

Chapter 9

Using the Collegiate Learning Assessment to Address the College-to-Career Space

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ABSTRACT

Issues in higher education, such as the rising cost of education, career readiness, and increases in the achievement gap have led to a movement toward accountability in higher education. This chapter addresses the issues related to career readiness by highlighting an assessment tool, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), through two case studies. The first examines the college-to-career space by comparing different alternatives for predicting college success as measured by college GPA. The second addresses an identified market failure of highly qualified college graduates being overlooked for employment due to a matching problem. The chapter concludes with a proposal for a solution to this problem, namely a matching system.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is intended to serve multiple purposes, initially focusing on documenting some of the more salient issues facing the American higher-education system, including the rising cost of education, inequality in the opportunities available to students following graduation, increases in

the achievement gap, and the resulting movement toward accountability in higher education. Next, the chapter presents tools that have been developed to meet these challenges, including the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The CLA has been demonstrated to be a psychometrically valid test, and research utilizing the CLA has shown it to be a useful predictor, at the institutional level, of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9441-5.ch009

students' college grade point averages (GPAs). An additional tool presented here is CLA+, which has been shown to also be reliable at the student level and assesses competencies not measured by the original CLA. The authors then present research comparing the CLA's and the SAT's relative capacities to predict college sophomore and senior GPAs.

Finally, the goal of the end of this chapter is to provide information regarding extensions of the use of CLA+. Specifically, the authors identify a market failure and present a research argument that illustrates how a standardized assessment, such as CLA+, may be used to anchor education policy surrounding career readiness and employability (Benjamin, 2012, 2014). The research portrays the matching problem students have in finding jobs appropriate for the skill levels they have achieved in college, and provides recommendations for how this matching problem might be solved.

ISSUES IN THE AMERICAN HIGHER-EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE MOVEMENT TOWARD ACCOUNTABILITY

A number of changes have affected the higher-education landscape in the 21st century, but perhaps none of these changes are as significant as the movement toward greater accountability. The history of higher education in America has been one in which an exceptional amount of faith has been placed in these institutions of higher education to educate the newest generation of America's young adults. This faith, however, has allowed institutions to operate without feeling pressure to be accountable for the education they provide to their students (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006). Recently, however, greater attention has been placed on a number of issues affecting higher education, leading to an increased focus on accountability.

One prime issue affecting higher education is the rising cost of a college education. College prices were relatively stable during the 1970s, but increases in tuition and fees began to exceed rises in the consumer price index during the 1980s, causing much public concern about college affordability. Prices increased more rapidly during the earlier part of the 1990s, as costs of attending both public and private institutions rose between 10% and 14% per year (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). For the 2011-2012 academic year, the average cost of attending a private four-year institution stood at about \$33,000. By comparison, the average cost of attending a private four-year institution in 1980 was just \$13,000, after adjusting for inflation. The problem is not only limited to private institutions; public institutions currently charge an average of about \$14,000 a year, which far exceeds the average yearly price of \$6,500 in 1980 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Staggering as these numbers may be, there does not seem to be an end to the rise in costs in the foreseeable future. In fact, current projections indicate that by 2020 four years at a top-tier school will cost \$328,000, and that by 2028, it will cost \$598,000 (Taylor, 2011).

Another important issue is the question of how much students are learning in college. The National Association of Adult Literacy asserts that, between 1992 and 2003, average prose literacy (the ability to understand narrative texts, such as newspaper articles) decreased among those holding a bachelor's degree or higher, as did average document literacy (the ability to understand practical information, such as instructions for taking medicine) (National Association of Adult Literacy, 2004). One consequence of this decline in literacy is that employers are increasingly complaining that American college graduates are not prepared for the workplace and lack the skill sets necessary for successful employment and continued career development. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

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