



## Memorandum

**To:** Faculty and Staff  
**From:** Gary L. Miller *GLM*  
**Date:** November 27, 2007  
**Subject:** Provost's Notes

I hope each of you has had a great fall semester. I appreciate your commitment to our students and the creative energy you apply each day to making the academic programs of Wichita State University stronger than ever.

Our urban serving research mission brings with it many obligations and opportunities that align with the economic and educational imperatives of the nation, Wichita, the state of Kansas and the new strategic direction of the Kansas Board of Regents. Informing these obligations and opportunities are important national discussions about the future of American higher education. One of the most important of these is the one surrounding accountability in measuring student learning. Following are some of my thoughts on this issue. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these ideas.

### *Accountability and Student Learning*

*(This essay is the basis of remarks given at the University Assessment Symposium on October 30, 2007)*

Certainly one of the most contentious current criticisms of higher education is that we (colleges and universities) do not hold ourselves accountable for student learning. The report of the *Commission on the Future of Higher Education* (the Spelling Commission), which many in state and local government have taken as the final word on what is wrong with postsecondary education (even though there are a number of more thoughtful critiques), puts it this way:

*...there are also disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined. Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy in which, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006.

To be sure, the Spelling Commission lays some of the blame for this at the feet of K12 public education confirming what nearly everyone has known for some time: *“Among high school graduates who do make it on to postsecondary education, a troubling number waste time—and taxpayer dollars—mastering English and math skills that they should have learned in high school.”* But while it is important to acknowledge the great challenge of public K12 education and to work as partners with public education to meet those challenges – a recurrent theme in my discussions of the urban serving research mission – the difficulties of that sector do not relieve us of our own responsibilities, nor do they necessarily fully explain our challenge. In the eyes of many, the troubles with secondary schools notwithstanding, universities have failed to hold themselves accountable for student learning and consequently are failing to adequately prepare students for career and citizenship.

Those of us who have worked in higher education for some time naturally recoil at the proposition that we are not adequately preparing students for their life after college. The judgment seems to be both a naively simplistic condemnation of an incredibly complex enterprise and inconsistent with much of our experience.

After all, there are demonstrable benefits to higher education. University and college graduates make more money throughout their lifetime, vote more frequently, are generally more involved in their communities, and are, for the most part, healthier regardless of the kind of university they attend. College graduates also get incarcerated at a far lower rate than non-college educated folks, though recent business scandals give one pause to question those data. Moreover, a number of the important reform movements that many of us have participated in over the years have been reasonably successful. Despite the rough beginning in the 1980s, most universities now have well developed cultures around the assessment of student learning and student engagement, and there is a vigorous and ongoing discussion in the higher education community about assessment strategies. Writing is now generally considered to be within the purview and responsibility of all disciplines. Interdisciplinary approaches are widespread, even though we have still not figured out how to arrange university financial models to make the development of interdisciplinary curricula anxiety-free. Initiatives to globalize curricula and provide students with more experiences overseas are common. Few universities – even the most elite – ignore the growing trend among students (and their parents) to want more attention given to career and work as part of their college experience. The elements of all of these are evident at Wichita State University, as recently affirmed via a thorough review by our accrediting body.

Also, there is empirical evidence to support the generally good impression most of us have about our industry. In the introduction to his analysis of how American higher education can achieve a greater level of effectiveness, Derek Bok points out that:

*Having examined the evidence on the effects of college, I find good reason for the satisfaction of most alumni with their education. Countless studies have found that college students, overall, achieve significant gains in critical thinking, general knowledge, moral reasoning, quantitative skills, and other competencies. Most seniors agree that they have made substantial intellectual progress. The marketplace affirms*

*these conclusions by giving large additional rewards to those who carry their education beyond high school to acquire a B.A. degree.*<sup>2</sup>

We might argue, then, that the strong negative feelings about higher education among policy makers, legislators and the public (including parents) don't square with the obvious good provided by higher education. Maybe all the fuss about accountability boils down to explaining ourselves better. As new Harvard president Drew Foust observed in her inaugural address:

*“The deeper problem is a widespread lack of understanding and agreement about what universities ought to do and be. Universities are curious institutions with varied purposes that they have neither clearly articulated nor adequately justified. Resulting public confusion, at a time when higher education has come to seem an indispensable social resource, has produced a torrent of demands for greater ‘accountability’ from colleges and universities”.*<sup>3</sup>

Still, there is disquietude about the current critique that is not assuaged by the assertions about the good of higher education. The breadth of public dissatisfaction with higher education is substantial and includes all parts of the political spectrum. The precipitous decline in state support for public higher education (as a percentage of total cost) and recent efforts by the Department of Education to impose draconian rules about measuring student learning on regional accrediting agencies is strong evidence of the depth of the dissatisfaction. Recently passed House and Senate versions of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act suggest wide bipartisan support for initiatives that will increase federal oversight of higher education. Pressure to test for undergraduate student achievement appears to be a very direct extension of the *No Child Left Behind* mentality of criterion testing now gripping the public school system. Vocal critics like Richard Vedder (a member of the Spelling Commission) of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity suggest the country has invested far too much in higher education.<sup>4</sup> Even Bok's defense of the college education is prelude to hundreds of pages of direct criticism about the shortcomings of higher education in teaching students to communicate, to think, to appreciate their role as citizens, to accept and embrace diversity, and to understand the global society and, importantly, to prepare for work.<sup>5</sup> And, perhaps most disturbing, is the view held by some that the ethos of discovery and discourse fueled by academic freedom that we cherish is somehow valueless, undirected and quite possibly morally bereft. I fear that President Foust's understanding of all this as "public confusion" is a luxury only she and her colleagues at Harvard can afford.

