

One Size Does Fit All

A Case for Educational Standardization and Assessment

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I doubt it will surprise anyone in this audience that when many if not most of our colleagues hear about the topic of today's conference, "Educational Assessment," alarm bells go off in their heads. And probably the most serious complaint leveled against assessment has to do with the association of the term with the dreaded "S word," Standardization, which, in requiring us to evaluate and measure what students learn in terms of common learning benchmarks, conjures up an image of teachers forced to relinquish their cherished lesson plans in favor of what some official bureaucratic body has determined is effective academic work. That is, a major fear with assessment and its evil twin standardization is that, as teachers we will all be forced to suppress our individual talents, honed through years of rigorous, disciplinary training, and be forced to conform to what we are told to do by those whose view of academic culture conflicts with our own. Thus for many academics, who are accustomed to tremendous amounts of autonomy in the classroom—who are accustomed to what my husband and frequent co-author Gerald Graff earlier called a "I-vunt- to be alone" mentality—standardizing teaching in terms of common assessment criteria is a bad idea—no, a *really, really* bad idea.

What I would like to do here today is build on an article that Gerald and I co-wrote that will appear in the Teagle Foundation's forthcoming collection *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*. In our article, entitled "A Progressive Case for Educational Standardization," Gerald and I defend curricular a

certain brand of curricular standardization and make the case that it is finally futile to protest categorically against standardizing the college curriculum because that curriculum, as I would like to emphasize here today, is *already* standardized in ways we barely notice. As we go on to show, the most effective academics conform to a set of common practices, and these turn out to be the very practices that students most need to master in order to succeed in college. When effective academics write, speak, read, and think, they do so not in thorough-going-ly individualized, idiosyncratic ways but in ways that are unexpectedly uniform, predictable, and ultimately standardized—ways in fact that should be used as the basis of assessment criteria for our nation’s higher education system. Ironically, in what I hope is a classic got-cha moment, I will show that academics use these standardized forms even when they are protesting against standardization and assessment!

This is not to deny that there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about bad forms of standardization and assessment. We concede that there are forces trying to use the mantle of “Standardization” to defund higher education, public institutions in particular, and to impose on higher Ed the same types of misguided tests that have characterized No Child Left Behind. And like many who oppose standardization, we fear that the standardization movement will be taken over by those with little knowledge of academic culture—by politicians, corporate donors, or administrators, say, who will force everyone to submit to some distorted vision of academic excellence. But this is a reason for embracing standardization and trying to do it right, not for rejecting standardization and assessment out of hand.

But the one major concern about curricular standardization and assessment that Gerald and I do not find legitimate is the one which suggests that standardization threatens the essential “diversity” and “heterogeneity”—indeed, the very irreducibility—of academic culture. It is very often said that because the subjects taught in higher education (history, biology, literature, business, and so forth) are so diverse, because the perspectives from which these subjects are taught are so multiple, because the institutions that constitute higher education are so different in type (community colleges, ivy league universities, small liberal arts colleges, vocational

schools, public research institutions), and because the students being taught in higher Ed are from so many different backgrounds and have so many different needs, academic culture could never be standardized—at least without losing its essence, its soul, its reason for being. Thus according to what has now become a familiar refrain, it is commonly said that “NO ONE- SIZE-FITS-ALL standard” can possibly do justice to all these diverse subjects, teachers, students, and institutions.

This no-one-size-fits-all mantra was invoked repeatedly in 2006 when the former Sectary of Education Margaret Spellings and a government commission she led under President George W. Bush called in effect for greater standardization of higher education. Spellings’ goal, she claimed, was to cut the costs of higher Ed, but it was also to help high school students make the transition to college. But many academics and academic groups across the country would have none of it. As you can see on your handout, Douglass Bennett, President of Earlham College complained that Spellings’s

commission comes dangerously close to implying that a one-size-fits-all measure should be used. The *diversity* of our institutions’ missions and our students calls for a *diversity* of measures—not some Washington-imposed single test” (1).

John Churchill, Secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, to take just one other of the examples on my list, insisted that Spellings’s “demand for common measurement” threatens what has been the strength of American higher education, which Churchill identified as its “*diversity*” and “*decentralization*” (2).

Gerald and I have several problems with this no-one-size-fits-all position. The first is that it simply reinforces the American curriculum’s already disconnected status quo.

As Gerald has argued at this conference already and at more length in his 2003 book Clueless in Academe, today’s American colleges can indeed be proud of their impressive intellectual and disciplinary diversity. But what is far less impressive, Gerald argues (and here we agree with Margaret Spellings), is academia’s record in

helping students negotiate this diversity by providing them with the skills they need to make their way through it. Because of these curricular discontinuities, students have no assurance that what they learn in one discipline or course will be rewarded or built on in the next. College thus becomes a series of unrelated messages, often *mixed*, contradictory messages, each tending to present a different vision of what academic work looks like, but few having the overarching status—and therefore the clarity and accessibility—that a more standardized curriculum would confer.

A second problem with the “no one-size-fits all position,” and the blanket rejection of educational standardization, is that it is undemocratic. When opponents of standardization insist that academic work cannot be reduced to any one common standard or measure of assessment they are refusing to do the hard work of reduction, which would help make college work accessible to the many students who do not know what college is all about. Put another way, when opponents of standardization say that academic competence cannot be judged by any one standard they end up mystifying such competence, turning it into a matter of esoteric taste or whim—an ineffable *je ne sais quoi* mysteriously possessed by a minority of superior talents—rather than a set of practices that can be identified, modeled, and made accessible. Ultimately, they render academic work unnecessarily “sublime” and “ineffable,” as the editors of the forthcoming Teagle volume suggest in their edition’s very title. It’s a short step from telling the Spellings Commission,

“Sorry, but we colleges are just too diverse to be measured by any common standard,”

to telling students,

“Sorry, but the basic skills that you need to succeed in college are just too complex and hard to be explained to you clearly, in a way that most of you can understand and master.”

