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by Thomas Toch

Tell the Truth About Colleges

AMERICA'S PARENTS AND politicians obsess over getting kids to go to college. But the delivery of a decent education, once the kids are on campus, is at least as large a challenge. Only about half of all college entrants earn degrees within six years. And many who do aren't learning much: one study indicates, for instance, that only 38 percent of graduating college students can successfully compare the viewpoints of two newspaper editorials.

The conventional wisdom is that you get what you pay for—that the larger the price tag, the better the product. But that's not true in higher education. Tuition has been skyrocketing for years, with little evidence that education has improved. Universities typically favor research and publishing over teaching. And influential college rankings like [the one published by U.S. News & World Report](#) measure mostly wealth and status (alumni giving rates, school reputation, incoming students' SAT scores); they reveal next to nothing about what students learn.

We need to shed more light on how well colleges are educating their students—to help prospective students make better decisions, and to exert pressure on the whole system to provide better value for money.

Reliable measures of the quality of undergraduate teaching already exist. [The National Survey of Student Engagement](#) gathers data on factors proven to correlate with learning—things like the number of books and lengthy papers assigned in courses. (The organization reports little relationship between having a prominent brand name and teaching students well.) The Collegiate Learning Assessment tests students' critical thinking and measures progress over a college career.

But the nonprofits that administer the CLA and NSSE can't report their findings publicly. Colleges and universities participate voluntarily and have control over the distribution of results. Many are loath to put them on public display, because reputation doesn't necessarily align with results.

The Obama administration could be a catalyst for change. The stimulus package includes \$30 billion in tuition aid, at a time when colleges are starving for money. That gives the government leverage—it should push for systematic public information on the quality of undergraduate learning, school by school. This would not only serve students; over time, it would improve the quality of our workforce and the prospects for our entire economy.

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