

## Nationwide Standardized Testing in College?

In recent months, members of the MAA Science Policy have heard “reliable rumors” that a committee appointed by U.S. Secretary of Education Spellings was strongly considering a national program of standardized testing for college students, and that mathematics and English were likely to be the first subjects tested. Those rumors were confirmed in part by a *New York Times* report dated February 9, 2006 written by Karen Arenson. Large parts of Arenson’s article are quoted below, and a url is given for the remainder.

February 9, 2006 Panel Explores Standard Tests for Colleges

By KAREN W. ARENSEN

A higher education commission named by the Bush administration is examining whether standardized testing should be expanded into universities and colleges to prove that students are learning and to allow easier comparisons on quality.

Charles Miller, a business executive who is the commission’s chairman, wrote in a memorandum recently to the 18 other members that he saw a developing consensus over the need for more accountability in higher education.

”What is clearly lacking is a nationwide system for comparative performance purposes, using standard formats,” Mr. Miller wrote, adding that student learning was a main component that should be measured.

Mr. Miller was head of the Regents of the University of Texas a few years ago when they directed the university’s nine campuses to use standardized tests to prove students were learning. He points to the test being tried there and to two other testing initiatives as evidence that assessment of writing, analytical skills and critical thinking is possible.

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed last fall by the secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, has until August to make a report on issues that include accountability, cost and quality. Educators are wary. ”To subject colleges to uniform standards is to trivialize what goes on in higher education,” said Leon Botstein, president of Bard College. ”Excellence comes in many unusual ways. You cannot apply the rules of high-stakes testing in high schools to universities.”

In an interview, Mr. Miller said he was not envisioning a higher education version of the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires standardizing testing in public schools and penalizes schools whose students do not improve. ”There is no way you can mandate a single set of tests, to have a federalist higher education system,” he said.

But he said public reporting of collegiate learning as measured through testing ”would be greatly beneficial to the students, parents, taxpayers and employers” and that he would like to create a national database that includes measures of learning. ”It would be a shame for the academy to say, ’We can’t tell you what it is; you have to trust us,’ ” Mr. Miller said.

He said he would like the commission to agree on the skills college students ought to be learning - like writing, critical thinking and problem solving - and to express that view forcefully.

”What happens with reform,” he said, ”is that it rarely happens overnight, and it rarely happens with a mandate.”

Later in the article, Arenson writes:

There is no unanimity on the commission, but some [other] members also expressed interest in measuring student learning. Kati Haycock, a commissioner who is director of the Education Trust in Washington, which has supported standardized testing, said in an e-mail message: ”Any honest look at the new adult literacy level data for recent college grads leaves you very queasy. And the racial gaps are unconscionable. So doing something on the assessment side is probably important. The question is what and when.”

Jonathan Grayer, another commissioner, who is chief executive of the test-coaching company Kaplan Inc., said that with so many students in college and so many tax dollars being spent, ”it is important for us to seek some type of knowledge about how much learning is going on.”

”What I am for is for institutions on their own or in groups to seek their own standards to show what they are achieving,” Mr. Grayer said. ”Whether that should be elective or mandatory, that is something the commission is thinking about.”

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For the rest of the Arenson article, which includes further comments from committee members and outside interested parties, see

[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/09/education/09testing.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/09/education/09testing.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)