

21st Century Excellence in Education: Introduction

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Thirty years after the *Nation at Risk* report warned that the U.S. education system was failing to meet the global economy and the national need for a competitive workforce, the question begs to be asked: *Are American students any closer to being globally ready?*

Most scholars and pundits, we believe, would agree that progress remains fitful. Although math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (considered the “gold” standard in assessment) have trended upwards, a host of other indicators tell a different story. They include results from international assessments in math, science, and literacy, as well as those from recent college and career readiness benchmarks. Not only do the indicators suggest that American students are academically behind, they also point to a system that is incompatible with the way we live and work in the twenty-first century.

There is an apparent mismatch between the accountability policy and the goal to produce globally competitive and skilled workers. High-stakes accountability cannot adequately cultivate real world and dynamic skills, like the ability to adapt, innovate, or recognize opportunities and solve problems. According to critics, high-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum and undermined authentic learning—and by extension, global readiness. Developing human potential and innovative leadership require a better approach. This symposium is dedicated to finding that approach.

First we must understand that history, culture, geography, and almost any personal experience or bias can shape our definition of excellence. As benchmarks change over time, so do our understanding and meaning of excellence. Scholars and pundits tend to focus on benchmarks and statistical data that support their own beliefs and examples of excellence. This becomes a problem when they extend their arguments and claims in new studies and publications. As such, the articles in this symposium will generate different responses to our contributors’ claims of excellence. Why? Because, as human beings, we have different life experiences, beliefs, and biases.

Since this theme is vital to the current discourse on American competitiveness, *Society* has divided this symposium into two issues. This issue (Mar/Apr), Part I of the “21st Century Excellence in Education,” examines excellence from a macro perspective. Under Global Excellence, Martin Carnoy and Richard Rothstein uncover the facts behind international test scores that policymakers tend to ignore. Yong Zhao, meanwhile, argues that emulating top performing students from Shanghai is perhaps the least constructive way to cultivate 21st century global learners. Under The Economics of Excellence, Henry Levin articulates the real attributes that influence work productivity (hint: test scores are not one of them). Ending this issue, Allan Ornstein examines the dispersion of talent, including ways to cultivate and retain it in the United States. Next issue (May/Jun), Part II, looks at the educational microenvironment—teaching and schooling.

Allan Ornstein is professor of curriculum and social policy at St. John’s University, New York. His latest books form a trilogy framed by the themes of globalization, technology, and inequality: the three major trends shaping society in the 21st century. The books are *Class Counts: Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class*; *Wealth vs. Work: How the 1 % Victimize the 99 %*; and *Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?*, to be published in 2015. His website—allanornsteinbooks.com—details the trilogy and latest book.

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