

National Forum on College-Level Learning
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Measuring Up, the national report card on higher education produced by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, in 2000 and 2002 graded each state on the effectiveness of its higher education system. It gave separate grades for preparation, participation, affordability, persistence and completion and benefits. But it was unable to assign a grade to the most important product of higher education, learning, because there are no nationwide, comparable data by which to assess the intellectual abilities of the college graduates in each state. Consequently, all states received an “incomplete” in this category.

Unprecedented numbers of Americans are enrolling in education and training beyond high school. They are well aware that college-level education and training has become a prerequisite for most jobs that support a middle-class standard of living. Policy leaders are equally aware that the demands of the global economy and of community and civic life now require that most Americans need more than a high-school diploma. As yet, however, little is known about the results—the extent to which Americans are actually acquiring the higher levels of knowledge and skills needed.

States have primary policy responsibility for education at all levels and have invested substantially in higher education. But they are uncertain about the benefits that that investment has yielded. Concerns regarding the lack of knowledge about college-level learning, which go back decades, led among other things to the assessment movement

in the mid-eighties. As a result of that movement, some states have assessment information about the graduates of their public systems of higher education on the institutional level; some have it state wide.

But few states, if any, know about the learning of their private-college graduates or what their college-educated citizens, regardless of where they were educated, know and can do. Moreover, the information states do have does not inform them about how well they are performing relative to their peers. As *Measuring Up 2000* made clear in the categories it was able to grade, it is only in the context of these kinds of comparisons that meaning can be assigned to results – that a state can know, for instance, whether information about the learning of its college-educated citizens is good or bad news.

In the early nineties, the National Education Goals provided another stimulus to a discussion of learning. In particular Goal 6—one objective of which was to increase the proportion of college graduates who could communicate effectively, think critically, and solve problems—suggested the need to know more about higher education’s results. But the next step in reaching Goal 6, to evaluate that learning in order to track progress, was never taken.

Almost a decade later, when *Measuring Up 2000* raised the college-level learning issue again, it seemed that it was the time to take that next step. To test the desirability and feasibility of doing so, in November 2001, the Pew-sponsored National Forum on College-Level Learning took place in Purchase, NY. At this meeting, a small group of

government, business, and higher-education leaders discussed whether nationally comparable information on college-level learning, collected systematically and regularly, could inform leaders and policy-makers about how each state's college-educated residents contribute to the educational capital that is available to further its civic and economic objectives, as well as how effectively the states' colleges and universities collectively contribute to that educational capital. Their conclusion was that this information would be invaluable and that we should proceed to collect it; they then suggested some strategies for doing so. With the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts, these strategies have subsequently been pursued.

The first step in assessing the knowledge and skills of college graduates was to develop a model for grading states, which was done with the help of several advisory committees. (A description of the model, an essay published in *Measuring Up 2002*, is available at <http://measuringup.highereducation.org/2002/articles/illustration.htm>.) That model was then tried out in part, using incomplete data from Kentucky: scores on existing graduate and professional school and licensure exams, supplemented by information from the National Adult Literacy Assessment and the National Survey of Student Engagement. The results were published in *Measuring Up 2002*. Since the model seemed promising, even working with incomplete information, the next step was to pilot a more comprehensive information-collection effort. The project, called the National Forum on College-Level Learning (<http://collegelevellearning.org>), took that next step with continued support from Pew.

To create and test a model for this broader strategy, five states (Kentucky, Illinois, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) have generated systematic information about the intellectual capacities of their college-educated citizens. In addition to collecting average scores on existing licensing and graduate-admissions exams, as Kentucky had done in the initial trial, in fall 2003 each state administered the following instruments to a random group of students on a representative set of campuses:

- the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, which asks community college students about their participation in activities that research suggests are associated with collegiate learning (information from the four-year counterpart, the National Survey of Student Engagement, is already available) ;
- for two-year college students, Work Keys, a series of tests focused on general intellectual skills needed in the workplace (applied mathematics, reading for information, locating information, and writing); and
- for four-year college students the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a performance-based assessment of college students' general intellectual skills in the domains of the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the workplace, plus a writing assessment.

The four-year colleges also asked their alumni to participate in the online Collegiate Results Survey, which asks college graduates how well prepared they are to function in a variety of real-life scenarios. Unfortunately, the number of respondents to the survey was insufficient. Also, although the project had planned to make use of information

generated by the federally administered National Assessment of Adult Literacy, originally scheduled for 2002, that information will not be available before 2005.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems is now analyzing the data generated by the various instruments and plugging it into the model. What the project has revealed about college-level learning in the five states and about the viability and usefulness of the model will be described in *Measuring Up 2004*. The project will also develop a how-to guide for states that want to proceed along the same lines. If enough other states do so, data will be available to grade states on college-level learning in *Measuring Up 2006*.