

Cultural Daily

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Jeffrey Selingo: Beyond Super and Ill-Prepared Students, How About Some With Creativity?

Jeffrey Selingo · Thursday, October 6th, 2011

We're quickly headed toward a future in which college students will either be super achievers or unprepared for the workplace.

At least that's according to dueling op-ed pieces in two of our nation's most influential newspapers on Sunday. On one hand, you have "[super people](#)" whose abilities and activities as students are literally off the charts (James Atlas, *The New York Times*). On the other hand, you have college graduates lacking basic skills because of colleges "[coddling](#)" them (Kathleen Parker, *The Washington Post*).

Could Atlas and Parker both be right? Perhaps super students are well prepared for making the grade and checking off all the right activities on a résumé, but ill prepared for the creative forces that will define the global economy in the future. I've been reminded of our desire to confine creativity several times this past week, in my readings and in my visit to Georgia Tech for the opening of its new Center for 21st Century Universities.

It's been widely reported that many of the best jobs of tomorrow don't even exist today, so the successful colleges of the future will be those that graduate students who have the imagination to figure things out.

Already, at both the top and bottom ends of the employment ladder, we have jobs that are going unfilled because they require technical skills many of the unemployed lack. That skills gap will only grow in the future as technology advances more quickly and new industries emerge. The skills mismatch is usually attributed only to open manufacturing jobs these days, but many of those workers get training and even degrees at community and technical colleges. And white-collar employees are not immune to the skills gap as education levels increase around the world.

We're very good at teaching to the test and students are now comfortable learning in that way. Jonathan Cole, a former provost at Columbia University and a professor in the law school there, describes how even his best students can't recall the facts of cases they learned in constitutional law courses in which they received A's. He blames this partly on an admissions process that is too tied to test scores and results in "one-dimensional students." He thinks the smartest people on campuses should be working in admissions.

We have lost our ability in schools and on college campuses to be creative: to learn through doing,

to learn through failing, to learn through just having fun.

“I remember kindergarten where you actually got to do things, not like today,” Alan Kay lamented the other day. “Now that’s graduate school.” Kay is a computer scientist who leads the [Viewpoints Research Institute](#), a nonprofit to improve “powerful ideas education.”

The failures of our education system are now beginning to reach the workplace. Amid worries that workers are becoming less innovative, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) last week that some companies are rewarding their employees for their mistakes or questionable risks.

In this hyperconnected world where companies have greater access to the best talent anywhere (as Tom Friedman reminded us in his *New York Times* [column](#) on Sunday), being only book smart doesn’t cut it. If colleges want to justify the value of their degrees in the future, they better start creating learning environments where their students can be creative, try things out, and on occasion fail without being penalized. Where should they begin?

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Image: Evolution of a Day, Step 8, by [Yoel Tordjman](#).

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