

A Test We Must Pass

We must recognize that knowledge is obtained in various ways and begin to measure competency similarly

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As New England continues to experience dramatic demographic shifts, it becomes increasingly clear that our future prosperity will depend on how well we prepare all learners for postsecondary success. If New England is to produce engaged, prosperous citizens, we must begin to expand our notion of what skills and knowledge learners need to acquire. If we do that, our region's higher education community must also expand how we measure those skills through multiple, varied assessments of student competency and achievement.

New England 2020, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's report, predicts a decline in the number of the region's citizens with postsecondary credentials. The high cost of living in the area has driven some graduates out, and many longtime residents are either leaving the region or "aging out" of the workforce. New England has been fortunate, however, to see an influx of immigrants and minority students to make up for the capacity it is losing. Although not served well by public education systems traditionally, these populations will continue to be a vital component of the region's success.

The telling statistic that those holding college degrees earn \$1 million more in their lifetime than those who do not continues to resonate with societal implications: The more citizens attain at a postsecondary level, the more fiscal input communities have into our cyclical economies; the more people earn, the more they purchase goods and services and pay taxes. When you also consider that well-educated citizens tend to be more productive, healthier, and more likely to be civically and culturally engaged, you begin to form a picture that we are just beginning to acknowledge — our collective future is in no small part dependent on the success of *each other*.

Preparing people for success has always been a moving target of sorts. What skills do people need to become civically engaged and economically self-sufficient? In recent years it has become increasingly evident that while basic skills are essential, the "3 R's" are not enough once learners enter secondary school. So-called "21st century" skills — innovation, creativity, the ability to work as part of a team, and to work through complex problems and find solutions — are becoming increasingly important in the new economy and interconnected world.

Measurement and assessment issues follow quickly from any discussion of integrating these "new" skills. Standardized tests still have a place in providing assessments of certain skills, but I've yet to see the written exam that can accurately measure one's ability to work within a team creatively. We must recognize that knowledge is obtained in various ways — through different methods in different places — and begin to measure competency similarly. Moreover, we must not go careening forward without discipline. High-quality varied assessment can only succeed where there is a shared understanding of what is required of learners and educators.

Performance-based assessments (also known as "applied learning" or "real-world" assessments) allow students to demonstrate competency through a number of activities, including mentorships, internships and portfolio building. There are already examples of performance-based assessments being used across the region at the K-12 level to complement traditional classroom testing. For example, with the class of 2008,

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Rhode Island began utilizing multiple assessments in high school graduation requirements. Rhode Island students must now be able to demonstrate skills and knowledge through a variety of assessments, including portfolios and projects, in addition to performance on more traditional measures. In New Hampshire, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation has partnered with the New Hampshire Department of Education and PlusTime NH to develop and support the Expanded Learning Opportunities pilot program at four high schools. This work is rooted in regulation changes that promote more educational options for learners, including credit for learning that takes place outside of the traditional classroom. In order to gain credit, students must demonstrate that, as a result of the experience, they have gained knowledge and skills and have met pre-established course competencies. For example, learners might receive partial credit for work at a magazine or newspaper; or students can gain math or science credits for demonstrated work within information technology.

In both instances, students need to demonstrate to the satisfaction of a highly qualified teacher that what they have learned ties back to pre-determined requirements. Those established criteria are vital, as without them, otherwise- useful demonstrations of knowledge become nothing more than watered-down exhibitions, and counterproductive to all involved.

Measuring achievement through performance is not new to higher education. Most instructors apply their judgment daily against a wide range of evidence

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in order to determine grades. Discussions of system-wide assessments in higher education are unavoidably linked to accountability, however, and can be met with trepidation or flat-out opposition by some. These skeptics are understandably fearful of uniformity in the academy simply for accountability's sake and even a diminishing of the value of professorial judgment. While such steps would certainly go too far, establishing a shared, institutional base value of what is expected of students would benefit higher education twofold. As Richard Hersh has noted, when discussing his "value-added" theory for higher education, strong assessment "first and foremost helps to improve student-learning and institutional efficacy and second, provides appropriate student learning evidence in response to calls for accountability."

Hersh's theory measures knowledge gained by students while at an institution, and involves assessment of learners at the start, during, and after college. He extols the virtues and necessity of data collection and transparency when evaluating college student outcomes — and institutions have begun to listen. At Alverno College in Wisconsin, students build a Diagnostic Digital Portfolio (DDP) based on the school's "assessment-as-learning process." The DDP is a web-based database of assessments and assignments that allows learning to become transparent not only to students, but also to potential future employers or graduate schools. In a 2006 report from the Education Schools Project, Alverno was one of only four institutions in the nation noted for contributing to a measurable difference in student outcomes. A glance at Alverno's

student population refutes any notion that New England's demographic shift might be an impediment to improving postsecondary achievement for a majority of learners: 35 percent of students are part-time; 71 percent of students are the first in their family to go to college; and 88 percent of all students at Alverno receive financial aid.

Some schools promote themselves based on their new measures of performance. The University of Nebraska at Omaha recently began marketing itself as "First in Value-Added Education" due to its impressive scores on the 2007-08 Collegiate Learning Assessment, the Council for Aid to Education's performance-based examination. In New England, Southern Connecticut State University uses a portfolio program similar to Alverno's for students pursuing a Master of Library Science degree. At the University of Massachusetts Boston, the College of Community and Public Service is designed around a competency-based curriculum, allowing students to learn in a variety of ways in and out of the classroom.

Far from becoming a one-size-fits-all means of accountability for higher education, the expanded acceptance and application of multiple assessments could ultimately help connect higher education with high schools — promoting creative, performance-based ways of bridging what is now a treacherous chasm between systems for so many learners. Currently, the important and necessary work behind "college readiness" and K-16 movements is driven primarily by student outcomes as defined by higher education. That conversation needs to become more collaborative in purpose, and the use of multiple, high quality assessments at both ends would help create the system we should be striving toward — one that is reasonably aligned, flexible and focused on meaningful outcomes.

The work ahead is no longer only about improving high school or ensuring the affordability of postsecondary education. The core challenge is to provide learners with high quality opportunities for postsecondary success. In order to produce the well-rounded citizens New England needs, we will first need rigorous, valid assessments that reveal what learners know in a variety of ways. Institutionalizing and implementing this effort is a test we can and must pass.

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