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February 28, 2011

### **In Talk to Governors, Bill Gates Says Public Colleges Should Prove They're Effective**

*By Derek Quizon*

Washington

States should hold their public colleges and universities more accountable for their performance, Bill Gates, the former Microsoft chairman, said in a speech at the National Governors Association's winter meeting here on Monday afternoon.

The billionaire software tycoon, who has taken an active interest in reforming public education since retiring in 2008 to focus on philanthropic work, said states should consider basing their support for public colleges and universities on performance measures—including graduation rates for students and income and employment rates for recent graduates.

And states should collect better statistics on those measures, he said.

A lack of data on graduation rates and how graduates fare in the labor market, he said, makes it difficult to tell which institutions are adequately preparing their students for life after graduation, and which aren't.

"Is there any criteria under which state funding would favor those that have the higher graduation rates over the ones that don't—particularly in times when our budgets are tight?" he said. "I'm not saying that's an easy [decision], but if we can get good measures, at least the data will be there for people to be able to decide that."

Mr. Gates briefly alluded to the debate over for-profit colleges and proposed rules that would eliminate federal funds for programs whose graduates have low employment rates and incomes. He said that the debate should be expanded to include nonprofit and public institutions as well.

"Those same types of questions, about outcomes and effectiveness, really should be asked of the whole higher-education sector," he said.

## Comments

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**beterschools** (change settings)

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Real-time updating is **enabled**. (Pause)



**Rick Alexander** 1 day ago

While education is a hot topic in Texas I think Mr Gates has a very good point. Colleges need to be held accountable. Especially community colleges that get state funds and focus on putting butts in seats and not focusing on just graduation rates but jobs.

7 people liked this. Like Reply



**swish** 19 hours ago in reply to Rick Alexander

Not enough that for-profits are fighting tooth and nail against being held accountable, but now Gates (who supports education privatization schemes) is helping to move the focus away from the ones that really need to be scrutinized.

5 people liked this. Like Reply



**11159786** 23 hours ago

Anyone appreciate the irony here: Gates, a college-dropout and success by any measure, advocating steps to increase graduation rates?

27 people liked this. Like Reply



**a\_voice** 17 hours ago in reply to 11159786

I also wonder what story graduation rates really tell. One way colleges can improve their graduation rates is by increasing selectivity. Another way is by lowering academic standards. Would those strategies be beneficial to the public?

6 people liked this. Like Reply



**beterschools** 16 hours ago in reply to a\_voice

Real possibilities lie between those extremes. As higher education expands to serve increasingly larger proportion of the population, we admit more students who, with better teaching and support, will achieve the same or better learning outcomes. Absent better teaching, many of these same students will fail. When HE served only the very smart and the rich, teaching skill was appreciated but not essential. It is now essential but is in short supply. Most professors teach the same way they were taught, which is to say from the early 20th century model.

2 people liked this. Edit Reply



**blue\_state\_academic** 12 hours ago in reply to 11159786

By his anecdote, Harvard is a failure

Like Reply



**corwinamber** 23 hours ago

You mean, like Microsoft shows how its software is effective, without glitches and security risks?

18 people liked this. Like Reply



**Paul Richardson** 22 hours ago

So let me get this straight. A college or university's sole purpose in life is to prepare one for the work force. That's news....

11 people liked this. Like Reply



**fulrich** 21 hours ago

I fully agree that not enough attention has been given to the student after graduation--the use of the education received. Down the line are these successful and are they satisfied with the foundation given by their higher education degree? As for graduation rates, be careful. If all you want is more people graduating, then professors and institutions will simply lower the scale so that more can graduate. How much responsibility should be on the student and how much on the institution? If rigor is there this may raise the bar for graduation that some students simply will not or cannot overcome.

