



Q&A August 2011

1. *What is What Will They Learn?*

What Will They Learn?[™] is a study of core academic requirements at all the major public and private universities in all 50 states—a total of 1007 four-year institutions that together enroll more than seven million undergraduate students. Its results are available to the public on a free website www.WhatWillTheyLearn.com.

Institutions in What Will They Learn?[™] are assigned a letter grade ranging from “A” to “F” based on how many of seven core subjects they require. Those subjects are: Composition, U.S. Government or History, Economics, Literature, Math, Science and Foreign Language at an intermediate level.

2. *How did you select the schools surveyed on the website?*

The 1007 institutions in What Will They Learn?[™] comprise all public universities with a stated liberal arts mission, as well as hundreds of private colleges and universities selected on the basis of size, academic reputation, and regional representation.

3. *What is your report telling us that we couldn't know from the many other rankings and guides that are out there already?*

Our website does not *rank* schools, it *rates* them on objective academic criteria. It grades each school based on the strength of its core curriculum. None of the three major ranking systems—*US News and World Report*, *Forbes*, and *The Princeton Review*—provides an evaluation of what students are learning. While these rankings look at such issues as the institution's wealth, reputation, physical facilities, number of Ph.D.'s among the faculty, and alumni giving records, no system other than What Will They Learn?[™] pays serious attention to the curriculum.

US News & World Report's ratings, for example, are determined by a number of measures that are not related to teaching and learning. Among these are four that comprise half of a college's overall evaluation: reputation (22.5% to 25%), student selectivity (15%), financial aid (10%) and alumni giving (5%).

4. *Why did you choose these seven core subjects for the What Will They Learn?TM study?*

A core curriculum that fails to require most of the seven key subjects outlined in this report will not satisfy the basic demands of general education. It is essential that students:

- be proficient in reading and writing;
- understand enough math, science and economics to be able to function in a modern, 21st century society;
- be able to communicate in a foreign language, since we live in an increasingly interconnected world;
- have a working knowledge of the history and governing institutions of this country that will prepare them for informed citizenship.

5. *What about schools that require other subjects?*

Many curricula go above and beyond this model—and we note many of the institutions that do throughout—but the seven core subjects we identify are the basic foundation of knowledge on which one should build. We also take note of institutions that use a standardized, nationally-normed test to assess the core collegiate skills of their students.

6. *Who is the target audience of your ratings?*

Our principal target audience is the sector of higher education that is ready to embrace significant academic reform, in other words, the trustees, alumni, academic leaders and policymakers who will challenge the status quo. However, the ratings also serve as a valuable resource for parents and student applicants to help them make choices that maximize the value of the higher education experience.

7. *What is the problem with distribution requirements?*

Distribution requirements—a system in which students select one or more courses from broad academic areas like “Humanities,” “Quantitative Reasoning,” or “Arts and Culture”—may seem like an appealing idea on paper. Distribution requirements appear to combine the virtues of a core while giving students more room for choice, but in practice they usually allow students to graduate with only a thin and patchy education. Within each subject area, it is not uncommon for students to have dozens or even hundreds of courses from which to choose—many of them narrow or frivolous. At Emory University, for example, students can choose from at least 470 different classes to fulfill their “History, Society, Cultures” requirement, including “Gynecology in the Ancient World.”

8. *My college says it has a good curriculum; why is its grade low?*

While most colleges today claim they are providing a strong core curriculum, in fact, they do so in name only. Instead of a limited number of courses, broad-based in focus, institutions now typically demand that students take courses in several broad subject areas—the so-called distribution requirements.

9. *What's wrong with choice? Shouldn't students be free to pick and choose which courses they take? They are, after all, paying for them.*

First of all, a core curriculum is in no way incompatible with choice. The requirement for the seven subjects that comprise the What Will They Learn?[™] core can be fulfilled in 30 credit hours—which is one-fourth of the credit hours normally required for a baccalaureate degree. The core makes sure that the basics are covered but students still have a range of courses to choose from within the core requirements and can pursue their own wider interests through electives.

Second, problems arise when having too many choices undermines the goal of giving students a coherent education. Once distribution requirements become too loose, students inevitably graduate with an odd list of random, unconnected courses. Research suggests that for many students having an expansive range of course options for their general education is confusing and may even be an obstacle to college completion.

Finally, education is not only about those who know more teaching those who know less; it is also about those who know more identifying the subjects that form the core of a solid education. Educators and administrators must exercise judgment and identify critical areas for mandatory study, rather than leave it up to 18-year-old freshmen, still inexperienced in the ways of the world, to determine what they need to know.

10. *Isn't the idea of a core outdated? Isn't it a throwback to the discredited pedagogy of the 1950s?*

Far from it. A well-designed core, such as the one suggested by ACTA, aims to give students the broad base of knowledge they need to compete successfully in our globalized economy and to make sense of the modern world. For example, as STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—fields continue to rise in prominence, scientific literacy increasingly becomes indispensable for individual and national economic success and for understanding the modern world.

11. *Aren't many of these subjects already covered in high school?*

Not all high school students take all of the courses that comprise a robust collegiate core curriculum. And more importantly, a high school-level class does not explore the material at a level commensurate with higher education.

