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Aaron W. Hughey

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## Does a college degree really influence economic success? It's complicated.

Aaron W. Hughey Opinion Contributor

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Higher education in the United States is currently facing a myriad of challenges, most of which are self-inflicted. Having a more educated populace, in and of itself, does not necessarily guarantee any advantages to anyone. We can blame shifting demographics, evolving economic realities and changing societal priorities – but the ultimate responsibility for our present circumstance lies squarely with those within the academy.

The full story of how higher education influences the economic status of either the individual or society is complicated. One of the keys to enhancing higher education's contribution to economic prosperity is greater alignment between what students major in and what the actual need will be for those majors. The ongoing proliferation of some interdisciplinary certificate and degree programs, for example, could potentially be doing more harm than good and deserves more intense scrutiny.

### **Consider our long-standing and almost irrational preoccupation with graduation rates.**

While the number of students a college or university can get to commencement is obviously important, it is not the best – or even the most desirable – measure of an institution's inherent value. The number of students retained to graduation does not signify whether colleges and universities are productively meeting their obligation to society. Whether or not those students are able to acquire and succeed in jobs related to their majors once they graduate is the only real measure of effectiveness.

Colleges and universities are notoriously inept at demonstrating the inherent value of the service they provide. They spend an inordinate amount of time, effort and resources producing endless reports designed to convince stakeholders that what they are doing is worthwhile and essential. In most instances, however, these reports are nothing more than self-serving exercises specifically devised to create the illusion that the institution is adding value when it is not.

The problem is that it is almost impossible to truly gauge the efficacy of a purported benefit while it is in progress. Demonstrating that a learning objective is being achieved assumes that the outcome is valid and has meaning outside the context of the class in which it is embedded. I can show that students are mastering the knowledge and skills that a course is designed to instill within them, but that's only relevant if what they learn can be applied outside the educational environment.

### **But what about accreditation?**

Administrators love to tie the demands they place on faculty to this mystical and overly emphasized process. The reality is that accreditation would be unnecessary and even redundant if institutions would simply restore credibility to grading protocols; i.e., if employers and the public saw grades

(and diplomas) as an accurate and realistic representation of the extent to which knowledge and skills have been mastered.

In the absence of this level of integrity, accreditation creates the illusion that accountability measures are in place and being followed. As anyone who has ever gone through accreditation knows, it is a very politically driven venture that is often more about perception than reality; a mutually beneficial and carefully choreographed dance. I tried to be honest with a visiting team once and I still remember the look of horror on the faces of my colleagues.

Keep in mind that most faculty members are intelligent. They can convince you they are changing the world when in fact they are not doing much of anything. Making arguments that seem cogent comes easily to many instructors and producing reports that seem credible is second nature to many professors. But is this really the best use of their talents? In recent years, I have spent so much time convincing various administrators that I am adding value that I have significantly less time to actually add value.

### **How to assess the efficacy of higher education**

Ultimately, there are only two ways to assess the efficacy of higher education. First, institutions must be able to demonstrate conclusively that those who earn a degree in a given field can perform the duties and responsibilities associated with jobs requiring that credential. This cannot be effectively accomplished in-house; it requires extensive and ongoing consultation with our counterparts outside academia.

Second, employers who hire an institution's graduates must recognize and appreciate the knowledge and skills they have acquired and be willing to compensate them in a way that is commensurate with the investment they made to acquire those competencies. Aside from the fact that most lenders expect their loans to be repaid, if a student can acquire – and be successful – in a job they could have secured without going to college, then we have a system that is inherently flawed.

### **Be more purposeful with the academic advising**

Our present efforts notwithstanding, aggressively helping students' secure appropriate employment after commencement should be more of a priority than simply increasing the number who make it to the finish line. Toward that end, colleges and universities need to become a lot more purposeful with the academic advising and career services they provide to students.

On the one hand, I believe everyone should be encouraged to follow their dreams. It is difficult to be successful in a vocation you are not passionate about. On the other hand, institutions can do a much better job of providing students with employment projections and the related economic information they need to make informed decisions about what majors will be most likely to enhance their quality-of-life post-graduation.

### **Tie financial support to placement rates**

The bottom line: If you want to hold higher education truly accountable, tie financial support to placement rates instead of graduation rates. And placement in a position that is demonstrably related to their major. Many programs claim that most of their alums are gainfully employed after graduation; they just fail to mention that several of them are in Aisle 16. You can be an enlightened human being and still living under an overpass.

We can do better.

*Aaron W. Hughey is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. He has been a fulltime faculty member since 1991; prior to joining the faculty he spent ten years as a university administrator.*



<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/2023/01/05/why-universities-should-focus-on-job-placement-not-how-many-graduate/69773294007/>