



[REALITY CHECK \(/BLOGS/REALITY-CHECK\)](#)

The Reality Check blog, from John V. Lombardi, follows the endlessly fascinating parade of criticism and defense of the higher education business.

## Minimalist College: The Testing Floor

November 1, 2013 - 7:29am

By [John Lombardi](#)

The ongoing pursuit of the cheapest and least intrusive higher education alternatives continues apace. Some find the activity new and exciting, although of course we've always been able to get educated by reading books and studying on our own. The new twist is that we can now sign up for computer mediated reading and studying on our own, a convenience in the fast-food tradition of highly efficient standardized production of useful commodity products.

To guarantee the benefit of this form of higher education, we develop a battery of tests that ensure no student is left behind in the race to certification as an educated and competent adult. Many in the state-supported higher education policy realm see these tests as mechanisms to reduce the number of students in real universities and drive them through a fast food education that produces certification at a low cost, perhaps only \$10K or less for a college diploma.

Real universities, confronted by a demand to test or lose more of their state funding, rush to implement various schemes of evaluation that they hope will satisfy state level political imperatives while protecting the substance and quality of the real work they do. They know, what we all know, that the faith in the power of competency tests will fade over time.

A test that will certify most of the students who enter some form of post-secondary schooling as having reached, upon exit, a minimal acceptable level of competency in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the ritual reference to critical thinking must set a reasonably low floor. If it is a serious test, many students will fail, and who can cope with a system that fails 60 percent or so of its test takers? Instead, we'll find a testing process that ensures that at least 70 to 80 percent of those who take it, will pass, if not on the first try, then on subsequent tries and perhaps with careful coaching and preparation by the institutions.

Quality colleges and universities, however, with the experience of SATs, ACTs, LSATs, GREs, MCATs, and a host of other tests designed to identify various forms of competency will quickly turn the exit test into an entrance requirement. If the test sets a floor low enough to allow 70% of college participants to eventually pass by graduation time, the well prepared students that go to selective colleges and universities will likely be able to pass the test before they enter. Indeed, a selective college might make this a condition of admission. This would also create an opportunity for the test-prep industry, which now improves students SATs and ACTs scores, to sell a new product that ensures prospective college students a passing score on the low level exit exams required by their state.

This strategy has the value of further separating the selective from the non-selective institutions, and serves important goals of prestige seeking colleges and universities. It will also ensure that the students who enter these selective institutions can pursue a real college education without the distraction of preparing for an exit test that has little value for those who seek a high quality higher education.

We can imagine a utopia where all students who enter college are interested, capable, and committed to learning. We can hope that all students who enter college have what it takes to graduate with sophisticated skills and broad knowledge. But we know that in the real world, people are different. Some are interested in a broad college educational experience, some seek specific skills, and some lack the interest, motivation, or preparation to participate in a real university.

The drive to ensure that everyone gets standardized fast-food educational certification will prove useful for political purposes, wi

help states continue to reduce their investment in quality higher education, and will provide an opportunity for many selective institutions to demonstrate that their programs fall into the elite category. To read about real colleges and universities, see *How Universities Work* (2013) from The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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