3 people liked this. Like Reply



**a\_voice** 16 hours ago in reply to fulrich

I do question the emphasis on employment and income. Are these the only or even the primary reasons why a society should invest in higher education? If that is the case, then should society expect payback with interest from the graduates/employees and their employers? I think that there is disagreement, along ideological lines, as to the purpose of higher education, which has implications for if and how it is funded.

4 people liked this. Like Reply



**SeniorProfessor** 16 hours ago in reply to a\_voice

I agree a\_voice. Good measures are broader. They include graduation, employment for which the degree is proffered as preparation, etc. but they also recognize others appropriate to the degree, etc.

On the other hand, we need to recognize the fact that something approaching half of today's college students are adults who work, have families, vote, etc. The so-called "citizenship" goals that we professors are fond of invoking without metrics do not apply, or apply in more modest ways, to adult students who may be active in civic matters and may even vote more often than we do.

Higher education is now too complex and diverse to approach as a single entity or for which single solutions can be proposed.

Like Reply



**joechill** 21 hours ago

To echo others, who the --- is Bill Gates, and why is he an expert on higher ed? I think software should be easy to use, trouble free, and not updated to a new model every other year. If he wasn't a billionaire, no one would care what he thought.

15 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**deepspace** 19 hours ago in reply to joechill

Plutocracy 101

6 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**quidditas** 21 hours ago

""Is there any criteria under which state funding would favor those that have the higher graduation rates over the ones that don't—particularly in times when our budgets are tight?" he said."

I'm guessing the criteria for that would be subsidizing the upper middle class and targeting funds to campuses that attract the upper middle class. (The class war is so predictable).

"The billionaire software tycoon, who has taken an active interest in reforming public education since retiring in 2008 to focus on philanthropic work"--

Just couldn't figure out how to fix that software, huh?

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**fizmath** 21 hours ago

Since when did this dropout become an expert in evaluating colleges? He has not intention of hiring American graduates. Microsoft rejects 98% of its applicants and then tells Congress that American schools are not graduating enough qualified graduates. Also, to provide more school funding, I suggest that we make Microsoft pay corporate income tax. They currently don't.

9 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**WmHooper** 20 hours ago

Sure, focus on graduation rates and post-graduation incomes. Great idea. The flagship schools, that enroll the wealthy students who go on to become lawyers and such, will get more resources.

The branch campuses that focus on educating the poor and working-class students who come to campus barely prepared for college, and who then become nurses, school teachers, middle managers, and other average "Joes and Janes", will get less and less. This is as it should be because it is their own damned fault for being born poor and for having attended substandard public schools. My flagship university and its football and basketball teams shouldn't have to suffer because these people. [for the tone deaf, this is post is intended as rank sarcasm].

8 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**SeniorProfessor** 18 hours ago in reply to WmHooper

William - Measurement science is considerably more advanced than the model to which you ascribe legitimate problems. The metrics I and others have proposed to the Department of Education control for differences in inputs and other factors across a wide range of variables.

I can appreciate that some folks are unaware of this (although they might be more circumspect with

respect to knowing what they don't know and avoiding posting on the topic) but ignorance of learning and measurement sciences is pandemic in the U.S. professoriate. Since these sciences are integral to a meaningful definition of their profession, this ignorance causes real problems.

2 people liked this. [Liked](#) [Reply](#)



**willismg** 19 hours ago

A defector from the old Soviet Union was once asked "Why do the Soviets need all those nuclear weapons?" He responded, "If they didn't have them, nobody would pay any attention to them."

This is what I think of Bill Gates and his thermonuclear wallet. If he didn't have so much money, who would even listen to him on this subject?

6 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**3224243** 19 hours ago

Microsoft and its "you're too stupid to figure this out so we'll do all the thinking for you" software contributes greatly to the dumbing-down of America. As long as M\$ Word spell-checks and grammar-checks for you, why do you need to learn English? As long as you can launch the calculator in Accessories, why bother with arithmetic?

4 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**SeniorProfessor** 19 hours ago

I don't know which is greater in some of these posts, the arrogance or the ignorance.

