assessment and accountability that haven't worked as well as we would have liked and to identify some up-and-coming methods that appear promising. It is my firm belief, however, that it is implicit upon the higher education community not only to provide better answers to these questions but also to be able to answer them clearly and more quickly.

Of course, in our everyday dealings with friends, family, partners, clients, prospective employees, and really everyone else, we have constructed ways of coping without firm answers to these questions about quality universities. Indeed, at some point in the course of conversation, we will find out where someone went to college, and we hear various answers like Clemson, USC Columbia, the University of Michigan, Harvard, Stanford, or even USC Aiken, and we reply with a response like "Ooooh... that's a good school."

Now how do we know this? How do we come to this judgment about educational quality? The answer is simple: *reputation*. [SLIDE] Sometimes we may know a graduate or two from the school, and sometime we may have even attended the institution ourselves (although as some of us recall college exploits and adventures, we may not also invoke parallel memories of academic rigor). But for the most part, we know (or believe we know) that a college provides a quality education because we have heard of the institution. This phenomenon – the primacy of reputation – has been a significant motive force that has prompted colleges to compete for rankings in *US News and World Report*, and it is a phenomenon is not likely ever to go away.

The power of reputation has also prompted a drive to control and to measure quality by inputs and by processes rather than by outcomes. Especially among the elite institutions, their status and symbolic capital is firmly linked to exclusivity, and the way that they have historically demonstrated quality is through what I like to call “The Great Chefs Method of Assessment.”

**[SLIDE]** If you ever watch the restaurant-based cooking shows on television, you have probably seen an interview with a snooty sounding head chef of a five star restaurant who says something like: “*we take the most talented international chefs, give them top-of-the-line facilities, and combine them with the finest premium local ingredients and POOF!*” culinary magic happens. You are presented with an elegant meal that looks like a work of art.

The parallel in higher education is simply that institutions like Harvard and Yale have employed the most talented professors in the world, designed the most rigorous curriculum, and recruited the very best students in the nation, and again – poof! Magic happens. Ultimately, however, these strategies represent process controls rather than outcomes measures, and the real questions we are left with are twofold: first, do the graduates of these institutions really have the best education in the world, and second, to what extent does the institution contribute to the skills and knowledge that their graduates later exhibit? In other words, could my daughter have gotten just as good of an education at Carolina as she did at Princeton?

To begin to address this problem, some states have instituted standardized exit exams that attempt to measure a minimum level of knowledge or mastery in a field or basic competency in skills like math and writing. Perhaps the example with which you may be most familiar is the

Regents Exam in the State of Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Eight other states include some multiple choice testing of students in colleges.<sup>2</sup> And recently, the governing board of the State University of New York system approved a similar measure so that all SUNY schools will administer a standardized test to measure competencies of graduates.<sup>3</sup> But here's the rub – since 1973 when the Georgia exam was instituted, there is little evidence that demonstrates the quality of higher education in Georgia or the skill levels of the state's graduates have improved.

Of course, student performance on a variety of standardized multiple-choice tests indicates that students' verbal and math skills along with mastery of subject matter do increase during college (and we would have stopped sending our children to college long ago if this were not noticeable). Nevertheless, there is significant evidence that indicates this increased level of performance on these tests during or near the end of college correlates to a large degree with performance on standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, so again we are back to measuring inputs rather than really measuring outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

But the real problem with most multiple choice tests is that they typically don't reflect the types of skills that we want college graduates to develop nor do they reflect skills that we typically need every day in "the real world" – how often in the course of running your business do you have to answer a simple multiple choice question on a reading passage where the supposedly

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<sup>1</sup> The California Higher Education Policy Center. <http://www.capolicycenter.org/georgia/georgia4.html#regents>. Feb. 25, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See Ross Miller, "Statewide Standardized Testing in Higher Education." Panel Abstract. American Association of Colleges and Universities. [http://www.greaterexpectations.org/briefing\\_papers/StatewideStandardizedTests.html](http://www.greaterexpectations.org/briefing_papers/StatewideStandardizedTests.html). Feb. 27, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Hebel, "SUNY Approves Systemwide Tests," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 50.43. July 2, 2004. A22. Online at <http://chronicle.com/prm/weekly/v50/i43/43a02202.htm>. Feb. 25, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students, Volume 2: A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 78 and 70-89 *passim*.

right answer has been extracted for you? Ultimately, real life does not lend itself to a multiple choice test, and the types of learning and abilities we hope our students acquire in college typically focus on higher level skills, such as creative problem solving, critical thinking, and ingenuity, that do not lend themselves to this sort of assessment.

So to deflect some of the issues and debate surrounding testing, many policy experts and higher education researchers have turned to the broader measurements of institutional graduation rates and retention rates. Given that college degrees are generally deemed to be one of the primary outcomes for attending college, these would appear to be reasonably good indicators for institutional effectiveness. **[SLIDE]** Nevertheless, a simple comparison of graduation rates among colleges may not really show institutional quality. First, these six-year graduation rates are tracked only for full-time freshmen who enter college directly from high school. This group makes up only about half of all the students in higher education today, and it is shrinking rapidly. Second, there is not currently a system that allows us to track students from institution to institution when they transfer (although such a system is currently under development and will likely be implemented at the federal level, despite the fears of some privacy hawks). Third, graduation and retention rates again appear to be heavily influenced by SAT scores, performance in high school; demographic factors like race and gender; and institutional characteristics such as size and selectivity.

