Multiple Choice Tests and Institutional Assessments Judged Ineffective by Employers Looking for Improvements in College Learning

New National Survey Demonstrates That Employers Dismiss Multiple Choice Tests of General Content Knowledge in Favor of Qualitative Assessments; College Transcript Not Helpful in Determining Potential

Washington, DC—January 22, 2008—The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) released the results of a national survey of employers of college graduates today as part of its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. The survey findings show that employers see a need for significant improvement in the skills and knowledge recent college graduates are bringing to today’s workplace. They judge several common approaches to assessment inadequate to the task of preparing today’s students for success in today’s competitive global economy.

“Every study of employers, including the several we have published, shows that they consistently argue for more advanced, contextual, and integrated learning in broad liberal education areas. Employers, in short, want more and better liberal education, not less,” said AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider. “What this newest data suggest is that employers also prefer assessments that demonstrate students’ abilities to integrate and apply their learning—both in hands-on college projects and in real-world settings.”

The key findings of the survey suggest:

- A majority of employers (57 percent) think that half or fewer college graduates have the full set of skills and knowledge needed for advancement in today’s workplace. Employers see room for improvement in twelve key areas of learning—especially in the areas of global knowledge, self-direction, writing, and critical thinking.

- Employers prefer assessments that require students to demonstrate depth of knowledge and advanced capacities in problem-solving, writing, and analytic reasoning. They believe that multiple choice tests and assessments that evaluate institutions rather than individual students are the wrong choices for assessment and accountability in higher education. The assessment approach that received the lowest scores from a majority of employers is the idea of requiring college students to complete multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge. A mere 7 percent think that this approach would be very effective in ensuring that college graduates possess the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the workplace. On the other hand, fully 69 percent think that qualitative evaluations of supervised internships or community-based projects would be very effective.

- Employers find college transcripts of limited use in evaluating college graduates’ potential to succeed in the workplace. Only 13% of employers find transcripts very useful. Sixty-seven percent find transcripts just somewhat or not useful.

- Employers recommend that colleges and universities invest in methods of assessment that evaluate students’ abilities to apply what they are learning to complex problems and in real-world settings. Four approaches are endorsed as worthy of investment, including:
- Faculty evaluations of internships or community based learning;
- Essay tests that measure individual students' problem-solving, writing, and analytical thinking skills;
- Electronic portfolios of students' work, including examples of accomplishments in key skill areas and faculty assessments of them;
- Faculty evaluations of comprehensive senior projects.

"This study affirms some of the main recommendations my colleagues and I made in the report we released last January, College Learning for the New Global Century," said State Farm Insurance Companies Executive Vice President and member of AAC&U's LEAP National Leadership Council Deborah Traskell. "As business leaders concerned about competing in an increasingly competitive global environment, we urge college leaders and policy makers to spend their resources wisely; they should invest in assessment and learning practices that help all students learn to write effectively, think critically and clearly about complex issues, and work productively in diverse teams."

"Too many policy makers and educational leaders are focused on the tests rather than on what is really important—whether students are learning what they need to know," said Roberts T. Jones, president of Education and Workforce Policy. "Business leaders no longer can say what a college diploma really means in terms of what graduates know and can do with their knowledge. One important message from this study is that colleges need to develop more opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in real-world settings. But an equally important message is that colleges must develop better ways to assess whether students have achieved a very specific set of essential skills and core knowledge as a result of their cumulative learning in college."

"Testing has focused for too long on multiple choice measures and narrowly defined cognitive skills," said Robert J. Sternberg, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University. "But we're starting to invent new approaches that tap creativity and practical skills as well as other kinds of higher level conceptual thinking that employers care about when they hire new employees. The message from this survey is that employers want these new assessment strategies, not the stale old strategies that have been handed down to us for close to a century with virtually no serious modifications. If medical, biological, or engineering technology had made as little progress as has the technology of testing, where would our society be today?"

The survey was conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. From November 8 to December 12, 2007, Hart Research interviewed 301 employers whose companies have at least 25 employees and report that 25 percent or more of their new hires hold at least a bachelor's degree from a four-year college. The margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 5.7 percentage points.

Liberal Education and America's Promise is an initiative sponsored by AAC&U to champion the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. The initiative focuses campus practice on fostering essential learning outcomes for all students, whatever their chosen field of study. It also utilizes advocacy at the national level and work in selected partner states to inform the public about the importance of key liberal education outcomes for every college student.

To see the full report of the survey, "How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers' Views on the Accountability Challenge" and the full text of the LEAP national report, College Learning for the New Global Century, see www.aacu.org/leap.

AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,150 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges. Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found on the AAC&U Web site.