I am reminded of a recent article in Scientific American observing the tendency of the extremely biased (most of those posting here) to misperceive facts. <http://www.scientificamerican....>

While I'm not a Microsoft person by preference, I have retained my ability to be objective. Bill Gates, in his former and current lives, has created more careers, elevated the workplace for more women, contributed more to the U.S. economy and GDP, contributed more measurably to quality of life and, literally and figuratively, has saved more lives than any thousand of us. To those whose principle talent is "snide:" if you can still see through the green wash of your bile and envy, you might want to familiarize yourself with the Gates Foundation. No, wait . . . To do that would be to be objective, something you take money for teaching but have long since abandoned in your professional lives. Some of you folks are a testament to the cause of your extinction and an embarrassment to the professoriate. If you are not already retired, please consider it soon.

7 people liked this. [Liked](#) [Reply](#)



**trendisnotdestiny** 10 hours ago in reply to SeniorProfessor

@ SeniorProfessor

For someone so concerned about arrogance and ignorance, claiming that you are objective and neutral onlooker (thus a more credible voice) collides with a huge 'projection' onto people posting who are critical of Gates as envy.... arrogance at claiming that only you perceive facts while others do not and ignorance to invoke envy as the main cause of criticism.... No one is neutral or innocent here.

Somehow your "objectivity" seems to focus on the more globalistic traits where your bias hides in the gaps between what is sold to us as myth and the real outcomes of humans in this society.... GDP, US Economy, quality of life measures etc.... If you hadn't noticed these categories are falling apart; insolvent.... People are flocking to precious metals, there are predictions of \$150/barrel oil prices this summer and we have until April 15th to raise the debt ceiling on \$14.1 Trillion dollars or default for the first time in our nation's history...

All the while, we are now opposing and seizing the assets of all those foreign dictators in the middle east we befriended for decades (\$40 Billion Mubarek) (\$30 Billion Ghadaffi) with more to come: Yemen, Bahrain, Tunisia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia etc... We armed and trained many of these regimes, but now they have to go.... as many of these world populations struggle with food and water

shortages.... Yes, the US and Gates have done some good over time, but we come to expect that of our leaders... What we do not expect is to be lied to and to be manipulated with neoliberal propaganda....

Lastly, using phrases like('some of you folks'), ('extinction'), and ('embarrassment to the professorate') is the kind of tone many of us can do without. I am pretty sure that we all have had enough disagreements in our lives to recognize that we have to tolerate opposition and recognize positions outside of our comfort zone.

Something you might try is reading what you have written before you press send button. You see, that way you have an opportunity to check your own arrogance and ignorance before you share it with this community since so much of what you write is about you and less about reality....

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**SeniorProfessor** 9 hours ago in reply to trendisnotdestiny

This is wonderful. Superb! Thank you so much.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



**kathden** 18 hours ago

As far as arrogance is concerned, SeniorProfessor, you are in serious contention for the prize.

As for ignorance: well, you seem to be guilty of ignoratio elenchi--missing the point. Even if Bill Gates has been in every respect the benefactor you describe, and even if he devotes a lot of his money to the study of education, this does not make him any more qualified to shape education policy than the next person.

Without getting into details here, there are lots of things his foundation stands for that are highly questionable because they fail to come to terms with one of the most basic elements of the nature of education (as opposed to training): it aims at the comprehensive good of the student and tries to bring him/her to the threshold of becoming a full member of the social and political community.

Gates was once quoted as saying that Microsoft is a company that manages imagination. If you understand what imagination is, that is basically a contradiction in terms. I fear that he brings the same kind of mindset to his efforts (however well intentioned they may be) to improve education.

7 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**beterschools** 17 hours ago in reply to kathden

If anything, SeniorProfessor understates that case that I see. No stakeholder group, least of all professors, enjoys exclusivity of insight into higher education.

