

Foreword

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We live in an age of metrics. With measurement everywhere, critical questions concern not whether, but how to gauge and evaluate. All the more reason to celebrate the pioneering approach to pedagogical achievement represented in this stimulating volume.

The Social Science Research Council is especially pleased to host the ambitious Measuring College Learning Project that has been guided by Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Amanda Cook because its core principles and methodology resonate so richly with the history and objectives of the SSRC. Founding in 1923, the Council was fashioned by then young learned societies in Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Statistics. Their intellectual leaders sought to deepen the craft of social science by crossing intellectual boundaries while respecting the individual vectors of each subject of study. They wished to galvanize social scientists to work on crucial public issues, including education. They also aimed to build the capacity of students and scholars to learn and conduct inquiry about the human condition.

What the founders did not do was focus on pedagogy or on assessing how undergraduates were acquiring knowledge. Notwithstanding, each of their principal aspirations only could be achieved

if buttressed by high-quality teaching and learning. Then as now, none of the Council's primary objectives can be secured without inspiring young adults to thoughtfully understand and deploy the work of systematic social knowledge. This capacity also provides a foundation for democratic citizenship in which members of the society are called on to thoughtfully judge key aspects of social life and public affairs.

By way of a compelling corrective, the past decade has witnessed a major effort by the SSRC to engage with and evaluate the results of collegiate instruction. The Council's program on higher education has originated powerful research concerned with what students actually learn in college, and with how their experiences project into adulthood. Based on rich data and incisive analysis, *Academically Adrift* revealed limits on learning and pressed colleges and universities to become more focused on goals and processes. That book's successor, *Aspiring Adults Adrift*, revealed profound challenges for the cohort of students studied in the earlier volume as that group left the shelter of the university for the world of more independent adulthood.

What the current work detailed below adds is a powerful insistence that meaningful assessments of learning outcomes depend on a small number of key decisions and judgments too rarely made. This approach to measuring outcomes revolves around the insight that faculty intentions not only motivate how education best proceeds, subject by subject, but how learning's achievements are refracted through competencies and concepts that educators believe to be essential for their fields of study.

At a time when too many standards impose artificial and mechanical criteria that fail to measure rigorously and thoughtfully, this project's diversity of fields, respect for the distinctiveness of different types of learning, and commitment to more incisive and precise measurements that move beyond too-simple efforts at accountability show that it is possible to advance learning by

combining understanding with clarity about objectives, means, and results.

Both the overview and the treatments of learning in the six disciplines this book considers are not intended to be dispositive. Rather, they convene a way of working that necessarily varies across subjects and across institutions and student communities. The issues dealt with in these essays go to the heart of defining what faculty instructors believe to be indispensable knowledge. They are bound to be controversial in both substance and method. As such, they should be read as a robust invitation to a wide variety of persons concerned with higher education to think hard, in fresh ways, about the ambitions, tools, and consequences of what we do as educators.

We are in the midst of a public conversation about the price, value, and effects of college-level pedagogy. Much of this talk has been based on uneven information, sporadic impressions, and limited analyses that are based on measures about cost, rates of completion, factual retention, and post-college job market experiences. These dominant approaches are not adequate. What we lack and urgently require are supple and knowledge-focused ways to appraise how those aspects of subjects that teachers and researchers believe to be fundamental to critical thought are conveyed and received. It is with passion for this set of challenges that the Measuring College Learning Project has begun to make important gains.

Much remains to be accomplished. The kinds of appraisals recommended here require new instruments, buy-ins by persons and organizations, effective persuasion and dissemination, and understanding of the utility of faculty- and discipline-based appraisals. In all, the success of this venture has large implications for the future of social knowledge and the character of civic life.