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Ready for a degree? Prove it

Under a state plan seeking more accountability, students face a more rigorous review to see if they have mastered their major.

By ANITA KUMAR, Times Staff Writer
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TALLAHASSEE - All university students would have to prove they learned key facts and mastered specific skills in their fields before graduation as part of a state proposal to hold Florida's schools more accountable.

Students would be judged through tests, essays, portfolios and interviews tailored to each of the state's hundreds of majors.

The measurements could be implemented as soon as this fall, with individual universities determining whether scores would be tied to graduation. But some school officials wonder why a costly new program is necessary when universities already give grades and diplomas.

"One would think a diploma would suffice," said Larry Abele, the provost at Florida State University.

A committee of the Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the state's 11 universities, agreed to the plan Wednesday after the previous proposal, a standardized test for all juniors, came under

Possible measures

- Performance-based case projects/courses
- Classroom assessment
- Employer surveys after graduation
- Curriculum and syllabus analysis
- Internship assessments
- Portfolios
- Performance-based case studies
- Observations reflective essays
- Standardized exams
- Licensure exams
- Senior and graduate surveys
- GRE subject area exams
- Alumni surveys

Source: Florida Board of Governors

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fire in recent months. The full board is expected to approve the plan today.

Steve Uhlfelder, the board member who spearheaded the standardized test idea, conceded he didn't have the support from the board for a test so he worked on a compromise that allows the universities to create the measures themselves.

"In a way, we're sort of deflecting the issue," he said. "There's not a one-size-fits-all measure."

Uhlfelder wants students to sign written contracts at the start of their work in a specific major, agreeing to learn certain facts and skills. A dean would later certify that students had learned them, and students would be able to take the certification to employers.

"In the final analysis, it is still grades that count," said FIU provost Mark Rosenberg said. "We will attempt to use this to complement them."

The idea is to follow a national trend and make Florida's universities accountable in much the same way Florida's public schools are punished or rewarded depending on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT.

Under a new law, 10 percent, or \$250-million, of the \$2.5-billion the universities will get from the state next year will be given only to schools that implement accountability measures that chart performance in a variety of areas. The Board of Governors already approved five such measures based on minority student enrollment, graduation rates, research dollars and national rankings.

Student performance was supposed to be another of those measures, but agreement couldn't be reached on how best to implement the idea. As a result, the new program for certifying student learning will not influence funding for individual schools.

Educational accountability has been around for more than a decade, but it became serious business a couple of years ago when education costs began to soar and budgets began to tighten. People want to make sure students are learning, not just graduating.

"The public, state legislators, governors were all asking what kind of bang are we getting for our buck," said Stephen Klein, senior research scientist at the RAND Corporation who is studying accountability. "This is something that is gaining strength."

Three dozen states and the federal government are researching accountability in higher education, but none agrees on the right way to measure and few, if any, have tied it to funding.

"We are interested in what the graduates look like and if they are meeting expectations," board member Castell Bryant said.

Under the Florida proposal, each student would be judged on knowledge, communication skills and critical thinking skills. Students would have to have an understanding of essential facts, terms and theories and be able to analyze them and explain them in the broader context.

School officials say the new proposal is better than a one-size-fits-all test, but some still worry the time and money spent on creating a specific set of measures for each major will take faculty away from research and teaching.

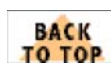
Universities already track dozens of measures, and could use existing measures or develop new ones. "We already assess them through a variety of ways," said FSU's Abele. "Why wouldn't you take the words of people who do this?"

Paul Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers and an accountability expert said he supports Florida's plan because it gives each school a coherent objective for every student and makes it clear that each school also has the responsibility for student success.

Clayton Solomon, board member and student body president at Florida International University, said the plan goes in the right direction, moving away from the testing and toward university decisionmaking.

"I think when it gets to the university, it will look different," he said. "The universities won't implement things that they don't need."

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