In the past 20 years, scholars and practitioners have committed to measuring the cognitive outcomes of education. In this chapter, the author assesses the movement that focuses on cognition, to the exclusion of other outcomes. An identity-based framework is offered as an alternative.

Changing How We Think About the Goals of Higher Education

Chad Hanson

Howard Bowen (1977) once wrote, “The impact of higher education is likely to be determined more by the kind of people college graduates become than by what they know when they leave college” (p. 270). It is easy to see the truth in such a statement. Even so, in the past two decades many of us turned our attention to documenting one aspect of change in college: cognitive development. As professionals, we became committed to measuring the skills and knowledge that people learn in courses and degree programs. For a range of reasons that include culture, politics, and accreditation, we made learning outcomes, rather than identity development, the centerpiece of our effort to understand how colleges affect students.

In what follows, I offer an analysis of the historical shift that made the assessment of learning outcomes a priority. I consider the social forces that moved our attention away from identity development and toward short-term cognitive outcomes. In the process, I hope to demonstrate why the authors in this volume offer a much-needed alternative to the common psychometrics that we use to measure the outcomes of the college experience.

A Culture Shift

In the beginning, American higher education was patterned primarily after the colleges of the United Kingdom. Our schools reflected conventions carried to North America from the campuses of Oxford and Cambridge. Our institutions saw character formation as central to their mission. Then, in the first two decades of the 20th century, the purpose of our schools started to change. We began to move away from the British archetype. We became
invested in the German model, emphasizing research and the production of knowledge (Rudolph & Thelin, 1990).

By 1968, when Christopher Jencks and David Reisman published *The Academic Revolution*, the shift from “teaching college” to “research university” had unfolded. The move in the direction of research served to privilege science- and technology-oriented fields. Experimental methods became a desirable, and lucrative, alternative to the arts and letters (Wilson, 2013). The study of how college affects students came of age in this period, and the perspectives and methods of hard science grew dominant. To this day, the distinction between “hard” and “soft” reveals our preference. Over time, the field of cognitive psychology became aligned with the methods of natural science. Thus, it was poised to become the “hard” face of our efforts to understand student development. Psychometrics became our benchmarks, and we abandoned the big questions about who our students become.

In *The Learning Self: Understanding the Potential for Transformation*, Mark Tennant (2012) explains how our affinity for the hard or natural sciences made it unlikely for faculty or staff to study student identity development. He wrote:

"The self is not a natural entity that can be objectively studied. It has a historical rather than a natural status. That is, unlike objects in the physical world, the self is not something that is independent of the way we think, theorize, and talk about it. (p. 5)"

Identities are created as we think, talk, and tell stories about who we are, where we have been, and what we have done. Any thorough study of how people change in college would seem to require an analysis of the narratives that students use to develop identities—a sense of what they were like before they started and who they became during the course of their education.

When graduates reflect on what their schooling meant to them, they put their narrative interpretations on display. Consider the following quote from the novelist Andre Dubus. In his memoirs, he wrote: “... all that book-learning had seemed to open doors inside me that led to a higher part of myself, one that was more evolved and thoughtful, reasonable and idealistic ...” (Dubus, 2011, p. 198). Technical skills and bits of knowledge seem trivial beside such a statement. Dubus illustrates the value of asking students to describe the kinds of people they are becoming. But the answers to such questions are not what we consider objective.

The stories that students use to make sense of who they are do not fit into charts or graphs. They clash with the culture of positivism that we maintain in the academy. Many scholars feel bound to use the methods of science as opposed to those of the humanities. We see stories as “soft,” and thus we find one reason why faculty rarely assess the meaning of the college
experience. Administrators and policymakers have also paid scant attention to the web of narrative that students inhabit.

**The Politics of Studying Students**

In 1973, Burton Clark published a prescient article, “Development of the Sociology of Higher Education.” In this work, Clark suggested that studies of schools are influenced by politics. He cited the tendency for research agendas to become “voiced around the immediate needs of administration and public policy” (p. 10), as opposed to the perspectives of scholars or the demands of the subject. With respect to policy, research questions become voiced around the concerns of partisan authors and elected officials.

In his books and articles, Stanley Fish resists easy classification as a member of the political left or right. Still, in his most well-known treatise on faculty, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Fish, 2008), he takes a conservative position on the purpose of education. Fish urges a narrow role for colleges and universities. He offers faculty a simple set of instructions: “teach materials and confer skills” (p. 176). He claims that by limiting our efforts to nurturing certain abilities, we protect ourselves from the accusation that “we venture into precincts (of politics, morality, and ethics) not properly ours” (p. 176). Conservative tomes, such as Allan Bloom’s (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* and E. D. Hirsch’s (1987) *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, mirror Fish’s line of thought. For conservative commentators, the aim of schooling is to ensure that graduates possess a proper stock of knowledge. Questions about whom our students become fall outside of this agenda.

