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When It Comes to Quality, Parents ARE Paying Attention

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The recent *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have a lot of people thinking about quality in higher education. But for thought leaders within academia, discussions about educational quality — what defines it, how to measure it, how to achieve it — are ongoing obsessions. College-bound students and their parents are only slightly less obsessed, as they search for the right college or university that can help them achieve their educational goals.

Now, however, comes the charge that colleges may be paying more attention to cosmetics than to the important issues. Citing a [CNN report](#), syndicated columnist [Kathleen Parker recently argued that “the problem is quality” and admonished the lot of us](#) because “instead of figuring out how to make education pay future dividends, higher-educational institutions are building better dorms, with flat-screen TVs, movie theaters and tanning salons ... If parents aren’t furious, they’re not paying attention.”

I guess I have more faith in parents and prospective residential students than some folks. Sure, students interested in a residential college experience are attracted to beautiful campuses and nice amenities. Many campuses have those attributes, and others lag behind the curve on some or all of those features. But parents and prospective students are not naive. Attractive physical plants may draw them in, but it is an institution’s program offerings and ability to deliver on its educational promises that turn an accepted student into an enrolled student. Parents know that it is the combined curricular and co-curricular experience that results in a transformative experience, retains residential students, and promotes their graduation and long-term success. Unlike Ms. Parker, I think most parents of residential students **are** “paying attention.”

As a Provost, I often explain that about 80 percent of a residential college student’s time is spent outside the classroom. So, I know for sure that to fully produce the Essential Learning Outcomes, we need to capture a portion of that time for various forms of experiential education — some of it related to coursework and some that grows from student development programming, leadership opportunities, and athletic participation. And, yes, we also need to release some of that non-classroom time for exploration, reflection, vocational discernment, relationship building, entertainment, cultural enrichment, community service, and fun!