

September 30, 2007

GRADUATION

## No Graduate Left Behind

By JAMES TRAUB

**AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHARLESTON**, a not-exactly-selective institution on the banks of the Kanawha River in the capital city of West Virginia, incoming students take a standardized test designed to measure reasoning and writing skills and then take the test again after sophomore year and once again as seniors — to see if their education is doing them any good. Courses are constructed around a series of defined “liberal learning outcomes” like critical thinking and creativity, and if the students’ work shows that many of them aren’t hitting the outcomes, the teachers go back to the drawing board. Ditto with the standardized tests. “We take data seriously,” says Alan Belcher, a member of the Faculty Center that rides herd on the whole process, “and we act on it.” Apparently they act well: in its promotional materials, U.C. boasts that it posted “the largest learning gain from first to final year” of any of the 40 schools that participated in a trial of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, one test it uses.

This orientation toward measurable outcomes has already colonized many spheres of life — K-12 education, medicine, government services — but in the world of higher education, places like the University of Charleston are lonely outliers. They may soon become the vanguard. The Bush administration, having used the [No Child Left Behind](#) Act to impose accountability — and, critics would say, a sterile uniformity — on the reluctant world of public elementary and secondary schools, is now seeking to accomplish something similar in post-secondary education. A commission impaneled by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings concluded last year that colleges “should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes,” that they should use tests to make comparison possible, that accrediting agencies should make these and other performance outcomes “the core of their assessment” and that colleges should make the results publicly available “as a condition of accreditation.”

The culture of assessment has provided a bracing discipline for the University of Charleston and for a small but growing number of other public and private institutions. But it’s fair to ask whether Stanford, say, or the [University of Michigan](#) needs any bracing. Do they need to prove that students are getting their money’s worth? And do we really want our dotty and beloved professor of medieval history to reverse-engineer his class according to desired student outcomes rather than sticking to the dictates of medieval history? In the upper reaches of academe there is an anxiety, sometimes bordering on panic, that the Bush administration is trying to turn everybody into the University of Charleston and has plans to implement something like No Child Left Behind. It wouldn’t try to do that, would it?

**SPELLINGS WAS** George Bush’s education adviser in Texas as well as in the White House and was one of the driving forces behind No Child Left Behind, known as N.C.L.B. It was soon after she became secretary of education in 2005 that Spellings impaneled the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. She appointed as chairman Charles Miller, a Texas entrepreneur who played a central role in devising the model

for his state's system of public-school testing and accountability — the forerunner of the national legislation. In 1999, Governor Bush appointed Miller to the Board of the Regents of the University of Texas System, and Miller used his post to make Texas's state university system the first to require the use of standardized testing and publication of the results. Miller saw a strong analogy between the problems of public schools and of higher education. "You take students who aren't prepared and then you toss them overboard," as Miller put it in a phone conversation this summer. "Time on task has shrunk a lot. You can't schedule a class Thursday afternoon or Friday, or no one will come. What you get is a happy professoriat and good grades. That's a system that's dysfunctional, and it shows."

Miller is not exactly a consensus builder by nature. As head of the federal commission, he chose consultants who largely shared his views and scheduled public testimony that largely confirmed his fears. An initial draft of the commission's report embodied Miller's dim regard for the educational establishment, as well as his belief in standardized testing. When parts of the draft were made public, that establishment, already deeply suspicious of the administration and all its works, recoiled in horror. David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and among the most vehement of the commission's critics, describes the expert witnesses who testified before the commission as "a parade of malcontents who came out with their theories about the failure of American higher education." The administration's goal, Warren insists, was to take N.C.L.B., its most cherished domestic initiative, and "launch it in higher education."

Spellings says that the federal role in higher education will be limited to getting out the facts, though she emphasized to me that if she "were the governor of a state, I might want to do something with that information." She has not managed to persuade either the innumerable associations whose job it is to defend the interests of the higher-education industry or academic leaders themselves of the value of this kind of testing. Henry Bienen, the president of [Northwestern University](#), says of the administration's interest in college assessment: "I think what's being done is less a burning wish to know what we have done" than a "kind of clunking of them over the head." Why, he asks, won't the Bush folks "accept the wisdom of the marketplace," which says that places like Northwestern have very happy customers? Bienen agrees that higher education hasn't been very accountable about outcomes but says that standardized measures would not get at the kind of learning at which the finest universities aim. That, he said, would require "quite sophisticated analytical tools" and presumably a very long time.