Liberal-minded leaders are motivated by different forces. Generations of Democrats have concerned themselves with improving access to higher education (Bailey & Smith-Morest, 2006). Liberals believe that it is the role of public institutions to address issues of inequality. Thus, they see education as a way to aid those who suffer from disadvantages. Concern for the underprivileged has led to a line of research on the self and identity, but the studies are often limited in scope. Subjects are chosen on the basis of their membership in a group identified as a minority—for example: women, people of color, or gay and lesbian students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Studying the identities of those from diverse backgrounds is important work. Efforts to document the cognitive outcomes of education are necessary, too. Taken together, however, the emphasis on documenting particular skills, and the focus on the race, gender, and sexuality of students have made it unlikely for scholars to build a program of research aimed at understanding identity development—writ large. The political climate steers us toward diversity studies on one hand (Jacoby, 1999) and documenting cognitive outcomes on the other (Arum & Roksa, 2011).
Some might argue that as ivory towers, institutions of higher learning are insulated from politics. To some degree, colleges and universities enjoy autonomy, but the autonomy is not complete. Through the accreditation process, institutions are held to politically acceptable standards. For the past 12 years, I have served as a consultant-evaluator for the nation’s largest regional accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. During that time, I have worked as a member of teams dispatched to assess institutions from Ohio to Arizona. Teams differ with respect to their priorities, but on two measures I find consistency. First, we expect schools to assess cognitive learning. Second, we make sure that institutions commit to assuring diversity within their staff, students, and faculty.

Even when a college’s mission statement suggests that the institution exists to create certain kinds of people—good citizens, for example—I am not aware of a case where an accrediting agency required an institution to assess the question of whether their graduates become vigorous citizens. I make this point not to underscore the shortcomings of the accreditation process, but rather to illustrate how political preferences shape our inquiries.

The Rise of Human Capital Development

There is one aspect of higher education that politicians agree upon. Across the spectrum, postsecondary schools are seen as engines of economic development (Engell & Dangerfield, 2005). Education is thought of as career preparation, and when we conceive education as training for the labor force, the effect has been that we become less interested in broader questions about the traits or character of graduates. Instead, we see students, narrowly, as economic resources. We see them as skill sets, capable of adding value to an organization (Barnett, 1994). We focus on producing outcomes and abilities. Then we think of our graduates as products that we market to employers. But in fact, the experience of attending a college or university is a process through which students grow into and become educated people (Chickering, 1969).

When we think of students as a human form of capital, the view potentially restricts our intellectual terrain. We run the risk of limiting ourselves to questions about what students know or how they perform prescribed tasks. We lose sight of the notion that schools allow people to forge new selves. During the process of higher education, students are “actively experimenting with and consolidating a sense of identity: who they are, what they can do well, what is important to them, how they want others to see them, and so forth” (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 203). Whether students are of traditional age and establishing independence or nontraditional and in the process of changing their identity, education offers individuals a chance to renew what it means to be themselves.
The human self or identity is a collection of memories (McCall & Simmons, 1966). For graduates, a college is an alma mater, a set of experiences, and a bundle of recollections. The experience of college becomes part of a student’s life story and a part of their past. The past has a profound influence upon whom we become and how we act. Our personal histories “take us to places that counsel and instruct, by showing us who we are and by showing us where we have been” (Chapman, 1979, p. 46). Those places and stories confer social status and they order behaviors, often, for the remainder of a person’s days. The most important feature of a college education is the process or experience of becoming educated.

Those who take a human capital approach to students do so, in large part, because they believe employers see graduates as economic entities. New research from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2013) suggests that businesses see employees as more than walking skill sets or indexes of knowledge, however. It turns out that when employers add to their workforce, they seek certain kinds of people. In the AAC&U (2013) study entitled *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success*, 318 executives in the private and not-for-profit sectors were asked to describe what they look for when they seek to fill new positions. The study suggests that employers place the highest priority on finding people with “integrity” and people who are willing to make “ethical judgments.” Organizations also seek employees with an interest in “continued new learning.” They hire people who “give back to the communities” they are from, and they look for those who are “comfortable working with colleagues, and/or clients from diverse cultural backgrounds” (p. 7).

Knowledge and skills are not necessarily the most important factors when it comes to the question of whom a business will hire. Picture a typical job interview. Employers rarely conduct knowledge or skills tests as part of the hiring process. An interview is an exercise in storytelling. Candidates are asked to tell the story of themselves: who they are, what they are like, where they have been, and what their futures hold in store.

I do not see college students as human capital. In my mind human beings and capital are two very different things. Even if you are comfortable thinking of people as economic units, however, the evidence suggests the best thing we can do for employers is to provide them with a selection of ethical, open-hearted, and intellectually curious people (AAC&U, 2013).

**Conclusion**

During a brief period in the 1970s, the study of student identity enjoyed some level of prestige. Today, however, books like Arthur Chickering’s (1969) *Education and Identity* stand on shelves as reminders of a time when it looked like our institutions might conduct wide-ranging investigations into the question of how our students change in college. Alas, for reasons
that relate to politics, positivism, and questionable assumptions about what is best for the economy, the focus on identity diminished. At the risk of sounding obvious, these are not fair reasons to avoid the study of how education becomes a part of our life stories.

The cognitive outcomes of education will likely remain the subject of our attention, at least in the short term. I am aware that we are not going to stop producing charts and graphs. But at this point, we would also do well to acknowledge that the experience of schooling holds the potential to serve as a life-changing milepost. Test scores and rubrics contribute little to the process of constructing a personal, civic, or professional identity. Students use narratives to build and maintain a sense of who they are. Schools hold the promise of helping students to develop wiser, more thoughtful, and idealistic versions of themselves. Our students deserve an educational experience intended to ensure that the memories will last and guide them into the future. In the months and years ahead, let us not forget, when it is at its best, higher education is a meaningful, memorable, and formative process.

**References**


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