

Breakthrough Solution #5:

Use “Results-Based” Contracts with Students to Measure Quality

The Goal

Research has shown that students are excellent judges of the learning that takes place in a classroom. This is particularly true if the deliverables for a course are clearly stated. This reform would require colleges and universities to develop contracts between deans, department heads, and teachers so that the promises of each degree program are clearly stated to each and every student.

A secondary benefit of this reform is that it provides an effective, institution-based accountability tool rather than a top-down, one-size-fits-all test or other system imposed by federal or state governments.

Notes

Carrying Out the Reform

Signed contracts will be established between the university, dean, department head, teachers and each student.

1. *Universities will provide each applicant with a “learning contract” that discloses, at a minimum:*
 - a. the graduation rate, placement rate and average starting salaries for a student with the equivalent entering admissions test scores (SAT) and major
 - b. the average class size
 - c. teaching evaluations for the faculty who will be teaching their classes
 - d. grade distributions
 - e. the skills, tools and lessons that the curriculum is designed to transmit
 - f. how educational value added will be measured.

All enrolling students will need to sign and return the learning contract to the school before admittance.

2. *Teachers will provide for each student enrolling in a course a classroom learning contract that discloses, at a minimum:*

- a. the skills, tools and lessons that the course is designed to transmit
- b. the grading policy for the course
- c. the method that students will use to evaluate the course and teacher on whether the learning promise was met.

To remain enrolled in a course, students must sign a copy of the contract and then have it returned to them signed by their teacher.

Possible Objections

1. *Students cannot measure whether or not they are learning the right tools, skills and lessons in class.*

If the learning contract is clearly drawn, students can judge whether or not they have learned anything. Adult learners now make up nearly half of all college students. Even in the case of younger students, our society allows eighteen-year-olds to vote and go to war and believes that young adults are capable of making complex purchasing decisions about automobiles and insurance. It simply makes no sense to assert that college students are not capable of judging the amount of learning that's being delivered in a classroom, particularly if it is clear what the course promises to deliver.

If a class is poorly designed or the learning objectives are unclear, students may have a difficult time deciding whether or not a class has delivered as promised. But that is the fault of the teacher who designed the course, not the student. And even in poorly defined courses, students still know whether or not they have learned anything at all.

2. *Won't this be a big burden on faculty, preparing all these contracts?*

Faculty already prepare syllabi for what will be taught in each class. These learning contracts are merely a refinement of the syllabi and thus not a great burden.

3. *Don't universities publish all of this information already?*

Graduation rates, class size and other data are not made

clear on a case-by-case basis in a way that would allow students and parents to make informed choices. Explicit promises on learning outcomes are rarely if ever provided to students and parents.

4. *We're already subject to myriad accountability systems, why do we need this, too?*

Taxpayers and tuition payers (students and parents) as well as employers of college graduates are all demanding greater accountability and performance from colleges and universities. Some have even proposed national testing at the college level to measure performance.

Institution learning contracts are a tool to address these legitimate concerns in a way that recognizes the unique role and mission of each university. The promises made in learning contracts can vary from university to university in ways a standardized test never will.