

From Heresy to Possibility

January 31, 2011 – 10:56pm

By [Kristin Conklin](#)

From an early age we drill into children's heads that they need to work hard to go to college so they can prepare for a successful life. Many students and their families take out loans and drain savings to pay for college. And for what? Are they getting what they pay for?

This month, we learned that nearly half the nation's undergraduates learned little in their first two years of college. According to a study included in Richard Arum's and Josipa Roksa's new book, *Academically Adrift*, [many students graduate without the competencies](#) they will need to participate fully in American society.

These findings and a [growing fear of debt and confusion](#) about the cost of college give dangerous credence to arguments that [maybe college isn't really for everyone](#). It's a crisis of confidence that threatens our economy, democracy, national security, and yes, even our happiness.

How do we regain national confidence in the value of higher education? The answer: Make it more valuable. In addition to making higher education more productive—the topic of prior posts this month, this value proposition will require a logical progression to competency-based higher education.

With the encouragement of Complete College America's [Alliance of States](#) and the National Governors Association (NGA), governors are leading the charge by setting completion goals, with public reporting and increased accountability for [common completion metrics](#). Declaring that higher education success leads to economic success, Utah Gov. Gary R. Herbert called for 66 percent of Utahans ages 20 to 64 to have a postsecondary degree or professional certification by 2020. In his first state of the state address, Hawaii Gov. Neil Abercrombie endorsed the University of Hawaii's "Graduation Initiative" and its ambitious goal to increase the number of college graduates by 25 percent by 2015.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper asked his state to be ready for difficult choices for the state's colleges and universities. He also stressed: "In the end, we believe we'll need to engage all of Colorado in a serious conversation about the value of

higher education.”

It is high time for the kind of competency-based higher education that galvanizes state leaders, colleges and universities, faculty and even students in defining and measuring the kind of education that prepares students to think critically, problem solve, invent, and advance on the job. Students and their families and taxpayers have every right to demand that investments in higher education will lead to skills and preparation for success.

In the first wave of governors' educational leadership, learning outcomes were squarely on the state policy agenda. Goals 2000 – a landmark gubernatorial initiative of the 1990s – explicitly included learning goals at each K-12 grade level. Now in 2011, this largest crop of new governors in history has the opportunity to usher in an era of innovation in cost-effective higher education founded upon outcomes – essentially, competency-based models that put learning as the bottom line, not the level of funding or how resources are allocated.

There are some great places to start. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) [VALUE project](#) engaged businesses and campuses in measuring and monitoring what it means to earn a higher education degree. Simply put: What gets measured, gets improved. The 325 colleges engaged in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) understand this. They publicly report undergraduate results on such norm-referenced tests as the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, and their faculty enliven student learning outcomes workshops.

The Lumina [Degree Qualifications Profile](#), which defines the knowledge and skills students should acquire before earning an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree, will soon be put to the test. A small group of accreditors and academic associations have agreed to apply the definitions at individual schools. This approach has the potential to end the input-driven accounting of what degrees stand for. Bottom line: It can't be about a single standardized test or number of course hours. Degrees must reflect skills and learning and preparation for tomorrow's world. It's a powerful idea for improving and proving the value of higher education for students, employers, and taxpayers.

In 2007, I witnessed first-hand the vociferous objections from Congress and the

higher education community to the Spellings Commission's recommendations to increase transparency and accountability for higher education outcomes. What once was heresy is now palatable. The new NGA college completion metrics, the U.S. Department of Education's gainful employment regulations, and organizations' willingness to voluntarily try the Lumina Degree Profile are all signs of an emerging consensus that neither dollars spent nor institutional ranking define value for students, employers, or taxpayers.

Family budgets are tight. Competition for state and federal dollars is intense. It's no surprise that the on-line, competency-based, flexible Western Governors University and its first state brand, [WGU Indiana](#), are capturing attention after 10 years of incubation. It is not just because tuition has remained flat for three years. Or that costs per degree are up to one-fourth what an average public bachelor's degrees cost. This outcomes-based model puts competencies and cost-*effectiveness* at the center of its academic and business models. And so goes the future of American higher education.