It is in no small part the expression "standardized test" that conjures the N.C.L.B. bogey. Charles Miller is a great proponent of the Collegiate Learning Assessment; Sarah Martinez Tucker, the undersecretary of education who was a member of the commission, is a former member of the C.L.A.'s board. David Warren asserts that the "digitized approach" embodied in many standardized tests "trivializes a very complicated process of how learning and teaching transpire." "The Study of Undergraduate Learning" at the [University of Washington](#) is said to have shown that writing and critical and quantitative thinking "are not generic skills" but rather are "mediated by the disciplines," so that any attempt to measure broad competencies is futile.

If that's so, then tests like the C.L.A. are useless. But the scholars who first developed the system have spent seven years fine-tuning it, and the C.L.A. is light years ahead of the fill-in-the-blanks format of most standardized tests. Students are given lengthy writing assignments, along with a "performance task" in which they are furnished with a set of documents and then instructed to analyze them in order to produce a

memo or report — like, say, a city official trying to trace a puzzling source of pollution and to recommend a course of action. It's hard to see how you can be well educated and do badly on the test, or vice versa. Schools like [Harvard](#) and Duke now administer it to students, though neither publishes the results. According to the former president of Trinity College, Richard Hersh, who played a key role in designing the test, a study of results at 200 colleges representing a cross-section of institutions shows, not surprisingly, that some places do a much more effective job of teaching than others. "Great teaching makes a difference," he says, "and the culture in which you're embedded makes a difference." Just as in high school.

**WHEN EDWIN WELCH** became president of the University of Charleston in 1989, he found that despite the grandiose name, he was running a community college. "The average age of the kids was 26 or older," he recalls. "Most were taking two-year programs, the largest in nursing. Enrollment had dropped as low as 490. In the community, we were basically known as a party school." Charleston, in short, had a market problem. The low road wasn't working; Welch, a social scientist with a deep fund of common sense and mother wit, concluded that the opportunities lay on the high road of academic competence. As it happened, he also sat on the quality committee of the local hospital, and he heard an administrator of a mental-health center talk about how they had to document quantifiable progress in some patients' conditions to receive reimbursement. The center was forced to focus on outcomes. "My challenge," he says, "was, How do I bring this to education?"

A schoolwide process of rethinking, in which you imagine Welch functioned as something more than first among equals, concluded that the school should shape its identity around outcomes. The question that he and his colleagues asked themselves, Welch says, was, "What do you want from a liberal arts education?" The obvious answers were curricular ones — a familiarity with history, with the major works of literature and philosophy, with core scientific disciplines. But curricular mastery, the group concluded, was the means rather than the end. The goal was a set of broad competencies that spanned disciplines: citizenship, communication, creativity, critical thinking, ethical practice and science. The idea was not to teach these skills directly, which would be vapid, but rather to embed them in the curriculum and to shape pedagogy and assignments so that students would gain the competencies in the course of their studies. Thus, for example, a student in the interior-design program can gain "historical understanding" from one specialized class, "foundational creativity" from still others and "research in the discipline" — a science outcome — from yet another. He or she may have to take a class in literature and several in science to satisfy other outcome requirements.

The liberal-learning outcomes are quantifiable — performance on them counts for 20 to 50 percent of a student's grade — but not, of course, standardized. Yet Charleston does believe strongly in standardized tests, at least good ones. Seven years ago, the school began administering a test now known as MAPP, which showed that in several cognitive areas its students were making more progress in their first two years than students at similar liberal-arts colleges were in four. But students were making little additional progress in the last two years, and perhaps in the last three. So the faculty decided to embed more critical-thinking outcomes in courses that students encounter in later years. When the C.L.A. was introduced, Charleston quickly instituted it. When the test was administered in 2005-6, incoming freshmen scored well below where their SAT scores would have predicted, while seniors scored at par. No other school showed such gains. The "gains," of course, were extrapolated from two different sets of students, at the beginning and at the end of their college careers — not a very convincing outcome. That hasn't stopped Charleston from

boasting about the results. Certainly there's no denying that Ed Welch's bold act of repositioning has transformed the school. U.C. now has about 1,400 students. Average SAT scores of incoming students are rising, and the school has begun to turn some applicants away. Six of the 10 campus buildings have gone up in the last decade. The endowment has reached \$35 million. And in the ultimate market affirmation, U.S. News & World Report now ranks U.C. among the Top 20 baccalaureate colleges in the South.

