

Ranking should rankle administrators



KARLA BRUNO

'TIS THE season for annual college rankings to flow from a variety of sources. The usual suspects have published their views.

What's different this year is the addition of a new player in the game: the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

The College of William and Mary earned a "C" from this new report card, "What Will They Learn?" (www.whatwilltheylearn.com), which Provost Michael Halleran quickly dismissed as "meaningless."

Halleran is wrong. A ranking system is meaningless if it has no basis in something substantive. There is plenty of meaning behind ACTA's report, plenty of thought and plenty of substance.

ACTA put years of effort into its review, looking at the general education requirements of 700 colleges and universities around the country. The goal was to alert the public to the results of a college education in modern America and to urge parents, students and, yes, college administrators to revisit what the ultimate goal of higher education is and what it should be.

What, indeed, will they have learned when they graduate? What skills and knowledge base will they have to go forth into the world as critical thinkers and useful employees?

When Halleran says, "We have a wide set of requirements, we just don't have their set," he's right, but "specific" versus "wide" is not a sound argument against any particular

set of standards.

If you go by Halleran's logic, having a broad set of general education requirements is good. But what does that mean?

It means there's no conclusive result. It means the college hasn't really considered what its graduates will take with them as a knowledge base. Or, to be fair, they've done an average job — a C's worth of thinking it through. That's not good enough for the Alma Mater of a Nation.

The point of ACTA's report isn't just the grade itself as an end, to be dismissed by administrators unwilling to consider that they are not producing graduates with the right stuff. The point is to generate a discussion. The topic is not meaningless. It is timely, it is urgent, it is imperative.

I would rather have ACTA's standards in place, for they pretty much guarantee that our graduates will be able to write coherently in standard English and that they will have a solid grounding in American history, two things that are sorely lacking in today's graduate.

If you don't believe me, I suggest you do a survey on campus. Just go around and ask students simple questions such as "What's the difference between 'its' and 'it's' "? Or "What are the Federalist Papers, and why are they important?"

For giggles, ask a professor or two and perhaps an administrator.

Take time to look at what passes for general education choices in the college cata-

log.

Ask yourself if the college is truly producing the results we most want and need in America.

You'll find it a meaningful exercise, I promise.

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