TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION
Testimony

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Center for Higher Education

Holding Public Colleges and Universities Accountable for Student Learning

Testimony in Support of SB 436

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I appear today to testify in support of SB 436. Part of a group of three witnesses (with Dr. Roger Benjamin and Dr. Scott Elliot), my task this afternoon is to introduce you to the national study of student learning (*Academically Adrift*) that both employs the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and, in turn, justifies SB 436's proposed requirement that all Texas public college and university students take the CLA in their freshman and senior years.

Adrift begins with a quote from former Harvard president, Derek Bok, according to whom too many students graduate college today "without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers … reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, non-technical problems."[1] *Adrift* validates Bok's observation through its longitudinal study of over 2,300 students from colleges and universities across the country. Employing the CLA, *Adrift* finds that 45 percent of students show "no statistically significant gains" in "general collegiate skills"—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills—after two full years in college (*Adrift*, 36). After four years, 36 percent continue to show only small or empirically non-existent gains.

In an effort to illuminate possible factors at play in the current state of higher learning, Arum and Roksa survey its "historical, social, and institutional context" (*Adrift*, 2). They begin with the "emerging empirical evidence that suggests that college students' academic effort has dramatically declined in recent decades" (*Adrift*, 3). Whereas full-time college students spent "roughly 40 hours per week in academic pursuits (i.e., combined studying and class time)," today's students spend only 27 hours per week on academic activities—"that is, less than a typical high school student spends at school." To sharpen the point: a study by Babcock and Marks finds that in 1961, 67 percent of college students reported studying more than 20 hours per week. Today, only 20 percent report the same.[2] Compositional changes cannot be used to explain this decline: Babcock and Marks find that "[s]tudy time fell for students from all demographic subgroups, within race, gender, ability and family background, overall and within major, for students who worked in college and for those who did not, and at four-year colleges of every type, size, degree structure and level of selectivity" (*Adrift*, 4).

Worse, the decline in study hours has not resulted in lower grades. To the contrary. A study by Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke geophysics professor, and Christopher Healy, a computer science professor at Furman University, looked at the grades awarded over the past several decades by more than 200 colleges and universities. They found that the proportion of:

> A grades awarded has skyrocketed over the years. … Most recently, about 43 percent of all letter grades given were A's, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988. The distribution of B's has stayed relatively constant; the growing share of A's instead comes at the expense of a shrinking share of C's, D's and F's. In fact, only about 10 percent of grades awarded are D's and F's.[3]

Rojstaczer and Healy's analysis leads them to a disquieting conclusion: "When college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they do not try to excel. It is likely that the decline in student study hours, student engagement, and literacy are partly the result of diminished academic expectations."[4]

Some of higher education's critics read Rojstaczer and Healy's study to suggest that American higher education has gone the way of Garrison Keillor's fictional "Lake Wobegon … where all the children are above average."

How are students able to study less and yet receive higher grades? *Adrift* cites the research of George Kuh, who holds that a "disengagement compact" has been struck between students and faculty generally. This compact consists in the following:

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> "I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone." That is, I won't make you work too hard (read a lot, write a lot) so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well. The existence of this bargain is suggested by the fact that at a relatively low level of effort, many students get decent grades—B's and sometimes better. There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning—on the part of faculty members who allow students to get by with far less than maximum effort, and on the part of students who are not taking full advantage of the resources institutions provide (*Adrift*, 5).[5]

In discussing the responsibility faculty bear for this state of affairs, Arum and Roksa acknowledge the fact that the percentage of full-time faculty in degree-granting schools fell from 78 percent in 1970 to 52 percent by 2005 (*Adrift*, 6). In addition, citing the work of Jencks and Riesman, faculty generally today are expected "to focus on producing scholarship rather than simply concentrating on teaching and institutional service."[6] Add to this the work of Ernest Boyer, who finds that "21 percent of faculty in 1969 strongly agreed with the statement that 'in my department it is difficult for a person to achieve tenure if he or she does not publish.'" Twenty years later, the number of professors agreeing with this statement had doubled to 42 percent.[7] Moreover, Boyer finds especially troubling the fact that this research-over-teaching agenda has "spread widely beyond the research university to a much larger set of otherwise institutionally diverse four-year colleges." (*Adrift*, 7) Massy and Zemsky refer to this teaching-undermining process as the "academic ratchet," such that "Even when most faculty use their time to meet professional and institutional obligations, the academic ratchet still shifts output from undergraduate education toward research, scholarship, professional service, and similar activities—a process that we have termed 'output creep.'"[8]

