



## Higher Education Quality



### The Issue

Texas higher education is in a crisis. Studies show that too many students learn too little. This deficit cannot help but have profound, destructive effects—both on workforce competitiveness and democratic deliberation.

While this is a Texas problem, it is far from Texas' alone. The academic world was rocked by the 2011 publication of the landmark study of collegiate learning, *Academically Adrift*. *Adrift* tracked a national cohort of college students for four years, measuring their fundamental academic skills—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and clear writing—in both their freshman and senior years, using the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The results are alarming: *Adrift* found that 36% of college students nationally show little to no increase in fundamental academic skills after four years invested in college.

We in Texas should be concerned that our students, too, have been cast “adrift.” In March 2012, the *Washington Post*, through a freedom of information request, found that the University of Texas at Austin scores in the lowest quartile (the 23rd percentile) among peer institutions on the CLA; that is, 77% of UT's competitors scored higher. None of this denies that Texas boasts some of the most prestigious universities in the world, UT-Austin among them. Nevertheless, we can and must do better if Texas graduates are to compete effectively in our increasingly competitive global market.

Feeding on and fostering the student-learning crisis is the scandal of college grade inflation. Research reveals that, in the early 1960s, 15% of all college grades awarded nationally were A's. But today, 43% of all grades are A's. In fact, an A is the most common grade given in college today. Moreover, 73% of all grades now are A's or B's. Grade inflation is a cancer, devouring standards and disincentivizing student effort. As monetary inflation devalues the dollar, so grade inflation debases the currency of higher education—student transcripts.

Another area in which universities need to improve is the study of civics. In 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), a non-profit educational organization, issued a study that found Texas undergraduates fail at civics. Nationwide, 50 universities were surveyed, three of them in Texas—Baylor University, West Texas A&M, and the University of Texas at Austin. Nearly 1,000 Texas freshmen and senior students were given a 60-question test on American history and institutions. Texas students performed worse than their peers nationwide.

More troubling, the survey found that only 2.9% of students' civic knowledge is acquired in the college classroom. Texas' comparative deficiency in knowledge of civics is likely explained by another of the study's findings: undergraduates at these three Texas universities were below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college. In addition, a recent study demonstrates that UT-Austin and Texas A&M allow students to take Special Topics courses to satisfy the state requirement of two college American History classes. This undermines the 1955 law mandating these two classes. The law aims to require survey courses, not Special Topics courses, for Texas students, the overwhelming majority of whom are not History majors; thus, these two courses will likely be their only introductions to collegiate-level American History.

### The Facts

- Thirty-six percent of college students nationally demonstrate little to no increase in fundamental academic skills after four years in college.

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- College grading standards have become so lax that, today, an A is the most common grade awarded.
- Texas students gain only 2.9% of their civic knowledge during college.
- Undergraduates at Texas universities are below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

### Recommendations

- Institute reforms that tie university funding to student success results such as learning outcomes (as measured by, e.g., the Collegiate Learning Assessment or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency), and employment outcomes five years after graduation.
- Simultaneous with the above, encourage university regents to institute measurements of learning outcomes at the freshman and senior years.
- Pass legislation requiring “Honest Transcripts,” which provide, alongside the grade each student received for his/her class, the average grade given by the professor for the entire class.
- Encourage university regents and other administrators to institute reforms that place more focus on teaching students basic American history, government, economics, and Western Civilization.
- Building on the foundation laid last year by HB 1296, improve information systems by giving accessible data on student academic performance, graduation rates, post-graduate earnings, percentage of classes taught by part-time faculty, and evidence of post-graduate earnings (from sites like PayScale.com, etc.).

### Resources

*Combating the “Other Inflation”* by Thomas K. Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Aug. 2014).

*(Not) Cheaper by the Dozen: 12 Myths about Higher Education’s Cost and Value* by Thomas K. Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Dec. 2013).

*Toward Strengthening Texas Public Higher Education: 10 Areas of Suggested Reform* by Thomas K. Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Dec. 2012).

*Academically Adrift* by R. Arum and J. Roksa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

*Grade Inflation: A Crisis in Higher Education* by Valen E. Johnson (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003).

*Texas Undergraduates Fail at Civics: ISI’s American Civic Literacy Survey Results* by Gary Scott, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2007).

