

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Faculty

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October 28, 2013

### States Demand That Colleges Show How Well Their Students Learn

*By Dan Berrett*

Some of the hallmarks of No Child Left Behind are creeping into higher education.

The 2002 law was intended to hold elementary and secondary schools accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students. It has come to be reviled by many teachers for what they see as a narrowing of the curriculum to the material covered on standardized tests, and for punishing schools for their students' performance.

Professors often invoke the law in objecting to calls for increased oversight—which they fear will come from the federal government or accreditors—as a cautionary tale of accountability run amok. But it is in the states, some of which are requiring colleges to demonstrate what their students are learning, that the real action is taking place.

Most of the efforts under way in a dozen states, still in their early stages, seek to answer mounting concerns about academic rigor in college. Two states are already using student surveys and standardized tests to document learning—and attaching financial rewards to the results.

Missouri, for example, awards a small share of its support to colleges on the basis of how well their students score on standardized tests. Pennsylvania includes data from the deep-learning-scales portion of the National Survey of Student Engagement in its formula for performance-based appropriations. South Carolina is developing learning metrics for educational quality that will be tied to state support.

Other states are bolstering their oversight of what happens in class. Professors who teach classes of 300 or more at Iowa's three public universities must report to administrators on how they assess learning; the information is sent to the state's Board of Regents.

The effort that may prove to be the most consequential, a nine-state consortium led by Massachusetts, is seeking to avoid the types of flaws that critics have seen in the 2002 law. Professors and state and college officials are adapting an existing faculty-developed tool to assess students' work, which they hope can be rated on a common scale and compared across disciplines, colleges, and state systems.

"We are a publicly supported set of institutions," says Richard M. Freeland, commissioner of higher education in Massachusetts.

"We need to be accountable to the state for our outcomes."

### **Money for Scores**

States' growing interest in student learning reflects several trends. The national effort to produce more college graduates, often referred to as the completion agenda, has raised worries that the pressure to push more students through the education pipeline will cause academic quality to diminish.

Meanwhile, the formulas by which many states support their colleges have grown increasingly sophisticated, with money being awarded on the basis of more and more data points.

Several college provosts in Missouri said they suggested including student learning in the state's new performance-based formula. An externally validated standardized test, many of them argued, would indicate rigor more objectively than an internal measure, like grade-point average, which can be inflated.

"We wanted to make sure there was quality assurance along with performance funding," says Douglas N. Dunham, provost of Northwest Missouri State University. Hypothetically, he says, "there could be a temptation to lower standards in order to get other categories elevated."

Missouri's colleges can choose the criteria on which they want their students' learning to be judged. Six of the institutions,

including the University of Missouri, use the results of professional licensure tests, in such fields as accounting, nursing, and teaching, to gauge how well their students fare in their majors.

The University of Central Missouri, Northwest Missouri State, and Missouri Western State University have chosen to be evaluated on the basis of their general-education offerings. They opted for the same standardized test: the Educational Testing Service's Proficiency Profile, an assessment of mathematics, reading, and writing.

The tests are not a result of the new system of performance-based appropriations. Northwest Missouri State has used the Proficiency Profile, or one its precursors, since 1994 as an externally validated measure of learning. All of its students must take the test early in their junior year.

Many professors there had long wondered why the university bothered with the expense and logistics of administering the test, says Joel D. Benson, a professor of history and president of the Faculty Senate. "The only thing that we were sort of in opposition to," he says, "was why are we going through all this if it isn't going to mean anything?"

This year it will mean \$186,000 in new money from the state, because more than 60 percent of Northwest Missouri State's students scored above the median on the test.

The university tries to raise the stakes for students to encourage them to take the test seriously. Those who fare poorly on the two-hour test must take it again. When students try harder, it is thought to provide institutions with better data. Otherwise, says Mr. Dunham, "you'll get students coming in and filling out boxes."

