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By **KATHLEEN PARKER** | September 30, 2011

Our Unprepared Graduates

Jobs, jobs, jobs, we keep hearing. But for whom, whom, whom?

Certainly not for the many young Americans being graduated from colleges that have prepared them inadequately for the competitive marketplace. The failure of colleges and universities to teach basic skills, while coddling them with plush dorms and self-directed “study,” is a dot-connecting exercise for Uncle Shoulda, who someday will say—in Chinese—“How could we have let this happen?”

We often hear lamentations about declining educational quality, but the focus is usually misplaced on SAT scores and graduation rates. Missing from the conversation is the quality of what’s being taught. Meanwhile, we are mistakenly wed to the notion that more people going to college means more people will find jobs.

Obviously the weak economy is a factor in the highest unemployment rate for those ages 16 to 29 since World War II. But there’s more to the story. Fundamentally, students aren’t learning what they need to compete for the jobs that do exist.

These facts have been well documented by a variety of sources, not to mention the common experience of employers who can’t find applicants who can express themselves grammatically.

A 2010 study published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 87 percent of employers believe that higher-education institutions have to raise student achievement if the United States is to be competitive in the global market. Sixty-three percent say that recent college grads don’t have the skills they need to succeed. And, according to a separate survey, more than a quarter of employers say entry-level writing

skills are deficient.

One of the most damning indictments of higher education came this year with a book, “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,” by Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia. It’s a dense tome that could put Ambien out of business, but the authors’ findings are compelling. Just two examples:

- Gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills are either “exceedingly small or nonexistent for a larger proportion of students.”

- Thirty-six percent of students experience no significant improvement in learning (as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment) over four years of higher education.

Undoubtedly, critics of Arum and Roksa will find reason to diminish their findings. But Americans know that something is wrong with higher education, and the consensus is growing that young adults aren’t being taught the basic skills that lead to critical thinking.

Most universities don’t require the courses considered core educational subjects—math, science, foreign languages at the intermediate level, U.S. government or history, composition, literature, and economics.

The nonprofit American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) has rated schools according to how many of the core subjects are required. A review of more than 1,000 colleges and universities found that 29 percent of schools require two or fewer subjects. Only 5 percent require economics. Less than 20 percent require U.S. government or history.

Critics of ACTA’s findings insist

that the core curriculum is outdated and accuse the organization of being “conservative.” (Founders included Lynne Cheney and Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman.) Some also insist that such “old-fashioned” curricula merely encourage memorization and rote learning rather than critical thinking.

Ridiculous, says ACTA President Anne Neal: “How can one think critically about anything if one does not have a foundation of skills and knowledge? It’s like suggesting that our future leaders only need to go to Wikipedia to determine the direction of our country.”

College students may be undereducated, but they’re not dumb and many feel short-changed. A recent Roper Organization study found that nearly half of recent graduates don’t think they got their money’s worth. The problem with education isn’t money—we spend plenty—but quality. Yet, instead of figuring out how to make education pay future dividends, higher-educational institutions are building better dorms with flat-screen TVs, movie theaters and tanning salons, according to a recent CNN report. If parents aren’t furious, they’re not paying attention.

In the lost spirit of *in loco parentis*, Neal and Arum have teamed up to take these findings to those upon whom ultimate responsibility falls: the nation’s 10,000 college and university trustees. In a letter sent a few weeks ago, Arum wrote that institutions not demanding a rigorous curriculum “are actively contributing to the degradation of teaching and learning. They are putting these students and our country’s future at risk.”

That’s a provocative charge and a call to arms. Let’s hope trustees hear it and heed.