A research university, or for that matter a more ambitious undergraduate college, would probably not want to emulate the University of Charleston, where the word "content" is used in an oddly pejorative or slighting sense, as the means by which "skills" are improved. It is a utilitarian institution. "Learning your way," as one of its marketing pitches has it, "is our focus." In this, however, it is like the overwhelming majority of American post-secondary institutions, of which only a small fraction are even marginally selective. Pleasing the customer is necessarily the name of the game.

**STANFORD SHOULD PROBABLY** not start behaving like the University of Charleston, but there isn't much danger of that. The far more pressing problem is that a tradition of college autonomy will preclude any sort of concerted action to improve higher education. Even the august Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard, recently wrote in "Our Underachieving Colleges" that "the prospects for turning colleges into effective learning organizations" are "not good," since "important faculty interests" stand in the way of doing so. Bok singles out the reluctance to measure outcomes as a symptom of that resistance. But political pressure is eroding the resistance. The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities are now considering a voluntary initiative in which their members will administer "core learning outcome tests" like the C.L.A. and publish the results. Public universities, of course, have to be acutely sensitive to the whims of state legislators. Peter McPherson, the head of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, describes the testing initiative as "something we could construct in a way that helps us get stronger, rather than government forcing it in a way that would be much more rigid."

The battle over accountability has many different skirmish lines. Private institutions like the University of Charleston are adapting to the marketplace. Public universities are warding off state action. State governments are talking about mandating assessment. In Washington, the great buzzing hive of associations seems, for now, to have successfully swarmed its adversary. After the commission published its report, Spellings convened a "negotiated rule-making" process. She wanted, among other things, to ensure that regional accrediting agencies demand that the institutions they accredit use objective outcome measurements. This was deemed an unprecedented attack on the autonomy of accrediting agencies and universities. Both turned to their friends in Congress. And in late May, just days before the rule-making process on accreditation was to conclude, Senator [Lamar Alexander](#), Republican of Tennessee, former secretary of education and ranking minority member on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, accused the Bush administration of "proposing to restrict autonomy, choice and competition." Alexander wrote to Spellings, telling her to leave these thorny issues to Congress. Spellings promptly complied. "Congress," says the crusty Charles Miller, "is in the thrall of the academy."

That grip is bound to weaken. The self-accountability of our system of higher education is grounded in the optional nature of college attendance. But college isn't really optional any longer. The economic value of higher education, on both the individual and the national levels, has given the public a stake in outcomes not

so different from the stake it has in the public schools. Even private institutions, in this regard, are quasi-public entities. Almost 25 years ago, Margaret Spellings points out, the report known as “A Nation at Risk” provoked a national discussion about education that has not yet subsided. “I think,” she says, “that’s what has been precipitated” by her own report. “It’s only just begun.”

*James Traub, a contributing writer, is currently working on a book about democracy promotion.*

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

The primary positives of the No Child Left Behind Act include: Accountability standards are set and measured annually by each state to foster educational growth and achievement. All results are also annually reported to parents. There's little doubt that the No Child Left Behind Act will be reauthorized by Congress in 2007. The open question is: How will Congress change the Act? White House Kicks-Off Reauthorization Discussions. A meeting was held on January 8, 2007 at the White House to mark the 5th anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act, and to kick-off Bush Administration discussions with Congress regarding reauthorization of the act. Attendees at the meeting with President Bush and Education Secretary Margaret Spellings were Sen. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was in effect from 2002 to 2015. It was a version of ESEA and was replaced by ESSA in 2015. Find out what NCLB did. No Child Left Behind: special education: adequate yearly progress: research-based instruction: general education curriculum: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: IEP: Share No Child Left Behind (NCLB): What You Need to Know. No Brew Left Behind. Cut Off the Heads. Mogu Massacre. Yak of All Trades. Our Backs to the Gate. Liquid Courage. Return to Mistfall. Add to list Links. No Brew Left Behind. Locate the abandoned brew barrels in Kun-Lai Summit. Description. My head is hurting. There can be only one solution. We flew over an abandoned brew caravan. You must go find it, and save that brew!