

New study shows best college not Harvard - try Lamar

By Kathleen Parker

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It is generally true that you get what you pay for, but not necessarily when it comes to higher education.

A new study set for release today about the value of a college education, at least when it comes to the basics, has found the opposite to be true in most cases. Forget Harvard and think Lamar.

Indeed, the Texas university, where tuition runs about \$7,000 per year (compared to Harvard's \$38,000) earns an "A" to Harvard's "D" based on an analysis of the universities' commitment to core subjects deemed essential to a well-rounded, competitive education.

In other words, Lamar requires courses that Harvard apparently considers of lesser value. These include six of the seven subject areas used in the study to gauge an institution's commitment to general education: composition, literature, foreign language at the intermediate level, U.S. government or history, economics, mathematics, and natural or physical science.

Harvard has comprehensive requirements for only two of those - composition and science.

The study was conducted by the nonprofit American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) to help parents and students determine where they might get the best bang for their buck. It was timed for release to coincide with U.S. News and World Report's annual evaluation of the "best" colleges and universities, which is based primarily on various statistical data, as well as reputation and prestige.

ACTA focused its efforts on requirements as a measure of what an institution actually delivers. Anne Neal, ACTA president, is quick to point out that the grading system doesn't tell the whole story about an institution, but does offer a crucial part that has been missing.

On a user-friendly website, "What Will They Learn?"

(www.whatwilltheylearn.com), visitors can compare the major public and

private universities in all 50 states. In other findings, public institutions are doing a relatively better job than private schools of ensuring that students receive basic skills and knowledge - and at a considerably lower price. But both public and private universities are failing to ensure that students cover the important subjects, notably economics and U.S. government or history.

Among the reasons for this void is that many professors prefer research to teaching, and course content reflects that. There's no paucity of subjects to choose from. More courses equals more expense equals higher tuition. The question is whether the offerings are of any value.

Students given so many choices aren't likely to select what's good for them. They'll choose what's fun, easy or cool - and not early in the morning and not on Fridays. It's up to universities to guide them away from the dessert tray to the vegetable courses they need. Neal says colleges have abdicated that responsibility.

At a time when the cost of higher education is increasingly prohibitive - and emphasis tends to focus on status - students and parents can find solace in the possibility that a better education can be found in one's own backyard.

The study and website fill a gap so that parents and students can make better choices. As a consequence, colleges and universities may be forced to examine their own responsibility in molding an educated, well-informed citizenry.

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