I have worked with the Foundation on and off, nearly since its inception. (I have refused compensation and provided what little assistance I could as a public service. I say this because even though I assume you are compensated for your role, I fear that you question the objectivity of others who are compensated for theirs.) In that work, I saw some of the best and brightest minds struggling to find the best way to bring higher education onto the 21st century. Mr. Gates hired them and set them free to do whatever the best evidence suggested. His only concern was that the support provided by the Foundation has the highest possible leverage (teach them to fish . . .). His only goal: efficiently educated, well-rounded citizens.

Separately, sidereal to your critique of the Gates Foundation, can you support your education/training distinction with non-tautological scientific evidence? If you can, you are in contravention of the last 50 years of learning sciences, which, sadly, puts you in the company of too many old-guard professors. Please post links to scientific studies, not professorial rants on the topic. I've heard all of those circular arguments.

While I agree that the Foundation's opinion is one among many involved groups, the opinion of one professor is just that, many orders of magnitude below that of the Foundation or any thoughtful group that approaches the problem independently with a clear, unbiased mindset.

By the way, I cannot help but note that you launched your piece accusing another poster of being "in contention for the prize" (for ignorance) yet failed to refute any of his points. In fact, you acknowledged the possibility that some of them may be correct. Hmmmmmm.

4 people liked this. [Edit](#) [Reply](#)



**kathden** 16 hours ago in reply to betterschools

Well, I put SeniorProfessor in contention for the \*arrogance\* prize.

I talked of the \*nature\* of education. The nature of education is one of those matters that cannot be pursued simply within a science of education, since for the most part a science must take for granted its subject matter (professionally I have dabbled in history and philosophy of science, so I think I know whereof I speak, though this is not the time or the forum to make the arguments about the relationship between science and subject matter). When the scientist questions the nature of his/her subject matter, he/she steps outside his/her science proper.

The nature of something cannot be determined by polling, however scientific, nor by double-blind studies. That is not to say that the science of education has nothing, or even little, to contribute to an understanding of education. But it all has to be argued in a larger context. One might call that context communal and philosophical.

One can make a similar point about the good and the comprehensive good of the student, which you did not mention, betterschools. To use an example: parents are more likely than any outsiders or institutions to have the comprehensive good of the child in mind. For-profit institutions never have the comprehensive good of anyone in mind (not even of the investors), and even nonprofit institutions have specialized interests. Institutions devoted to education--which is different from institutions devoted to the study of education--are closer to having the comprehensive good of students in mind than any other. Of course this is truer of some institutions than of others; similarly for parents. And that's true whether or not one cites a scientific study.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**rhancuff** 16 hours ago in reply to betterschools

I suppose you should be doing your work pro bono if you confuse arrogance with ignorance. Throwing claims of "scientific evidence" around a debate on education is disingenuous to say the least. What researchers gather are statistics that can show trends and patterns, but hardly rise to the level of clear-cut scientific proof. "Education" and "training" have multiple definitions, so it seems you object to kathden's definitions differing from yours.

However, that doesn't excuse SeniorProfessor from coming off as an arrogant stuffed shirt.

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**SeniorProfessor** 14 hours ago in reply to rhancuff

I don't know exactly what betterschools had in mind but your comment to the effect that references to scientific evidence are disingenuous certainly strengthens the starch in my stuffed shirt. A vast body of scientific research (unless you believe that learning and brain sciences are non scientific) bears directly on the limited usefulness of the training vs. education distinction. You would be advised to learn a little about it. If you decide to examine these topics intellectually, explore the mechanisms for the formation of valid generalizations (the foundations of principles, which lead to models, which lead to theories, which lead to forms of life or canons of reasoning . . . you get the idea). Even absent such research, the "I educate, you dear sir (harumph) merely train" distinction is predicated on academic arrogance. I suggest that you fail to notice this true arrogance while labeling accurate and honest reflection that happens to diverge from your unexamined view as arrogant.