Other institutions attach tougher consequences—at least on paper. The University of Central Missouri uses the Proficiency Profile as an exit exam. To graduate, students must score at least 425, which is slightly below the lowest level of proficiency, out of a possible 500.

About 98 percent of Central Missouri's students pass the test, says

Carole E. Nimmer, director of testing services, and they are allowed to take it as many as four times. No one has been denied graduation because of the test.

The importance that standardized tests have assumed troubles some professors, says Mr. Benson. Faculty members do not know what is on the Proficiency Profile, he notes, and so they don't tailor their class material to it; hence no one expresses much concern about teaching to the test.

Mr. Benson points to a larger context as well: Missouri's support for higher education has yet to recover from recent cuts. Therefore additional money, even if it is linked to performance-based appropriations, is better than nothing.

"You have to recognize there are political realities," he says. "It may be a standardized test, but it's a standardized test that supports general education."

Other Missouri institutions, like Truman State University, use a combination of internally developed rubrics and standardized tests to evaluate their students' success. Troy D. Paino, president of Truman State, sees value in the assessments, which he says have sparked a broader conversation on campus, particularly about critical thinking.

But he worries about the embrace of performance-based appropriations, which can quickly reward and punish on the basis of data that often reflect slow-moving trends.

"People want to find some kind of silver bullet that's going to improve the quality of education, and they think performance funding is going to turn things around," he says. "It's not going to work that way."

### **The Power of Numbers**

Missouri is one of the nine states in the consortium being led by Massachusetts. The others are Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah.

Officials in Missouri hope the group's efforts will produce a tool to

measure learning that surpasses the current array of standardized tests.

The group's starting point is the Value rubrics of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. They emerged as a faculty--developed response to the concerns about quality raised by the higher-education commission created in 2005 by the secretary of education, Margaret Spellings. More than 1,000 institutions use the rubrics, says the association, which is also participating in the consortium.

The consortium is adapting three of the association's rubrics: in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and writing. Those skills are divided into component parts, each of which can be judged by faculty on a scale of one to four. The hope is that each category within those rubrics, which reflect qualitative judgment calls, can be converted to a quantitative measure like a point system, which could be generalized and compared across departments, institutions, and states.

The virtue of the rubrics, say participants in the effort, is that they reflect common standards but are based on the work that students actually produce. Standardized tests may offer uniformity, but they are not tied to the curriculum.

"If we can make this work, we will have accomplished something rather large in higher education," says Patricia H. Crosson, senior adviser for academic policy at the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education and a professor emerita of higher education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The consortium's efforts could accomplish several goals at once, says Carol Geary Schneider, president of the association. Higher education would have a clear, understandable way to describe learning that would be more nuanced and meaningful than standardized tests, while also giving faculty members tools that truly help improve teaching.

"We're trying to wean higher education from the simple and often deceptive number," she says.

But numbers, even those built on faculty-vetted qualitative judgments like the rubrics, have a way of acquiring their own force. Once a number starts to be treated as a definitive measure of truth, it is tempting to tie it to other numbers—like a dollar value.

Mr. Freeland, the Massachusetts higher-education commissioner, envisions the rubrics' numbers one day feeding his state's performance-based formula, though that day is far-off.

"It is just so rational," he says, "to link performance to at least a significant component of your budget."

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archman • a day ago

"People want to find some kind of silver bullet that's going to improve the quality of education, and they think performance funding is going to turn things around," he says. "It's not going to work that way."

Bingo. All we end up doing at the end of the day is wasting a great deal of time, money, and effort. But somewhere, some high level administrators are securing their jobs and promotions for showing their "innovation".

"Performance Funding" = Teaching to the Test. Rebranding the name every few years doesn't hide the inevitable results of these programs.

"Mr. Freeland, the Massachusetts higher-education commissioner, envisions the rubrics' numbers one day feeding his state's performance-based formula, though that day is far-off.

It is just so rational," he says, "to link performance to at least a significant component of your budget."