Arum and Roksa outline additional factors that have contributed to the decline in attention to undergraduate teaching: the rising leverage of research-oriented faculty who, unlike their more-teaching-oriented colleagues, can bring to the institution a larger share of newly available research funding; the "growth of commercial opportunities associated with research activities in higher education" (which has been enhanced substantially by passage of the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act); and administrative neglect of the fact that their institutions are "drift[ing] away from an undergraduate instructional focus" (*Adrift*, 9-11). For evidence of this last point, Arum and Roksa look to staffing and employment decisions of higher-education institutions over the last few decades and find, "In colleges and universities across the country, not only have part-time instructors increasingly replaced full-time professors, but resources have increasingly been diverted towards nonacademic functions" (*Adrift*, 11-12). They cite the work of Gary Rhoades, who argues that most of the increase in nonacademic functions has occurred in "the broad area of student services, including admissions, financial aid, career placement, counseling, and academic services such as advising and tutoring that have been reassigned to non-faculty professionals."[9]

A work published in the same year as *Adrift* fleshes out this portrait of the changing face of campus personnel and priorities over the past few decades. "Forty years ago," reports Benjamin Ginsberg, "U.S. colleges employed more faculty than administrators. But today, teachers make up less than half of college employees." As documented in his *The Fall of the Faculty*, "forty years ago, the efforts of 446,830 professors were supported by 268,952 administrators and staff. Since then, the number of full-time professors increased slightly more than 50 percent, while the number of administrators and administrative staffers increased 85 percent and 240 percent, respectively." Adjusting for inflation, from 1947 to 1995, "overall university spending increased 148 percent. Administrative spending, though, increased by a whopping 235 percent. Instructional spending, by contrast, increased only 128 percent, 20 points less than the overall rate of spending increase." Senior administrators have done particularly well under the new regime. From 1998 to 2003, deans and vice presidents saw their salaries increase as much as 50 percent, and "by 2007, the median salary paid to a president of a doctoral degree-granting institution was $325,000."[10]

As an aside, given the straitened circumstances in which students, parents, taxpayers, and state legislatures find themselves these days, the above statistics are disconcerting. But perhaps more alarming is the fact that the affordability crisis in higher education appears to have had little effect on the growth in administration nationally. According to the *Higher Education Employment Report*, "colleges and universities continued to focus more on hiring administrators and executives over faculty in Q1 2012, although the rate of change has slowed."

Regardless of the weight one puts on the various factors rehearsed above, write Arum and Roksa, "one thing is clear: undergraduate education in many colleges and universities is only a limited component of a much broader set of faculty professional interests, and one that generally is not perceived as being significantly rewarded" (*Adrift*, 12).

In an effort to restore the integrity that Arum and Roksa demonstrate has been lost in undergraduate education, I support SB 436, which would make transparent areas of strength and weakness in every Texas public college and university as well as in every major at these institutions. Such transparency is the precondition of fuller accountability on the part of Texas public higher education. Fuller accountability, in turn, is essential to incentivizing efforts to improve education quality.

Thank you for considering my testimony. ✯

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[1] Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006) 8.

[2] Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, "The Falling Time Cost of College: Evidence from Half a Century of Time Use Data," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (forthcoming).

[3] Catherine Rampell, "A History of College Grade Inflation," *New York Times* (14 July 2011). The article goes on to note:

> … [P]rivate colleges and universities are by far the biggest offenders on grade inflation, even when you compare private schools to equally selective public schools. By the end of the last decade, A's and B's represented 73 percent of all grades awarded at public schools, and 86 percent of all grades awarded at private schools, according to the database compiled by Mr. Rojstaczer and Mr. Healy. (Mr. Rojstaczer is a former Duke geophysics professor, and Mr. Healy is a computer science professor at Furman University.)
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> Southern schools have also been less generous with their grading than institutions in other geographic regions, and schools that focus on science and engineering tend to be stingier with their A's than liberal arts schools of equal selectivity.
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> … [T]he researchers argue that grade inflation began picking in the 1960s and 1970s probably because professors were reluctant to give students D's and F's. After all, poor grades could land young men in Vietnam.
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> They then attribute the rapid rise in grade inflation in the last couple of decades to a more "consumer-based approach" to education, which they say "has created both external and internal incentives for the faculty to grade more generously." More generous grading can produce better instructor reviews, for example, and can help students be more competitive candidates for graduate schools and the job market. The authors argue that grading standards may become even looser in the coming years, making it increasingly more difficult for graduate schools and employers to distinguish between excellent, good and mediocre students.

[4] Ibid.

[5] George D. Kuh, "What We Are Learning About Student Engagement," *Change* 35 (2003): 28.

[6] Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1968) 14.

[7] Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Stanford, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990) 12.

[8] William F. Massy and Robert Zemsky, "Faculty Discretionary Time: Departments and the Academic Ratchet," *Journal of Higher Education* 65 (1994): 1-22.

[9] Gary Rhoades, "The Study of American Professions," in Sociology of Higher Education: Contributions and their Contexts, ed. Patricia Gumport (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) 128.

[10] Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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