“You students are just going to have to sit there and figure out what academia is all about on your own.”

“Sink or swim.”

As educators, we can come up with a far better line than this. We can do much more to help students understand the academic world and master its key practices.

Our third and final problem with the anti-standardization position, and the problem I want to focus on from here on out, is that it ignores the common standards—and their implied criteria of assessment—that already *do* pervasively exist in the intellectual practices of academics. In other words, the no-one-size-fits-all position, which fetishizes how allegedly different we all are, ignores such things as the fact that we academics not only continually assess—ie, *grade*—our students and evaluate our peers, but without that much variation I suspect (though admittedly I’m conjecturing here), collectively seem to agree as a group on who the “A” students are and who our most effective cogent peers are. That is, though our beliefs and methods do indeed often differ in terms of *what* we believe, in terms of the *content* of our beliefs, we are far more standardized in terms of the *forms* that we use to structure those contents—far more standardized than we realize in terms of *how* we communicate what we believe.

What, then, are these common standards, these hidden criteria that circulate through the academic world?

To determine what perhaps the most important of these common competencies are, we need look no further than the statements I quoted earlier by the various representatives of academic organizations who opposed the standardization threatened by the Spellings Commission on the grounds that academia is far too diverse to be reduced to common competencies. If we look for a moment not at *what* these opponents of standardization say, but at *how* they say it, at the *form* or *structure* that their various statements take, the curious fact emerges that in the very act of claiming that academia is too diverse to be reduced to common standards, these anti-standardization critics make arguments that take the same common shape, which turns out to be the same shape commonly found not just in academic world but in the

wider domain of public and civic debate. In fact, this shape or form is so familiar to most of us that it is easy to pass over and not even notice it. Though the writers I quoted above hail from different disciplines (political science, philosophy, theatre), they all engage in the common practice of argumentation: or what might more precisely be identified as the core, liberal arts practice of

* entering a provocative conversation;

*making argument against argument;

* listening to and answering counterarguments;

* engaging “diverse perspectives” (which 80% of faculty want their students to be able to do, according to the NSSE survey results we heard about earlier today)

* or to reduce this practice down to its essentials, summarizing what someone else has said (in this case, Margaret Spellings) and then offering a relevant response.

If you’ll bear with me, I’d like to return once again to my handout to review what the first three opponents of standardization say and how each follows this common summary/response format that I’ve just outlined. Bennett, for instance, the political scientist, uses this summary/response format when he summarizes the commission as QUOTE “com[ing] dangerous close to” ENDQUOTE a QUOTE “one-size-fits-all measure,” ENDQUOTE, and responds by insisting that higher Ed demands QUOTE “a diversity of measures—not some Washington-imposed single test” (1) ENDQUOTE. Churchill, the philosopher, summarizes Spellings as demanding a QUOTE “common measurement” ENDQUOTE and responds by insisting that this demand threatens what he characterizes as the strength of American higher education: its QUOTE “diversity” ENDQUOTE and QUOTE “decentralization” ENDQUOTE (2). Along similar lines, the American Association of University Professors summarizes the commission as QUOTE “call[ing] for standardization” ENDQUOTE, and responds by insisting that this standardization will “harm ...the diverse missions of our colleges and universities” ENDQUOTE.

Given the way these academics all speak—celebrating diversity by, ironically, making claims that all take the same form—I am reminded of the Far Side cartoon that I’ve reprinted on the back-side of your handout that shows a crowd of identical-looking penguins with one blurting out, “I gotta be me!” Today’s diversitarian, pluralist climate has so many of us intoxicated with our differences that, like the penguin insisting on his uniqueness, we overlook what should be our obvious commonalities.

Yet let me make some concessions. It is true, as these opponents of standardization have it, that there are many differences in our nation’s higher education system that are important—differences that can and should never be erased. There are some differences between two-year and four year colleges and it is certainly true that making an argument or summarizing and responding to a text in, say biology, is a different matter from enacting these key practices in, say, history or literature. Yet at the end of the day, these differences should not be allowed to occlude the common competencies that lie at the heart of intellectual, academic culture—the basic argumentation skills that Gerald and I outline at greater length in our textbook They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing, basic skills that students throughout our school system need to learn, and that even faculty themselves at times need to be reminded of as well.

I am worried, therefore, by the trend among those who do favor assessment and accountability of articulating assessment criteria only in the discreet disciplines, the thinking being, I believe, that developing such discipline-specific criteria will avoid any monolithic, one-size-fits-all criteria that would inevitably force everyone to repress what makes their own fields of study unique. But again, I would argue that we can acknowledge disciplinary differences at the same time that we also acknowledge the common skills that pervade academic culture. My goal is not to deny disciplinary differences but to argue that we can, in a sense, have it both ways and acknowledge both disciplinary differences and general academic competencies *at the same time*. After all, were disciplinary differences all that existed we would not be able to explain trans- or interdisciplinary work and the fact that most of us cross disciplinary boundaries frequently, that few of us can say we belong to any one disciplinary domain

in any exclusive way. Were disciplinary differences all that existed we would also not be able to explain the fact that translation and communication between academia's different domains is not only possible but takes place every day: in what College Presidents from different disciplinary domains say to Secretaries of Education and the general public; and in what I, I hope, have said to you here today and you all have said to me and to each other, though we are all in a so-called "general" audience and all hail from very different academic domains and fields.

—thank you—