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SUNY Standardizes Tests To Grade Campuses

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ALBANY, N.Y. -- The State University of New York will use standardized exams to measure campuses against SUNY's standards, but it won't release campus comparisons to the public, according to SUNY records.

The tests would begin with a two-year pilot program starting next fall and would measure the performance of some of SUNY's 64 campuses. The test would cover math, writing, social sciences and computer literacy, SUNY spokesman David Henahan told the Times Union of Albany, which noted that the Board of Trustees quietly approved the idea in June.

The results can be used by a campus for its own marketing and for internal SUNY use, but neither SUNY nor the schools will use the results to compare SUNY's campuses and students with one another, according to SUNY documents obtained Friday.

Chancellor Robert King's proposal, adopted by the Board of Trustees, called for "appropriate safeguards that will ensure that assessment results are used appropriately in support of improving the teaching and learning process." King's resolution said "campus-specific data" would be for SUNY and campus administrators only.

The proposal is based on a 2000 SUNY report that called for "stringent guidelines" on the confidentiality of testing data and that the results "be shared only with appropriate stakeholders."

"While campuses may use assessment results to engage in self-promotion, they must remain collegial and should not use these data as a means of comparing themselves in ways that would tend to diminish other institutions," the report states. "Campus-specific assessment data should be used primarily for confidential in-house discussions."

Only SUNY-wide aggregate figures, or perhaps by category such as "university center" or "community college," should be released to the public, according to the report.

"The reason for the sector release is it prevents raw data from being used to make apples to oranges comparisons," Henahan said.

SUNY Trustee Candace de Russy, who has for years sought the student assessments, said the data for each publicly support campus should be released to the public.

"Students, parents and all those who munificently fund SUNY should have a right to know how each campus is performing," de Russy said Friday.

"It is the same kind of standard I believe the Regents have been moving forward in their public reporting of elementary and high school performances," she said. She referred to the state Board of Regents which credits



improved performance in part on annual "school report cards" of public schools throughout the state.

Standardized tests are already required of elementary and secondary schools under federal law and that has prompted consideration of college-level tests in several states, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

But implementing standardized tests that can accurately compare the performance of students and colleges _ both of which can vary drastically _ has proven an impediment in most states so far, said Peter Schmidt of the Chronicle.

"We've seen such a debate of using a test to measure how high schools are doing, now it's bleeding over into colleges," he said. "But a lot of states found colleges are entirely different animals."

Henahan did not have an answer for why the controversial and substantial change in SUNY practice was not the subject of a public announcement among the many issued since the meeting.

But there are other concerns, too.

"It seems to have the potential of being an unfunded mandate," said Frank Maurizio of the United University Professions that represents SUNY professors and other workers. "That would drain some resources from campuses that are already cash starved."

Blair Horner of the New York Public Interest Research Group questions whether a test can be fair and useful.

"Any time any educational institution wants to require a test, they should prove to the public that the exam is a valid measure of whatever it's supposed to be checking," Horner said. "In a system as vast as SUNY, I'm not sure what it would do."

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