Given such realities, institutions faced with being evaluated by graduation and retention rates as a primary measure of institutional quality will likely be prompted to tighten access to higher education and limit access to students in groups who are less likely to graduate. Even grading

policies likely play a factor in graduation rates, as we have observed higher grades awarded at private not-for-profit colleges than at public universities and still higher grades awarded at private for-profit institutions, like the University of Phoenix.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it should surprise no one that when revenue stream depends almost solely on tuition revenue, as it does in the for-profit sector and much of the private not-for-profit sector, that institutions award grades which make their students want to continue at that institution.

All of this said, however, I don't want to pooh-pooh the utility of graduation and retention rates, despite the complex realities that underlie them. They are important enough indicators regardless of the confounding factors, that the higher education community has invested significant resources to understand why students leave colleges and why they stay because colleges want to improve the rates at which students complete their degrees in a reasonable amount of time. USCA's Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services and I are participating in on national study teams to investigate campuses with higher than expected graduation rates and develop a report that will help to shape both the policy debate on the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act this year as well as to develop and disseminate some best-practices guidelines for improving the rates at which students earn college degrees.

Beyond SAT scores and high school performance, the factor that at first glance seem to impact graduation rates and the student learning on which these rates are founded the most can be best summed up as "student engagement" or more simply put, students' active participation in and out of the classroom. When students become involved in their own educations, they learn more, and they graduate at higher rates. There are some strong empirical data to support this line of

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<sup>5</sup> *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51.1, August 27, 2004, 13.

inquiry, and to I return to at least one of the questions I raised at the beginning of my talk, when you look for a college or university with your son or daughter, look for a campus where there is obvious and active student participation. Universities that promote service learning, community service projects, civic engagement initiatives, vibrant student-led organizations and clubs, interdisciplinary and problem-based learning in the classroom, collaborative faculty and undergraduate research, and a host of other activities tend to prompt students to become engaged.

An ongoing national study coordinated through the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University Purdue called the National Survey of Student Engagement has made great strides in developing measures for student engagement. **[SLIDE]** Indicators, such as the amount of time students spend on academic work, the number of papers they write, and other course-related activities also tend to provide powerful data about the level and depth of learning that occurs on campus, much more so than satisfaction surveys or some of the standardized tests I discussed earlier. About 850 four-year institutions have participated in the past five years – 473 last year, one of which was USCA, and this number keeps growing.

While the large scope of this study prompts overall findings to be too complex to summarize here, some significant national findings include **[SLIDE]**:

- Higher levels of engagement were reported among institutions with formalized first-year experience programs and bridge programs for freshmen and transfer students.
- Full-time students in more challenging institutions (top 25%) averaged about 16 hours per week preparing for class; full-time students in the least challenging institutions

(bottom 25%) spent only about 10 hours per week on academics. [just as an aside, faculty generally expected students to spend 30 hours a week on academic work]

- Nationwide, only 10% of students rely on newspapers or magazines as a primary source for news about international, national, or local news, while 50% primarily gained this information from television.<sup>6</sup>

Lest you be led to believe that these results are “soft,” NSSE results are specifically referenced in HR 507, the bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act introduced this year by Representatives John Boehner and Buck McKeon, senior members of the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

At USCA, we indeed learned some very valuable information from participating in the NSSE, much of which validated many of the strengths we knew we had and reinforced the expediency of current strategic initiatives. For instance, we are in the process of formalizing the First Year Experience at USCA to promote more engaged first-year students. While USCA students report higher levels of academic and personal growth than their counterparts nationwide, we identified that we wanted our students to spend more time on academic work than they are currently spending. And we identified the need to coordinate and further develop vibrant supplementary experiences that extend throughout the curriculum. Such initiatives are not unique to USCA, but ongoing administration of the NSSE will allow us to measure our progress in terms of outcomes rather than just by processes and inputs.

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<sup>6</sup> *Student Engagement: Pathways to Student Success 2004 Annual Survey Results*. Available online at <http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/>. Jan 15, 2005.



As I close my remarks today, I want to leave you with the parting thought that in terms of outcomes, there is wide agreement that higher education in the United States is superior to the higher education systems in other countries, and much of this is due to the wide array of colleges and universities that are accredited independently of strict governmental control and fill a range of mission-specific goals that serve local, regional, and national interests. College graduates produce range of public economic and social goods such as higher tax revenues, increased productivity, increased consumption, lower crime rates, lower levels of public assistance, and higher levels of civic engagement. And this is to say nothing of the personal benefits. For instance, in 2004, the mean personal annual income of a college graduate in South Carolina was \$47,422; by comparison, the average annual income for high school graduate in the state was less than half that at \$22,224. And the general increase in quality of life for college graduates that includes a greater appreciation of the arts, better health, increased personal status, and better personal decision making speak for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

It is implicit upon all of us to continue to advance in our capacity to deepen these outcomes and expand the number of citizens who can earn college degrees. As we continue to develop measurement techniques and indicators for accountability we want to ensure that we clearly communicate quality and successes to students and prospective students, parents and taxpayers, legislators and colleagues. But we also want to avoid damaging quality by institutionalizing misplaced assessment techniques, testing for the sake of testing, or diverting significant resources away from our core mission of education and research when the results will not point toward ways to improve outcomes. **[SLIDE]**

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<sup>7</sup> The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education (Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005), 4 and 25.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. The text of my talk today, along with the PowerPoint slides and a wide range of supplementary information will be available on the USCA Institutional Effectiveness web site at <http://ie.usca.edu>. I have promised not to ask for questions at this juncture, but I will stay around to answer questions after this event is over.