

A Babel of Standards: Students face a confusing array of tests and assessments

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EDUCATION STANDARDS have swept across the U.S., engulfing almost every state. Forty-six states have created K-12 academic content standards in most academic subjects, and all but Iowa and Nebraska have statewide K-12 student achievement tests.

At the state level, there is progress toward focusing on, and clarifying: 1) what students must be able to know and to do in the K-12 grades, and 2) how to align standards, assessments, textbook selection, and accountability measures at the K-12 level. A gaping hole in this reform strategy, however, is the lack of coherence in content and assessment standards between higher education institutions and systems and K-12 systems.

Unless we close this standards gap and align K-16 policies, students and secondary schools will continue to receive a confusing array of signals and will not be able to prepare adequately for higher education. The current scene is a Babel of standards, rather than a coherent strategy.

The roots of this problem go very deep in the history of American education standards policy. The U.S. created two separate mass education systems (K-12 and universities and colleges) that rarely collaborated to establish consistent standards. Often, economically disadvantaged students are overrepresented in non-honors courses and do not receive college admissions-related information from either school or non-school sources. Improving the policy signaling process, and the alignment of K-16 policies, will benefit all students.

Not all countries have a history of such a disconnect between education systems. In England, for example, senior secondary education exams and standards were designed solely to prepare and sort out students for university entrance. Now that England sends about the same percentage to universities as the U.S., this system uses two exams that are designed to align K-16 standards.

We rely on the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and ACT (American College Testing) to provide some uniformity, but neither of these assessments is aligned with the recent up-surge in K-12 standards. The situation is even more disjointed concerning higher education placement tests. In the southeast United States, for example, there are nearly 125 combinations of 75 different placement tests devised by universities with scant regard to secondary school standards. The only nationally aligned K-16 standards effort is the Advanced Placement program—a stalactite that extends from universities, utilizing a common content syllabus and exam.

The result of this confusion is that K-12 and university entrance and placement assessments usually utilize different formats, emphasize different content, and take different amounts of time to complete.

For example, Kentucky's K-12 assessment relies heavily on writing examples, but the SAT and ACT assess writing through multiple choice. Massachusetts' state K-12 assessment contains performance items that are dissimilar to the closed-end multiple choice format of SAT and ACT. California's newly-augmented STAR test includes math that is considerably more advanced and difficult than SAT and ACT. Texas' K-12 assessment (TAAS), however, does not include sufficient algebra or geometry so it is not as challenging as the SAT.

Some state K-12 assessments permit students to use calculators, but the university placement exams do not. Texas has a statewide postsecondary placement test (TASP), but many Texas universities also use their own placement exams. Interviews with students demonstrate that they have no idea about placement standards. Many state assessments do not go beyond tenth grade and do not test every pupil (they use a matrix sample). Consequently, they do not provide individual scores for use in admissions or placement. Illinois is implementing an expensive new state test to be given in the 11th and 12th grades, but there are no plans to use it for college admission and placement.

Universities provide some good reasons why they pay little attention to K-12 standards or assessments. Universities emphasize that they were not involved in the process of creating or refining K-12 standards. Moreover, state K-12 standards keep changing because of political or technical problems. The K-12 assessments are not evaluated to see how well they predict freshman grades (although this is not difficult to do). Universities hope that the SAT and ACT will make adjustments to accommodate these new K-12 standards, and feel more comfortable with the two assessments they know and can influence.

These disjunctures will be hard to fix unless there is an institutional center for K-16 reform. Very few states have any policy mechanism that can deal with K-16 standards alignment. As president of the California State Board of Education for several years, I never met with my higher education counterparts.

Higher education coordinating bodies do not include K-16 standards alignment within their purview. In short, there are few regular opportunities for K-12 educators to discuss standards issues with college and university faculty or policymakers. The professional lives of K-12 and higher education proceed in separate orbits.

In some states, the governor's office is the most logical place to put these fractured standards systems together, but higher education leaders want to guard their political independence from gubernatorial and legislative specification of admissions criteria. Because each state has a distinctive K-12 standards and assessment system, it is not clear what can be done nationally. President Clinton's advocacy of a national voluntary test has died after protests about states' rights in education. Perhaps the College Board could assume a leadership role.

Some states provide examples of a possible resolution. California tests each 11th grader for 400 minutes on math and language arts, and has additional state tests for science and social studies. Unlike Texas' TAAS test, the California state assessment is geared to university preparation needs. Indeed, California 11th grade math is considerably more advanced than the SAT or ACT.

Consequently, California universities could use the end-of-11th grade test for university admission, and restrict the SAT and ACT to out-of-state applicants. Also, the California K-12 assessment could be used instead of separate university placement tests, like the entry-level math and English tests required of all first-year students in the 22-campus California State University system.

Other states like North Carolina and Texas have implemented end-of-course statewide tests for college preparation courses. These tests could be reviewed by universities, and then incorporated within admission criteria.

Something should be done to assist students, who increasingly are asked to pass a bewildering array of K-12 and higher education tests and assessments that might make sense individually, but that do not add up to a coherent whole.