

Memorandum

Date: September 29, 2003

From: Steve Uhlfelder, Chair
Board of Governors Performance and Accountability Committee

To: Members, SUS Council of Presidents
Members, SUS Council of Academic Vice Presidents
Members, Board of Governors Performance and Accountability Committee
Other Members, Board of Governors
Members, University Sector Accountability Task Force

Subject: Proposed Recommendations:
Accountability for Postsecondary Student Learning

As Chair of the Board's Accountability and Performance Committee, I am providing you with these thoughts in order to encourage feedback and further dialogue. Please provide any comments either to me at the addresses below, or to Division of Colleges and Universities Vice Chancellor R. E. LeMon at email address RE.LeMon@FLDOE.org. I hope to receive your input prior to my committee's conference call, scheduled for October 7th from 2:00 to 3:00.

Proposed Recommendations: Accountability for Postsecondary Student Learning

In the context of the K-20 Accountability Project, the State University System (SUS) is currently considering two types of measures that either directly or by association address student learning outcomes.

Direct measures that attempt to measure student learning are passage rates on licensure examinations, and average graduate record examination scores.

Associated measures are those that, by inference, relation, deduction, logic, or common sense would indicate that student learning has taken place without directly measuring it. These include numbers of degrees granted, job placement and earnings, and percentage of students who go on to graduate school.

Taken together, the two direct measures, supported by the three associated measures, constitute a proactive response that, over time, will become even more viable and meaningful.

However, these measures provide an incomplete assessment and, to be accountable, we must do more.

The good news is that, between Florida's accountability mandate, the impending reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the mandates of SACS and discipline-specific accrediting bodies, the devolution of the programmatic review process, the oversight of university boards of trustees, and the oversight provided by the Board of Governors and its Performance and Accountability Committee, the planets have aligned for the SUS to become a national leader in postsecondary student learning assessment.

At the Lower Division

I am recommending that CLAST be carefully studied in order to determine what it is designed to test, whether it is currently testing what students are taught, whether it is currently testing what students need to know, whether it should be modified, whether it can be meaningful without being a "high-stakes" test, whether it should be made mandatory for all SUS first-time-in-college students, whether it can and should form an assessment bridge to the FCAT, or whether it should be discontinued.

At the Upper Division

I am recommending that we develop measurements for every baccalaureate program in the SUS and identify as specifically as possible and in writing:

- (1) what curricular and experiential offerings students will be exposed to,
- (2) what students will be expected to have learned as an outcome of the program of study, and
- (3) how, beyond course grades awarded by individual instructors, learning will be measured.

I am, further, recommending that, each university demonstrate that such a process has been implemented whereby student learning assessment has become a university-wide endeavor, institutionalized, formalized, ongoing, transparent, and public.

Identifying what it is that students will be exposed to, and what they will be expected to have learned, are aligned with current SACS requirements. The identification of "external" measurement mechanisms (that is, something beyond the accumulation of grades received from individual instructors) provides for the validation that brings accountability.

I know that this issue is being seriously addressed at certain of our institutions and by certain specific disciplines. It often takes the form of a rigorous

programmatic review that feeds into academic and fiscal planning; and by rigorous I mean that the results of the process receive exposure at least to other members of the academic community on that campus.

For purposes of accountability mandates, however, it is my impression that there is currently too much variability across institutions in the commitment to ensure that student learning assessment is serious and meaningful, especially when it comes to the external validation necessary in measuring the learning. Insisting on and monitoring a process as outlined above, while leaving the specific “how” up to disciplines and institutions, is the best way to make it happen meaningfully.

Further, it is not my intention that every response must necessarily result in a university-based pre- and post-test by discipline. For example, given the small numbers of graduates at New College, I would conceive that this institution could entertain having in place a portfolio / exit interview process for each and every graduate. Other disciplines, such as architecture and visual arts may already be using portfolios and exit interviews. Elsewhere, I know that some chemistry baccalaureate programs do give their graduates a national examination. Other disciplines may wish to use content portions of the Graduate Record Examination. Other disciplines may find it appropriate to vigorously evaluate their internships and practica. Other disciplines may actually want to develop their own tests. Still others may wish to create departmentally-designed rubrics of competencies and coursework, with ensurance of inter-rater reliability. We ought not be bound to testing, but we must, by institution and by program, be bound to something.

Finally, it has been pointed out that the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education’s study, “Measuring Up: The State-By-State Report Card for Higher Education, has given every state in the nation an “incomplete” with respect to learning. This is Florida’s opportunity to lead the nation in a meaningful way and, accordingly, as a further condition of this process, I am recommending that our entire endeavor as outlined be assessed over the next two years by this Center (and / or by others) in order to validate that what our institutions are doing in the area of learning assessment, and that what we monitor, ensure to the public, and incentivise through performance funding at the state-level, constitutes true accountability in a groundbreaking way.

I am very interested in working with our universities and their boards to create a first class accountability system that will result in our universities having more flexibility with more funding.

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