

# The Proof Is in the Portfolio

AS I PEN THIS MESSAGE, Washington is poised for a new era—a new presidency and a new chapter in the nation’s struggle toward equality and justice for all. It is a momentous period—fraught with perils, clearly—but also a time to both probe and recommit to the principles and the possibilities that are fundamental to our American heritage.

I believe this is also a propitious time to open a new chapter in the national dialogue about assessment and accountability in higher education. Let’s band together as a community and insist that it is high time to break free of the reductive focus on standardized testing of “general skills,” quantitative metrics for achievement, and the national obeisance before the false gods of comparable scores and faux rankings.

Together, we can work toward a new era of commitment to forms of assessment that challenge students both to meet high expectations and to show how well they can actually apply their learning—their knowledge as well as their skills—to real problems and complex challenges. And, just as we have bro-

## PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

ken free from the idea that an African American could never be elected president in our lifetimes, we can also

agree to retire, once and for all, forms of assessment that, in practice though not by intent, have helped perpetuate the patterns of stratification and unequal opportunity that still disfigure our democracy.

Led by the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, a commission for the National Association for College Admission Counseling made exactly this point when it urged colleges and universities, in a recent report, to move away from admissions reliance on national tests of general skills, and to shift toward admissions materials much more closely tied to the high school curriculum and to students’ academic achievement. Admissions tests of general skills, the commission concluded, “appear to calcify differences based on class, race/ethnicity, and parental educational attainment.” Or as Georgetown University economist Tony Carnevale has repeatedly pointed out, SAT scores are so tightly correlated with family income that higher education would have gotten the same level of (modest) predictive validity if it had used family income instead of tests in selection screening. (See the latest correlations online at [www.diversityweb.org/DiversityDemocracy/vol11no3/report.cfm](http://www.diversityweb.org/DiversityDemocracy/vol11no3/report.cfm).)

When standardized college admissions tests became part of the admissions process in the 1930s and 1940s, it was widely assumed that only a fraction of the population needed college study, and that tests of general skills (then thought to be native abilities) could help discover those natural gems who would benefit from higher learning, irrespective of family background or the quality of their earlier schooling. But now, after nearly a century of experimentation with standardized testing in college admissions, we know that students’ scores tells us much more about the test-takers’ resource base—or lack of it—than about their potential or their capacity to learn. We also know, from numerous studies at selective institutions where standardized tests have become optional, that students who are admitted on other criteria do as well academically as those who submitted the SAT.

And yet, in the very year that the admissions community has called for a shift toward admissions measures that are less focused on general skills and more tightly tied to a challenging high school curriculum, large parts of the higher education community have agreed to a “trial test” of standardized

general skills testing in order to make themselves “accountable” for students’ level of learning across the multiple years of college. Why would we do this? Why are we relying on strategies that short-circuit the actual curriculum to report student “achievement” in college, when we already know the “calcification” effects of similar tests used in admissions?

Worse, while high school students have good reason to do their very best on the ACT or the SAT, since the scores still “count” in many admissions decisions, higher education proposes to build its own accountability system on a small sample of “volunteer” test-takers. These volunteers will be asked to show how well they can do on tests that bear no connection to their actual course of study in college. The unsettling result of this approach to accountability testing will be high stakes for the universities and no stakes at all for the students whose performance nonetheless becomes the measure of higher education’s “success.” Meanwhile, since most of the students on a given campus will not take part in these voluntary tests, the resulting assessment system will do nothing at all to focus or sharpen most students’ learning.

We can do better. We are scholars and we are educators. As scholars, we need to mobilize the already abundant evidence showing why narrowly focused standardized tests are misaligned with the way knowledge is actually put to work in twenty-first-century contexts. As educators, we need to move beyond the reactive mode provoked by the Spellings barrage and help society get ahead of the curve on forms of assessment that can actually drive higher achievement.

Policy leaders have asked for transparency about student performance. In response, we must point out that ill-focused tests can be neither transparent nor informative about what a student has accomplished, over time, on a range of learning outcomes that are important to our economy, our democracy, and his or her own hopes for the future.

What then should we recommend? Educators around the country are pointing to an accountability strategy that can provide, simultaneously, a framework for raising student achievement, evidence of progress over time, and transparency about the extent to which students are achieving what AAC&U’s LEAP initiative calls “essential learning outcomes.”

The strategy—well attuned to the technologies of our time—uses e-portfolios, or what we might call “supplemental transcripts.” Already adopted by institutions as diverse as the University of Michigan, LaGuardia Community College, Hampshire, and Carleton and in development at many others, e-portfolios enable us to see what a student is working on over time, to discern an emerging sense of purpose and direction, and to review samples of writing, research projects, and creative work as well as progress in integrating learning across multiple levels of schooling and multiple areas of study and experience. An e-portfolio also opens windows into a student’s field-based assignments by creating opportunities to present supervisor evaluations or even videos showing real-world performance. They can be sampled, using rubrics, for external reporting.

What we need now is a proactive movement—involving committed leaders, faculty members, and assessment scholars—to chart an educationally productive direction for assessment, transparency, and accountability. This is already a high priority for AAC&U. I hope we can also make it a high priority for the entire educational community.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

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