[Like](#)



**kathden** 13 hours ago in reply to rhancuff

Your points are well taken, rhancuff. Betterschools and even SeniorProfessor seem not to have noticed that SeniorProfessor was the first to make the "arrogance" accusation. (I, a bit snarkily to be sure, pointed out that one has to be careful not to be hoist with one's own petard.)

SeniorProfessor, there are differences between education and training, as well as family resemblances. I train my students in philosophy to use citations properly, and that is an important part of my job as an academic. I train them to recognize features in secondary literature that will allow them to quickly assess where an author stands in a debate. I train them to play fair in discussions and to recognize the tricks of the rhetorical trade. But I also educate, or at least try to educate, them about fundamental questions (and some answers) that have perennial value. (Try Hubert Dreyfus, "On the Internet," 2d ed., esp. chapter 2, for more.)

Some schools are devoted exclusively to job training--and as long as they are not making fraudulent claims I have no quarrel with them and recognize (even affirm) their existence. Public universities, responding to the political will, need to make accommodation to training needs (and also need to avoid fraud--and so there is nothing wrong with appropriate indexes of accountability). But they need to be universities first, devoted to the recognition of the highest learning as other than training. Private universities can do as they like, of course, but they too have to avoid fraud and be universities (they can also more easily commit themselves to higher and highest education and train only in the ways they see as appropriate). These are (complex and different) facts which the science of education has to accept. (BTW, a science of education that rejects the distinction between education and training can't be much of a science or contribute much to our understanding of teaching and learning.)

I infer from your mention of principles, models, theories, etc., that you are committed to some version of hypothetico-deductive empiricism (this is weak, conversational inference, not strong logical inference--there are other positions with which what you've said is compatible). Having a method is not a justification of the adequacy of the method, however. The question is whether you can define what the method is capable of reaching, and whether it is ample enough for understanding the object of inquiry. One can have a scientifically informed discussion of these things, but science won't settle it (part of rhancaff's point).

One thing that is clear about your "debate logic" is that it is dichotomous: "you're with me or you're agin me." I'll grant that a lot of the initial reaction was impassioned, but the end of the debate ought not to be simply labeling and crushing opponents, or even just dividing them into sheep and goats (note again: the "ought" in that statement cannot be determined solely by scientific study). Or is that what this is all about?

Like



**11223435** 14 hours ago in reply to better-schools

Another flack. Like working for free to stoke that ego makes you less of a flack--

Like Reply



**quidditas** 16 hours ago

""Is there any criteria under which state funding would favor those that have the higher graduation rates over the ones that don't--particularly in times when our budgets are tight?" he said. "I'm not saying that's an easy [decision], but if we can get good measures, at least the data will be there for people to be able to decide that.""

By all means, investigate the schools and hold people accountable.

But, I think the problem is that Gates comes across as having already made up his mind--lowering education spending is the priority and defunding whole schools is how to implement the priority. He also suggested states defund whole disciplines if that wasn't where "the jobs" were. In this, Gates is no different from any other billionaire Tea Party sponsor. He just has a more genteel way of using his wealth in order to attain the same narrow objective.

Why is the priority defunding whole schools and departments and not improving graduation rates or job placement? Why, for that matter, is the onus for employment being placed solely on schools? Shouldn't the economy be generating jobs? If the problem is that the economy is not generating jobs, shouldn't Gates be volunteering his expertise--as an extremely successful entrepreneur--rather than defunding, say, the history department because there are but few history "jobs" in any given state?

Meanwhile, why are "our budgets" so "tight" again?

<http://www.theatlantic.com/mag.../>  
Simon Johnson, "The Quiet Coup"

I don't expect Gates to be as savvy about the domestic and global economy as MIT Professor and former IMF Chief turned public informant Simon Johnson, but given that Bill Gates is such a successful entrepreneur and can afford to hire researchers, I fully expect to hold him to a higher standard than his hack comrade over there in the Governorship of Wisconsin. (Even if they're both college drop-outs).

