

Testing the aims of college

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

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College graduates who can discuss the Gettysburg Address and get a job at Google.

That's the closing image of Jon Meacham's Oct. 7 *Time* cover story, "[The Class of 2025](#)." The piece begins by considering what students actually learn in college (as far as the curriculum, at least). "What should every college graduate know?" Meacham wonders. Or, he ponders, should the question be, "What should every college graduate know *how to do*?"

Meacham quickly covers a bit of U.S. higher education history with a discussion of the core curriculum battles, then closes with the sticky wicket of assessment.

Apparently some folks, aware of the diverse capacities (or lack thereof) of recent college graduates, have begun piloting a SAT-like assessment, the Collegiate Learning Assessment or CLA+, intended for college seniors. Meacham isn't keen on this idea exactly, but does wonder if individual colleges should "create a required general-education comprehensive exam as a condition for graduation."

While I'm no fan of standardized tests, I am a fan of learning—big fan, in fact. A national college graduation test scares the bejeezus out of me, but I have no problem with increased emphases, and raised standards, for college education. Here's why.

College is for learning. College prepares responsible citizens. College teaches students active engagement in all of life's questions, for all of life's days.

I'm sick and tired of the perspective (often coming out of Washington, or from local politicians of all stripes) that college is primarily—or only—about job preparation, or even more narrow: getting a job at all.

Yes, college graduates with all majors have a very high chance of finding employment after graduation. Many of my recent students had to decide between multiple job offers. So, let me be clear: I like jobs. I want college grads to hold them.

I'm pro-job.

What raises my hackles is when folks talk about higher education as only a means to end: employment.

So, as hesitant as I am to consider any sort of enormous exam for already stressed-out college students, I don't think it's a crazy idea. Why not test college seniors on general knowledge? Why not test college seniors on critical thinking? Why not test college seniors on ability to analyze their community and understand their own gifts for social responsibility?

That's the point of college, after all. If instituting graduate assessments on college campuses could bring the focus of higher education back to the heart of gaining a liberal education, and by doing so if exams could refocus students' energies on learning rather than simply getting a job, I'm up for giving it the old college try.

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