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Grand Valley State University

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2013

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Daniel Miedema, *Grand Valley State University*

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Operation Fast and [We're Serious]

By Daniel Miedema, GVSU Student, and Donald Mitchell, Jr., GVSU Faculty

Illustration By Lisa R. Tennant



Despite the increase for “top-down” standards in K-12 settings, standardization is in stark opposition of the values emphasized at a substantial number of 4-yr colleges and universities—those of a liberal arts education. These two distinct educational models lead to the cyclical question, “In what ways can secondary and postsecondary schools better align their educational practices to improve student success?”

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, this legislative act has ushered in heated debates among teachers, administrators, parents, and lawmakers because of its shortcomings and triumphs—and we use triumphs hesitantly—in K-12 education. President Obama campaigned on the platform reforming NCLB,

but President Obama and Secretary Duncan introduced NCLB’s “cousin, Race to the Top” (Wilson, 2013, p. 3) and Common Core Standards as change. The intention of this piece is not to reanalyze NCLB, but rather push thinking beyond NCLB and offer a fresh perspective on how the U.S. educational system might progress in the future. Consider this a call to action to inspire and promote real change in a profession that has been restrained by federal regulations, standardization, and modest funding.

The Issues

First, we would like to highlight the elephant in the room—how “top-down” standards in K-12 settings do not take into account the resources available to districts, identity markers such as socioeconomic status and race,

personality traits, or learning styles of an increasingly diverse and ever-changing student population. “Top-down” standards appear to be acceptable social justice issues. Consider the schools receiving Title I funding as determined by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). On the surface AYP holds teachers, administrators, and districts accountable; however, AYP ultimately ends up drying-up funding for already struggling schools and districts, eventually closing doors for good. Is it not ironic that the schools most in need of funding do not receive it because they are not meeting required federal standards?

Federal and State standards fail to account for the ever-increasing diversity of the United States. Furthermore, standardized outcomes fail to measure and develop critical thinking, creativity, work ethic, teamwork, ethical reasoning, civic engagement, and an appreciation and understanding of diverse people; this list includes numerous skills included in the “Essential Learning Outcomes” of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Grand Valley State University’s provost and vice president of academic affairs, Gayle Davis, recently highlighted the value of these skills and a liberal arts education in the 21st century. Davis wrote:

With exposure to a well-rounded, liberal education college and university students master not only a specific area of study, but they are also prepared to think, keep learning, communicate effectively, solve complex problems, create and innovate, lead, work collaboratively, and thereby contribute richly to their communities and their world. (para. 5)

In higher education, professors—who have autonomy and academic freedom—require students to demonstrate knowledge through writing, public speaking, research, and working through real-life scenarios. Additionally, higher education faculty and staff foster environments that assist students in moving from dualistic to multiplistic ways of thinking and knowing. Finally, and perhaps our most important point, the abrupt transition from “teaching [or learning] to the test” to the fluid culture of liberal arts leaves students underprepared for college. However, we

are optimistic that the U.S. educational system can and will change, and our recommendations for change include K-12 teacher agency and K-16 partnerships.

Recommendations

The standards used in K-12 education are not improving educational inequities and they leave teachers, particularly from underfunded districts, crippled in the classroom. For example, a teacher who is using one science book published in 1984 and forced to “teach to the test” is not going to compete with a teacher from a district that has smart labs in bathroom stalls. We call for empowering K-12 teachers by restoring agency; this is the first, and most critical, step in improving our educational system and broken educational pipeline.

Teacher agency gives the teacher with the one science book breathing room, and the flexibility to give students in the classroom the best education possible, despite the school’s zip code. Additionally, the teacher can better prepare students for postsecondary success through creative and innovative pedagogy. It is increasingly necessary to earn some type of postsecondary training or education to enter the workforce, which bring us to our second point. It is no longer an option for the interests, goals, and outcomes of K-12 schools and higher education institutions to remain divided; K-16 partnerships and state systems are long overdue.

Across multiple fields and disciplines, K-16 collaborations benefit both secondary and post-secondary participants. For example, Mesut, Runvand, and Fossum (2009) highlighted the benefits of a K-16 partnership between higher education and faculty and K-12 teachers that integrated technology into K-12 science lessons. Another example is educators using National History Day as an opportunity to teach students how to analyze primary sources and emphasize that K-12 teachers, higher education faculty and librarians, all have roles in helping students learn and achieve their educational and professional goals (Manuel, 2005). In a recent analysis of K-16 partnerships in California, Domina and Ruzek (2012) found that graduation rates rose for students in districts with effective

K-16 partnerships. Yet, the authors noted that there is no instant gratification when implementing K-16 partnerships. In most cases, it took more than 10 years of K-16 partnerships to see positive effects. Consequently, effective K-16 partnerships and state systems are needed right now.

In order to reach President Obama's 2020 goal of becoming the most college educated nation in the world amidst changing demographics, federal and state legislators have to work together to revitalize K-12 systems giving teachers agency, promote K-16 collaboration, and eventually establish K-16 systems. We contend these are lofty, yet realistic suggestions, to strengthen the educational pipeline. The U.S. must leave no child behind, yet race to "Operation Fast and [We're Serious]"; right now!

Authors Note

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Interesting Times

We are working in "interesting times." The education profession is under pressure to treat students as products and impose industrial quality control measures upon these products.

What has always seemed mind-boggling to me is that humans are so diverse in ability and interest that to attempt this mass quantification just seems patently ludicrous. Therefore, I hope the articles in this issue can help you step back from the fray and provide some

research-based critiques of current trends. Combine your hunch with the facts contained herein.

If you have a passion about an issue in education, please consider submitting a proposal to write for *Colleagues*. Please email me at pelonc@gvsu.edu with the title "Colleagues Submission."

Thank you for reading,

Clayton Pelon
Editor-in-Chief