Why is it that they both sound so much the same? You don't think Gates comes off narrow, parochial and, well, just kinda dumb? Is he really dumb, or does he just play dumb?

He's not dumb when he goes to Congress looking for H1-B visas to undercut the job market for tech grads. Then he heads over to his foundation and has the nerve to pretend that he's "just doing it all for the children."

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**trendisnotdestiny** 10 hours ago in reply to quidditas

Simon Johnson's article is a classic (I liked his book too 13 Bankers)... nicely done quid

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



**azprof** 15 hours ago

Wow... there seems to be a lot of professors afraid of accountability. Kill the messenger seems to be alive and well.

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**11223435** 15 hours ago in reply to azprof

Accountability to Gates's wallet and his self-importance? Or to the "experts" he's hired?

Grab your ankles, academia--if the DB is willing to continue to spend as he has--and why wouldn't he?--on the sorts of agenda-driven "reforms" he and his mercenaries are bringing to the K-12 debate...Bill Gates will be running education in this country

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



**swish** 13 hours ago in reply to 11223435

It seems improbable to me that Gates' motivations have anything to do with concern for his wallet. He's been trying to give away his money lately. Rather than selfishness or greed, I think it's more a sense of self-importance, combined with the "when you've got a hammer, everything looks like a nail" phenomenon. He does seem to think he should be running education in this country.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



**rhancuff** 14 hours ago in reply to azprof

I think it's the message that needs to be examined. Is the sort of accountability that Gates espouses actually accountability that does long-term good? Too often reformers geared to the job market argument forget that the job market doesn't remain static; even in the disciplines "where the jobs are," the specific practical applications -- which can change rapidly -- in the field differ from the theory in the departments. I would be wary of gearing our four year institutions to respond to the annual bevy of "top ten hot jobs for the next decade" lists; we already have Learning Tree, etc., to fill those training needs.

An English professor should be held accountable to a student's understanding something of the discipline of English, not to that student's ability to gain employment. My estimate will be that universities will all do better when unemployment goes down and will do worse when it goes up. That's some accountability.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**trendisnotdestiny** 10 hours ago in reply to azprof

"afraid of accountability"?

If you are going to make sniveling comments about fear, why not add some honest fears to a list instead of just landing on one incorrect answer:

Things Professors are afraid of:

1) Having something they believe to be earned with hard work taken away

A) Tenure

B) Freedom of Expression without reprisal

C) Shared Governance

2) Sabotaging and Blurring the role of academics

A) Turning into Academic Corporatists: competing for large pools of grant money

B) Mimicking salespeople: university, community, students entertainers

C) Publish, Perish or Impoverished Adjunctivitus

D) Write 2 Journal articles this semester with high impact factors to get tenure

3) University Inc.

A) Encroachment into multiple domains: administrative overseers, unqualified students

B) Decreasing opportunities combined with escalating tuition/student debt for graduates

C) Positions left unfilled, departments re-organized, and duties folded into existing positions

D) The Lording of Business, Economics, and Marketing Positions

4) Student Responses

A) I paid this much for this degree (outcome)?

B) Grade inflation, High school student preparation-admission policies, & Honesty

C) Becoming technologically as competent as our students

D) Helping place our students in jobs and grad school

5) And a whole host of other things that I am sure my fellow colleagues can address -

We may have a number of fears azprof, but I don't believe accountability is one of them. I think that is a corporatist notion stereotype that is used against the professorate (not unlike the elite and lazy teacher who comes in for a few hours but goes home to cut his lawn at 4pm).. Grow up...

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



**navigations** 15 hours ago

Gates comments beg the question, Do we really want to narrowly define what we mean by "effective" in higher education? Does "effective" only mean being prepared for the workplace? And what workplace?

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

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