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RENEWAL

Academic Transparency

"[H]onesty is the 1st chapter in the book of wisdom." —Thomas Jefferson

"[T]here is no greatness where simplicity, goodness, and truth are absent." —Leo Tolstoy

Why is academic transparency needed?

The surest measure of a successful college or university is the academic success of its students. Academic success is not just exemplified in good grades and on-time graduation, although those are both essential components of a valuable education. True academic success requires incoming students to be academically prepared for college rigor, and is demonstrated by the availability of high-quality academic programs and evidence of personal and professional growth in the years after students' graduation. Institutions that churn out students with low-quality—yet costly—degrees or who set up students for failure by whittling down academic standards, are setting them up for long-term economic and personal hardship. This is why academic transparency is crucial.

Academic transparency is truth in advertising. One is hard-pressed to find a college mission statement that doesn't promise to elevate students' academic potential and set them on a path to life-long success. If colleges are confident in the value they offer, they should be equally confident in drawing back the curtain on what they teach students, how they determine and enforce academic standards, and where their students go post-graduation.

One of the simplest ways to practice academic transparency is to make syllabi publicly accessible by posting them online before registration for classes begins. Doing so serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it allows students to make more informed decisions about what classes they should take. A history course that has a list of original founding documents for required reading is vastly different from a history course with contemporary ideologically tilted assignments. Knowing the required reading ahead of time will allow conscientious students to get the most out of their

1. To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of governance transparency, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/academic-transparency>

time in college. Secondly, the sunlight provided by having their syllabi publicly viewable may encourage professors to cull truly rigorous coursework. The public eye is a good deterrent for professors who may be tempted to use their classes as a front to advance their ideological agendas. Finally, it allows lawmakers to see what kind of education is being offered at taxpayer-supported institutions. This and other academic transparency measures outlined below should be standard practice for every public college and university.

Recommendations

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and faculty governing committees take steps to improve academic transparency at public colleges and universities.

Universities should:

- Make all undergraduate syllabi publicly accessible online before the first day of class registration.
- Require that the titles and authors of all required reading material be listed on the syllabi.
- Make all professors' CVs publicly accessible online.
- Report on aggregate student outcomes one year, five years, and ten years after college, including career paths and median income by college major. This data should be publicly accessible in the form of an online report or interactive data dashboard.

Model university practices:

- University of North Carolina at Asheville: Online Syllabi ([English](#), [Atmospheric Sciences](#), [Languages & Literatures](#))
- University of North Carolina at Greensboro: Online Syllabi ([History](#))

- University of North Carolina System: [Interactive Data Dashboards](#)
 - Enrollment
 - Transfer Students
 - Freshmen Admissions and Performance
 - Degrees
 - Educator Quality

Policymakers should:

- Enact legislation requiring public colleges and universities to make all undergraduate syllabi publicly accessible online before the first day of class registration.
- Require that the titles and authors of all required reading material be listed on the syllabi.
- Require that the CV of every professor be published online.
- Reform public records laws to clarify that syllabi and CVs are subject to public records requests.
- Require public institutions to report annually on student outcomes, including graduates' career paths, median income, and amount of student debt.

Model Legislation

- [Texas Education Code 51.974](#)
- [Iowa Legislature: House File 11 \(2023\)](#)
- The American Legislative Exchange Council: [Higher Education Transparency Act](#)
- The National Association of Scholars: [Syllabus Transparency Act](#)

Further Reading

From the Martin Center:

- [Political Accountability Versus Campus Autonomy](#) by George R. La Noue (October 31, 2022)
- [What Are Students Learning? Make Syllabi Public](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (July 12, 2021)

Further Reading, continued

- [The Majors that Pay and the Degrees that Don't for Graduates](#) by Preston Cooper (November 25, 2019)
- [Athletics Department Oversight of Academics: A Scandal Waiting to Happen](#) by Anthony Hennen (October 27, 2017)
- [Will New Transparency Measures Help North Carolina Students?](#) by Stephanie Keaveney (June 27, 2016)
- [Are college course syllabi really protected by copyright?](#) by George Leef (October 22, 2014)
- [A Punch List for UNC](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (May 5, 2014)
- [From Ivory Tower to Shining City Upon a Hill](#) by Jay Schalin (October 6, 2013)
- [Five Tasks for the UNC Board of Governors](#) by Jane S. Shaw (July 21, 2013)
- [Fayetteville State Opens Up the Classroom](#) by Jane S. Shaw (August 8, 2010)
- [T is for Texas...and Transparency](#) by David Koon (October 30, 2009).
- [Assessments in the Cross-hairs](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (September 14, 2009)
- [Opening Up the Classroom: A Survey of Students, Administrators, and Faculty](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (February 22, 2009)
- [Time For Academic Truth-in-Advertising](#) by Jay Schalin (July 29, 2008)
- [Opening Up the Classroom: Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information](#) by Jay Schalin (July 2008)

Other Sources:

- [NC Tower Data](#)
- [FREOPP: Is College Worth It? A Comprehensive Return on Investment Analysis](#)
- [FREOPP: Is Graduate School Worth It? A Comprehensive Return on Investment Analysis](#)
- [FREOPP: Is Community College Worth It? A Comprehensive Return on Investment Analysis](#)

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

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About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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