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<sup>2</sup> Bok, Derek. 2006. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more.* Princeton University Press, Princeton. Page 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Unleashing our most ambitious imaginings*, Inaugural address of Dr. Drew Faust, President of Harvard University, October 12, 2007, Cambridge, Mass. [http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/faust/071012\\_installation.html](http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/faust/071012_installation.html).

<sup>4</sup> Vedder, R. 2007. *Over Invested and Over Priced: American Higher Education Today.* A policy paper from the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. November.

<sup>5</sup> Bok, D. C. 2006.

It is not likely that the concern for more accountability in higher education will go away anytime soon. And, it is likely that demands for direct quantitative measures of student learning will be with us for some time. Our challenge then is either to rise up against the accountability movement in defense of the notion that, messy as it is, the college experience does a pretty good job of getting students ready for work and citizenship, or alternatively, figure out a way to leverage (if not embrace) the movement to energize and reframe our vision of the future of higher education (in much the same way we came to accept the assessment movement in the 1980s). While the former approach will assuage our native spirit of defense of the institution we love – after all, how dare they presume to tell us what learning is or is not – the latter approach, I suggest, we must adopt. Indeed, accountability is the cornerstone of President Beggs’s vision for Wichita State. To hold true to this element of our vision, we must hold ourselves accountable for student learning.

To be sure, embracing the accountability movement with respect to student learning is difficult to swallow, especially if we are asked to do it with a standardized test of some kind. What metric shall we use to evaluate the development of an appreciation for Faulkner or a deep understanding of the historical and social psychological roots of the Holocaust or the ability to objectively discern the veracity of various claims of global climate change? How do we test things like information and quantitative literacy, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, oral and verbal communication, and intercultural knowledge? Are these so called “basic skills,” actually antecedent to deep learning, or are they *resultant* of it? Or both? If there is some magic component of learning that can be measured and compared among universities, what is it?

The fact is, we *do* accept – and always have – that college-level learning, or some significant residue of it, can be measured quantitatively. All of us believe that the course grade – an index of measurements – is a fair representation of student learning. As an industry, we generally agree that standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT, combined with high school GPA (another index of quantitative measurements) measures some important part of high school learning. In addition, most graduate programs happily use the GRE as a quantitative measure of achievement in making admissions decisions. Moreover, hundreds of universities use standardized testing as part of their learning assessment strategy.

Reflecting on the New American University at the turn of the millennium, Frank H. T. Rhodes, President Emeritus of Cornell University, suggested how we might reconcile our aversion to testing for learning and our desire to actually *improve* student learning:

*The “best” universities and colleges of the future will be those demonstrating the most effective gains in learning and learning skills among their students. This new accountability will demand a better understanding of the learning process and a clearer statement of instructional purpose and effectiveness.....The traditional pattern of a student accumulating information – however advanced – and a professor teaching subjects – however effectively – will be displaced by an emphasis on developing in*

*students the initiative, skills, and discipline to pursue knowledge independently, to evaluate and weigh it effectively, and to apply it creatively and responsibly.*<sup>6</sup>

Rhodes would have us measure student learning and hold ourselves accountable for it not to determine whether our students are learning all the right answers but, instead, as a way to continually improve the learning process.

In the coming weeks, the Assessment Committee, the Faculty Senate, the deans and others will discuss student learning in the context of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) that the National Association of Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), our principal professional affiliation, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) have developed this past year. While the program is a direct response to the Spelling Commission report, it was created in the spirit of Rhodes, as a way to increase transparency and encourage accountability while embracing the great variation in mission and approach in American higher education. I was fortunate to have been asked to participate in that initiative last spring and summer. Our discussion of the VSA follows on our efforts of recent years to accommodate the Board of Regents' desire to include direct measures of student learning in our Performance Agreement. The VSA standardizes the key metrics that characterize universities (e.g., graduate rates, "sticker" price and actual cost, demographic parameters, etc.) Participants are required to reveal a subset of data about student engagement (measured by NSSE, which we use, or one of two other engagement surveys). Importantly, it requires participating institutions to measure critical thinking and writing and oral communication by adopting one of three standardized tests (CLA, MAPP, CAPP) after a four-year campus trial period. The program sets out these measures at the institutional level, not at the level of individual students. The design of the program is meant to complement, not replace, existing campus learning assessment and student engagement structure. The initiative is offered as a voluntary program in order to ensure that the effort does not replace a self-made mandate for an external one.

The VSA does not resolve all aspects of the challenge of accountability. However, it does match our institutional commitment to accountability to students, faculty, staff and the community, and it does provide valuable information about how learning takes place at Wichita State University. I look forward to working with the Wichita State University community on this national initiative.

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<sup>6</sup> Rhodes, F. H. T. 1999. "The New University." Pp 167 – 174 in W. Z. Hirsch and L. E. Weber (eds.) *The Challenges Facing Higher Education in the Millennium*. American Council on Education. Oryx Press.