Spoken like someone who has inadequate experience and understanding of how the teaching and learning process works. Misplaced reliance and trust on top-down NCLB-style bureaucracy just fails abysmally. Our administrators and education leaders need to start letting that sink into their heads. Leave teachers alone to let us do our jobs properly. Top-down management of performance only dilutes and detracts from most instructors' quality of teaching, and most students' quality of learning.

13 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



reckgg → archman • 4 hours ago

Let's be honest. This movement isn't about authentic assessment or "efficiency." It's about destroying education as we have known it. It's about stripping faculty of the academic freedom and responsibility that has made American universities so great. It's about the intrusion of a corporate model of governance. It's about squeezing public education until it can no longer breathe. It's about the destruction of all civil structures of a viable democracy.

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**neconsultant** → reckgg • an hour ago

"Me thinks you protest too much." - :) You may be right although given the "freedom" some faculty will teach the largest possible classes allowable in order to teach the fewest sections. Historically, research university faculty taught 3 - 3 annually. Now down to 2 - 2 and, in some cases, 2 - 1. So, in the spring semester, the prof is standing before students a total of 3 hours a week then wonder why the general public and legislators don't understand? Some faculty do not live in the real world.

1 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share ›



**cao3rd** → heconsultant • 31 minutes ago

Your numbers are highly suspect for the vast majority of institutions. There are at most 200 or so research institutions and more than 4,000 others where your teaching load is simply not the norm. There is no doubt that one can find cases where it is true as well. Faculty, because of their expertise, should determine the curriculum. Academic leadership works with them, ideally, to deliver courses that are fully enrolled and make financial sense. While I have been an academic leader for the past dozen years, I have focused on controlling costs through not offering under enrolled courses.

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**the\_doctor** • 5 hours ago

Beyond stupid.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**mbelvadi** • 4 hours ago

"425, which is slightly below the lowest level of proficiency, out of a possible 500" - this weird compression of the scale which puts the bottom at a 85% raw score looks like the standardized testing version of extreme grade inflation.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**shawnpng** → mbelvadi • 4 hours ago

Yes, and it could also mean that the test is really easy. My guess is that the students who do well on this test probably could have done well on it when they were high school seniors. It's very telling that a school can achieve 98% success rate by just allowing students to try again, and again, and again. The test can apparently be figured out once a student chooses to give a hoot.

Looks like ETS has opened up another money spigot.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**rwiit004** → shawnpng • 3 hours ago

Exactly. Why does a third-party company who makes money from standardized testing apparently have automatic validity? And the consortium; "hope the groups efforts produce a tool...", "the hope is that...", "if we can make this work...", "could accomplish several goals...", "that day is far off...". Meanwhile, standardized tests will creep, no, crash their way, in.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**sgaetjens** → mbelvadi • 39 minutes ago

I wonder whether there is a slight mistake in the article regarding the 500. It is much more likely to be a median rather than a maximum.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**tjfarrel** • 4 hours ago

Do we get to evaluate state legislatures and their creatures based on performance?

performance:

14 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**cao3rd** → tjfarrel • 3 hours ago

Love it! We do have this opportunity at each election. The problem is that we as a society are just so damned apathetic that we don't pay attention. I have been mildly stating this to students and student groups as well as faculty and staff when I speak in an attempt to influence them to remember all that has happened since the last election. At the same time I also contact my legislatures on a regular basis when then do something that i disagree or agree with just to let them know how I feel without being disagreeable (get the on your email contacts).

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**Mark Branson** • 3 hours ago

The trouble with the formula suggested here is that faculty are not solely responsible for learning: there are a myriad of factors that impact student success--some, indeed, rest with faculty; however, a significant number (support for learning at home, background experiences & knowledge, financial situation, stress management, time management, and so forth) are also factors that standardized tests do not take into consideration. I do appreciate that tone of this article in the sense that colleges and universities are trying to drive this issue instead of re-acting after the fact and missing their mission: shaping the future one student at a time.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**rwilt004** • 3 hours ago

No mention of the abilities of the enrolling/matriculating students? Just increase selectivity. And when I hear "those who can't get in to the state schools can go to community colleges..." I am going ballistic.

