

Standard-Driven Variety

Why Must Equitable Outcomes Be the *Same* Outcomes?

NICHOLAS C. DONOHUE

In May, the U.S. Education Department decided to move forward with its stated desire to make colleges and universities report measurable student outcomes in order to remain eligible for any of the nearly \$100 billion available in federal student aid. Many higher education leaders rightly challenged the suggested mandate, and the battle was joined.

There is an understandable sense of ownership among higher education institutions over what constitutes a valid education. U.S. higher education is envied around the globe. The federal government's foray into K-12 accountability with No Child Left Behind has contributed to higher education's reluctance to be told who is and who is not a competent college graduate. And in the current political climate, it's easy to push back against the administration's accountability plan. All this notwithstanding, there remains an enormous opportunity to articulate "standards" for higher education.

Educators, economists and policy-makers agree that raising the level of achievement for more learners is important. Studies of global workforce competitiveness regularly point toward the goal of nearly everyone achieving skills and knowledge commensurate with at least two years of higher education. Do we need a list of measurable outcomes to drive toward that goal? Or could we just better prepare our high school students, fund public higher education sufficiently and let the marketplace drive quality upward?

The danger when we start defining learner outcomes is that we will narrow the postsecondary experience and diminish its quality. Research regarding implementation of No Child Left Behind supports this concern. A recent survey of nearly 350 school districts by the Washington D.C.-based Center for

Education Policy found that to make room for additional curriculum and instructional time in reading and math—the two subjects tested under the federal law—many districts are spending less time in other subjects that are not the focus of federal accountability. Still, these findings do not damn the standards movement, but instead, point to the need to develop better standards.

We must ensure that the standards we define are congruent with the needs of students once they leave education's hallowed halls for the real world. The study *Tough Choices or Tough Times* suggests that the qualities that "may spell the difference between success and failure" in the global economy include "creativity and innovation, facility with the use of abstractions [and] the ability to function well as a member of a team."

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, meanwhile, has developed a specific framework for learning that includes: knowledge of modern themes ("traditional" courses plus civic, financial and global awareness); learning and innovation skills (creativity); media and technology (technology and media literacy); and life and career skills (including initiative, accountability and leadership). Though imperfect, this design, developed by talent from the likes of Apple, AT&T, Leapfrog Media, the National Education Association and Junior Achievement, marks a way forward to a clearer definition of higher learning. The partnership is working hard to get government to buy in.

Of course, this is not the first time well-intended business types have searched for some discrete definition of "preparation." But we may have finally reached a tipping point where these kinds of skills are going to be necessary for broader success in the new economy.

This is not to dismiss education that does not directly serve an economic engine. To the contrary, a variety of high-quality options will be required in the new global society. Traditional opportunities and liberal arts approaches must be nurtured, protected and made more accessible. And expectations for all students must remain high.

When we accept the idea of nurturing a variety of high-quality learning opportunities, a thorny issue remains: how do we ensure that uniformity in standards doesn't create a myopic definition of success?

We have increased equity at the K-12 level for those least-served by our public education systems by demanding that the same standards be used for all learners. This approach has uncovered vast differences in performance correlated tragically with race and class. We must be vigilant about disparities in outcomes, but we should also intelligently differentiate our notions of opportunity and achievement. Why must strong equitable outcomes be the *same* outcomes? More specifically, while college success is a worthy goal for anyone, is it the only worthy goal for everyone?

One argument is that in today's world, college graduation and degree attainment are the "gold standard" for economic success. And it is right to aim for success for all learners, not just a privileged few. The problem is that college success—traditionally defined—is at best a proxy for the specific skills and knowledge necessary for success in the "real world." Just ask our business leaders who together budget millions of dollars annually for work-based remedial education activities. While college graduation is indisputably a passport to higher earnings, it's not the only source of economic benefit (nor of cultural literacy and social privilege). Conversely, even if college isn't for everyone, real success can be.

O U T C O M E S & A S S E S S M E N T

Recent alarming workforce projections, the explosion of online coursework, industry-based learning, the evolution of community colleges, and the fact that technical trades now demand a much higher level of literacy, problem-solving and other high-value skills, are all trends that may force acceptance of a greater variety of outcomes and a more authentic and honest appreciation of a variety of vocations.

To some, the argument for standard-driven variety will seem like revisiting the past. To others, it may be misread

as a step back from the equity we have approached through uniformity in standards. As educators, philanthropists and concerned citizens, we must begin to ask ourselves the hard questions about what it really means to educate the largest majority of students imaginable. We are doing a poor job of it today, at a time when we need to be doing an excellent job. We have made strides by demanding accountability, but we still champion a one-size-fits-all future when the world is screaming for innovation, differentiation and the highest quality possible.

New England's colleges and universities have an opportunity to take a leadership role in redefining the experiences of higher learning. Indeed, their ingenuity, depth of knowledge and commitment to excellence put them in a unique position to develop measurable, rigorous and varied outcomes that expand opportunity, safeguard equity and position our region moving forward.

Nicholas C. Donohue is president and CEO of the *Nellie Mae Education Foundation*.
Email: ndonohue@nmefdn.org.
