

The Case for Common Examinations

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Abstract: Through an examination of one institution's efforts to strengthen teaching and learning on campus, the author makes a strong case for the use of common examinations as a powerful form of assessment as well as a fruitful context for faculty deliberations.

Essay:

The notion that all students who take the same course at a given college should take common examinations has been around for a long time. But programs that regularly employ common examinations are still rare, primarily because they require a significant investment of faculty time and effort. Because of the many benefits they entail, when effective programs can be found, they are worth serious study. Glendale Community College, one of 11 colleges in the Carnegie/Hewlett grant project, [Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges](#), is a case in point.

Beginning in 2000, the Glendale mathematics department instituted a common final examination for all sections of its developmental course in precollegiate algebra. The department produces tabularized information after each examination that shows, among other things, the dropout rate and mean GPA for each class, as well as the performance of each class (properly coded to insure anonymity) on the overall test and on subtopics.

The faculty as a whole discuss topical areas that students appear to be learning well and those they are still struggling with. Individual instructors examine the performance on the test of their own students in various ways that reveal important aspects of their teaching practice and grading standards. For example, instructors whose A and B students do relatively poorly on the final examination must ask themselves whether their standards are too lax. Instructors whose C students perform well on the test must ask themselves if

their standards are unrealistically high. The entire project stimulates faculty discussion and reflection in ways that did not occur before.

The benefits of common examinations

The single most important benefit of common examinations is that everyone must run the same race. Because of this, common examinations can be a powerful hedge against two persistent problems with grades: grade inflation and the wide variability across teachers in grading standards. Regarding grade inflation, an instructor who awards A's and B's to students who do poorly on every common examination must ask himself whether his grading practices and standards are appropriate. Is he awarding inappropriate weight to class participation, effort and personality, say, at the expense of genuine learning?

Teachers differ in virtually all of the factors that contribute to grades: the amount of course content actually taught during the semester; the quality of instruction; the difficulty of quizzes, examinations and other class assignments; the leniency or stringency of standards; and so on. How much is taught and how well it was taught over the semester surely varies from instructor to instructor. But instructors typically test only material that they have taught. In a class where a mere 60 percent of the intended material was taught, an A means that a student mastered only that material. Yet a B in another course section might well mean that a student learned more material because the second instructor taught 90 percent of the intended subject matter. If an A student in instructor Jones' class is a C student in Smith's class, what meaning can we attach to grades at all? Currently these complications remain largely unexplored, but common examinations could shed considerable light on the situation.

The very process of developing and coming to consensus on an assessment framework, along with the development of exercises and a scoring rubric, all tend to get faculty on the same page about what is important for students to know and be able to do. Instructors who entertain idiosyncratic notions about grading or essential content must defend their ideas to their colleagues in an open forum where departmental objectives and disciplinary considerations are the reference standards. A program of common examinations will encourage honest discussion about the appropriate weight to be given to effort over outcome, to growth over absolute level of achievement, to test performance over class participation.

The above benefits focus primarily on how common examinations can positively affect teachers and their practice. But what about students? Several instructors at Glendale have noted that their students tend to be fearful of common tests. The students understandably have achieved a certain comfort level with their instructor and the prospect of a common examination developed by the entire faculty is intimidating. The math department at Glendale responded by instituting a practice of putting former tests on the internet so that students could get a clear idea of what was expected of them. To be sure, the research evidence on this interesting topic suggests that mild test anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it more often than not serves to motivate rather than paralyze. But common examinations may have an even more constructive effect on the intentional learning of

students. If the examinations constitute a significant part of their grades, students may well resist the nearly ubiquitous inclination to enroll in classes of known "soft graders." For if students perceive that they will be evaluated impartially and even anonymously on what and how well they have learned, perhaps they will seek out the great teacher, rather than the easy grader.

A matter of professional development

Providing a continuing occasion for faculty inquiry and discussion, insuring grade comparability across classes, making instructors more reflective about their grading practices, dampening the effects of grade inflation, and encouraging students to be more intentional about their curricular choices—these are significant benefits of common examinations that far outweigh the increased time and effort required of faculty. But at Glendale there is one additional benefit that, in its long-term effects, may prove to be more important than all the rest. It is exemplified in how the math faculty use test results in professional development. Noting that some instructors' students repeatedly performed well above average on the examinations or on particular topical areas, the department began a program of having faculty observe these instructors in action. The department appears to have taken to heart the sage observation of educational policy scholar Richard Elmore, who claims that one of the most powerful professional development experiences possible is to study carefully someone else who does what you do, only better.

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