

# Excerpts from "What Should [College] Graduates Know?"

Excerpted by M. Schield (bold added)

What Should Graduates Know? By Nicholas Lemann, Dean emeritus at Columbia and a member of the AAAS Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education.

<http://akumedia.aku.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/What-Should-Graduates-Know-The-Chronicle-of-Higher-Education.pdf>

## EXCERPTS:

"One reason that more-structured undergraduate education is so rare is that it doesn't have an organized constituency."

"The impulse to avoid taking on the difficult task of establishing a more-structured undergraduate curriculum can impose real costs over the long term."

- "the size of the annual increases in stated tuition peaked in the early 1980s and has been declining ever since; the most recent survey showed an average annual increase of 3.9%, the lowest in 40 years
- "the average tuition-discount rate for first-year students was 48%, up from 38% 10 years ago.
- Discounting is rising more rapidly than published tuition, so tuition revenue at many private institutions may be falling.

"If colleges can't or don't want to clearly define what they're about academically, they are left unarmed against what has become the intense pressure to define undergraduate education in terms of acquiring only those skills that have an obvious, immediate, practical applicability and will enhance a graduate's chances of employment."

If an institutions is presenting itself as offering "a wide variety of options from which students can select, it has to maintain a large, expensive set of departments and courses."

"the evidence we have about what accounts for the substantial overall economic value of a college degree over a lifetime indicates that it is a payoff for the development of "cognitive skills" rather than for specific job skills or credentials — a payoff that manifests itself regardless of what a student learned."

"Colleges will find it more and more difficult to stay the present course, which drive costs ever higher and revenues ever lower. Far better to go through a considered, openhearted process of deciding what you stand for academically and where you want to be strongest, ensure that every student's experience encompasses that, and use it as the way you present yourself to the world."

"My own preference is to create **a canon of methods** rather than a canon of specific knowledge or of great books — that is, to define, develop, and require instruction around **a set of master skills** that together would make one an educated, intellectually empowered, morally aware person."

"A quick list of possibilities: Rigorous interpretation of meaning, taught mainly through close reading of texts. **Numeracy, including basic statistical literacy.** Pattern and context recognition. Developing and stating an argument, in spoken and written form. Visual and spatial grammar and logic. **Understanding how information is produced, how to locate it, and how much faith to put in it.** Empathetic understanding of other people and other cultures. **Learning to explore rigorously the relationship between cause and effect and to draw plausible inferences.**"

"**I am advocating developing courses that are specifically aimed at creating those capabilities,** rather than declaring that existing courses that are notionally about something else will confer them."