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Standardized Test Proposal for Texas Colleges Stalls

by [Reeve Hamilton](#) | May 1, 2013 | [17 Comments](#)[Comment](#)[Republish](#)[Email](#)[Tweet](#)[Recommend](#)[Enlarge](#)

photo by: Marjorie Kamys Cotera

State Sen. Brian Birdwell, R-Granbury on Sept. 5, 2012.

A proposal requiring Texas public universities to administer a standardized test, one that has been the subject of significant national debate, appears to be stalled, but the debate over the assessment appears to be far from over.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment, launched in 2000 and run by the Rand Corporation's Council for Aid to Education, purports to measure the critical thinking, writing and analytical skills gained in college by testing students as entering freshmen and exiting seniors. It has been a major flashpoint in higher-education circles since the 2011 release of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on*

College Campuses, a book by social scientists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. They found that more than one-third of those who took the test did not show significant improvement in these areas over four years in college.

This caught the attention of one of the state's most influential conservative think tanks, the Austin-based Texas Public Policy Foundation, which has been active and occasionally controversial in higher-education policy discussions. Thomas Lindsay, the director of the TPPF's Center for Higher Education, has been pushing awareness of the test for the last year and hoped that Texas might become among the first states to mandate that all public university students take the test when they enter and exit college.

Sen. [Brian Birdwell](#), R-Granbury, filed [Senate Bill 436](#), which would have established such a requirement. But it appears Lindsay and Birdwell will have to wait at least another biennium. Birdwell told the Tribune that the bill, which is pending in the Senate Higher Education Committee and expected to remain there, “lacks the requisite support to pass this session.”

In the committee's public hearing on the bill, Lindsay said the test would help the state more accurately evaluate its higher-education system. "Grade inflation is ravaging our universities," he said, noting that administering the same evaluation to all students would allow for "truly apples to apples comparisons" of their gains in higher education.



One of the sticking points of the bill is the price tag of requiring the test, an estimated \$11 million. But Lindsay noted that the per-student cost is only \$25, or “a couple of Starbucks” coffee drinks.

Still others balked at the idea, saying it was an unneeded and dubious testing instrument.

“We could do better for higher education than to spend \$11 million in the next two years on a testing company, ” said Mary Aldridge Dean, executive director of the Texas Faculty Association and an opponent of the bill.

She added that supporting such a test would run counter to legislators’ current push to reduce standardized testing in elementary and secondary education. As proposed in Texas, the Collegiate Learning Assessment would not be a high-stakes test — poor performance would not jeopardize anyone's graduation — though Birdwell's initial proposal did call for students' scores to be put on their transcripts.

Dean also pointed out that the methodology in *Academically Adrift* has been [questioned by some academics](#), as has the CLA itself.

Some question the value of the test, which focuses on general abilities rather than specific knowledge, particularly for elite colleges, where students typically enter with high critical thinking skills, leaving them little room for improvement.

The test would not be new to all institutions in Texas, where some of the universities that pioneered its use are located. The University of Texas at Austin, for example, has administered the test to a sample of a few hundred freshmen and seniors each year since the University of Texas System instructed institutions to do so in 2004.

In a 2012 story, [the Washington Post revealed](#) that UT-Austin students tested the previous year showed only slight improvement for the seniors. Among similar institutions that also administer the test, UT-Austin was reported to be in the 23rd percentile for four-year learning gains.



But UT-Austin spokesman Gary Susswein said this one test was not the final word on the university’s productivity.

“We also use other national and in-house assessments to gauge student progress and evaluate our curriculum,” he said. “They are extremely useful tools to improve curricula, courses, teaching; however, the assessments such as the CLA are not currently designed to capture the student’s entire educational experience at the university.”

Lindsay said that he was confident in the validity of the instrument and was encouraged that the Legislature had begun to discuss it. He said he was hopeful that lawmakers would continue that conversation by commissioning an interim study on the issue.

“This would be a fundamental transformation in the transparency with which universities operate on their most fundamental charge, which is educating students,” he said. “So I understand how something like this may take time.”

Meanwhile, Birdwell showed no signs of giving up on the notion of requiring such evaluations.

“Ensuring that parents and prospective students know the value they are being provided remains one of my top priorities,” Birdwell said, “and I look forward to empowering them to make a market-based decision on where they can get the best education with their tuition dollars.”

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