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**cao3rd** • 3 hours ago

Assessment of learning is something that we can get better at doing for the benefit of students and continuously improving the approaches we use. The idea of tying assessment to the already severely declining rates of investment the states are making in public higher education concerns me because I do not believe either the states or the public institutions' central administrations can do this in a way that it will not hurt students (and the publics educate roughly half the students). I believe this approach will, and should if the institutions are paying attention to their interests, ultimately reduce the level of access to higher education for students who are less motivated and less capable of being successful. In another cycle of the political back and forth and there could be more cries for access . . . an so the world turns.

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**cksyme** • 2 hours ago

I would hope that states would be more interested in retention and job placement. Those are the metrics that show universities are doing their jobs. Students are responsible for their own learning experience--I think this idea is misplaced.

4 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share ›

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**npboyer** • 2 hours ago

I wonder how a test administered early in a student's junior year assesses that students full college performance. There are, after all, still almost 4 semesters worth of college left. I especially wonder how this works in assessing that college if a large number of the students are transfers. In that case, isn't this exam testing what the students learned at their previous institutions, not at the one giving the test?

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quepasso • 2 hours ago

the attitude seems to be that if you can't put a number on it its worthless. everything has to be measured quantitatively and then all decision can be made to improve that number. that's how those who do not understand complex issues (and their inherent ambiguity) would like it - first and foremost politicians and their backers (that includes voters). sorry boys/girls life does not work like that.

p.s. was there not once a formula the CIA used to assess who was winning the cold war? i think the numbers said the USSR was. maybe some historian can weigh in on that...

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Paul Sutton → quepasso • 18 minutes ago

Einstein had a great quote on this matter:  
Not everything that can be counted counts  
and not everything that counts can be counted.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Avatar

Thomas Bacher • 2 hours ago

Education is not a business of performance-based results. The more state legislatures get involved, the less robust a system we'll get.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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11167997 • an hour ago

The best one in here from a qualitative perspective is the case of the 3 schools in Iowa where faculty show everyone what assignments they give to students, something they do all the time, and something that shows us what students are expected to master and learn. That says a lot more than any test score, particularly from third parties. And it's precisely what the Degree Qualifications Profile and the growing number of "Tuning" projects calls for.

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quepasso → 11167997 • an hour ago

great, particularly if we add the responses of the students. the problem is that in order to do the evaluation one has to read and understand the assignments - and accept that there is no number (or set of numbers) that can accurately summarize it for one's convenience. unfortunately most 'decision makers' will likely not be able/willing to do that.

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sailor208 • 28 minutes ago

Talk about reinventing the wheel. Most disciplines already have objective exams - These already serve as a good measure of student learning outcomes. Why not use these instead of inventing more testing which, by the way, will once again immerse us in the "abyss of standard test design."

Then, we move directly from objective testing to "creativity, creative thinking, and creative problem solving." Just another small area of the undisputed role and mission of higher education.

The advocates of a new learning rubric measure are kind of like those creating another healthcare system instead of expanding the ones we've got. Want answers?

Look to program accreditation for the answers. Typically, accreditation standards take a close look at all the necessary components of higher education. Without achieving accreditation, and all that goes with it, programs in higher education aren't much more than "mills" that may or may not produce educated students.

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see more

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**jmalstrom** • 6 minutes ago

We have an administrator at our college who has no particular expertise in any traditional academic field. He once stated "We're not going to take you experts' word for it anymore." To which I responded "If you disagree with a mechanics evaluation of your car, do you take it to a psychologist?" Face it, we have people, with no particular skills who are trying to insert themselves into the process in order to justify their continued employment. They add no value to the student experience and they bring no particularly useful expertise to the table.

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