12. *What evidence do you have that colleges are not preparing students to participate successfully in the economy?*

- **87%** of employers believe that America's colleges and universities need to raise the quality of student achievement to ensure the United States remains competitive in the global economy.
- **63%** of employers believe that too many recent college graduates do not have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy.
- Only **39%** of recent college graduates say college prepared them very well to succeed in today's economy.

- *Less than 25%* of employers consider the entry-level academic skills of four-year college graduates to be “excellent.”
- *Over 25%* of employers consider the writing skills of four-year graduates “deficient.”
- *36%* of college graduates showed no significant increase in cognitive skills over the four-years they were enrolled full-time in college.

AAC&U, *How Should Colleges Prepare Students To Succeed In Today's Global Economy?* [2006]

The Conference Board, *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce* [2006]

Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho, *Improving Undergraduate Learning: Findings and Policy Recommendations from the SSRC-CLA Longitudinal Project* [2011]

13. *How does ACTA find its information?*

Our analysis is based on publicly available information found in syllabi and course catalogs. This is the same information many prospective students and parents reference when evaluating colleges.

14. *Do Americans really want a core curriculum?*

Yes. In a study commissioned in August 2011, the highly respected Roper Public Affairs and Media firm found that 70% of American adults agree that colleges and universities should require all students to take basic classes in core subjects. That number spikes to 80% for 25-34 year olds, the segment that would include recent college graduates looking for employment and discovering the expectations that prospective employers have for entry-level skills.

The Roper survey also found that more than half of those surveyed (54%) were surprised that some institutions - including many prominent ones – do not require students to take any classes in basic economics, math, science, writing and U.S. history before they graduate. That number rose to 61% for 18-24 year olds, the demographic being asked to make choices about entry-level college courses.

Additional findings include:

- Less than half of American adults believe today's college students are definitely or probably getting their money's worth from a college education at a public college or university.
- Less than half of those surveyed believe today's college students are definitely or probably getting their money's worth from a college education at a private college or university.
- Nearly six in ten American adults believe today's colleges and universities are doing only a fair or poor job of preparing graduates for their future careers. That number jumps nine percentage points among the age group that includes recent graduates.

15. *How long has ACTA been doing these ratings? Has the number of colleges and universities examined grown?*

ACTA's *What Will They Learn? 2011-12* study is the third in this annual series. The series began in 2009 with an evaluation of 100 of the nation's leading colleges and universities. Last year, ACTA surveyed more than 700. This year's list has grown to over 1000 institutions.

16. *Are there patterns to the results of the ratings?*

Several significant and interesting patterns emerge from the ratings. The first is that, despite the responsiveness of some colleges to their particular rating, reform in the core curriculum overall proceeds at a glacial pace. Second, our research suggests that the more costly the college, the less likely such colleges will have a required core curriculum. Indeed, often less expensive colleges and universities have the most robust core curriculum requirements. Third, public institutions generally outshine private schools, and historically black colleges and universities fare better than the average college we studied. The U.S. military service academies have by far the strongest core requirements.

17. *Are things getting better, worse, or staying the same?*

Unfortunately, the results are fairly similar to those of last year. The number of schools which attained an A remained low – at around 2 percent. The percentage of schools receiving a B or C was relatively stagnant, and the number of schools receiving a D or F declined only slightly from 33% to 29%.

18. *How are colleges and universities reacting to the results of ACTA's ratings?*

Schools' reactions tend to be as varied as their grades. Colleges and universities that do well are often eager to publicize their rating. Schools that fail to provide a broad core curriculum, however, often criticize ACTA's rating system. Several schools have indicated an interest in strengthening their core curricula and rising in the ratings.

19. *Are you saying that places like the Kennesaw State University and Brooklyn College, which get "A"s, give a better education than world-renowned institutions like University of California at Berkeley and Brown University, which get "F"s?*

In terms of their general education curricula, yes. Our report is not intended to offer a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of a university. That some of the best-known colleges earn poor marks for general education doesn't mean that they don't do other things well; it means that they are not demonstrating commitment to a broad-based general education curriculum.

Colleges and universities with poor ratings in the ACTA study are not necessarily "failing" schools, but they are failing the long-term needs of their students by not requiring a broad-based core curriculum. This is recognized by an overwhelming number of recent graduates, as

evidenced by the fact that 66% of 25-34 year olds believe that colleges are doing only a fair or poor job of preparing students for the workplace, according to the recent nationwide Roper poll.

20. How current is the data that comprise the 2011-2012 results?

The information used in the study was drawn from the most recent course catalogs available to our researchers during the summer of 2011.

The criteria and model used by ACTA were reviewed by two panels of noted independent academics, including George E. Andrews, former President of the American Mathematical Society and Evan Pugh Professor of Mathematics at Penn State; Mark Bauerlein, Professor of English at Emory University; Jonathan Rose, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of History at Drew University; Sidney Gulick, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Maryland; and James A. Sellers, Professor and Director of Undergraduate Mathematics at Penn State.

This project was directed by Michael Poliakoff, ACTA's Vice President of Policy. Among his many academic positions, Dr. Poliakoff is a former professor of classical studies at Wellesley College and former Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research at the University of Colorado.