A Progressive Case for Educational Standardization

By Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein

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How not to respond to the Spellings report.

In the responses from higher education to the 2006 report of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, one particular argument is made over and over again: that educational standardization of the sort implicitly called for in the report is neither possible nor desirable. According to this argument, the standardization entailed by the report's recommendations would destroy what makes American colleges and universities so great: their diversity, which can never be reduced to a common standard or measure of educational effectiveness. This, we think, is the wrong way to respond to the Spellings report and other similar critiques of higher education. Although the "s" word has become virtually synonymous among academics with pedagogical sterility, we want to make a progressive case for educational standardization by pointing out its unappreciated democratic potential.

The Spellings Approach

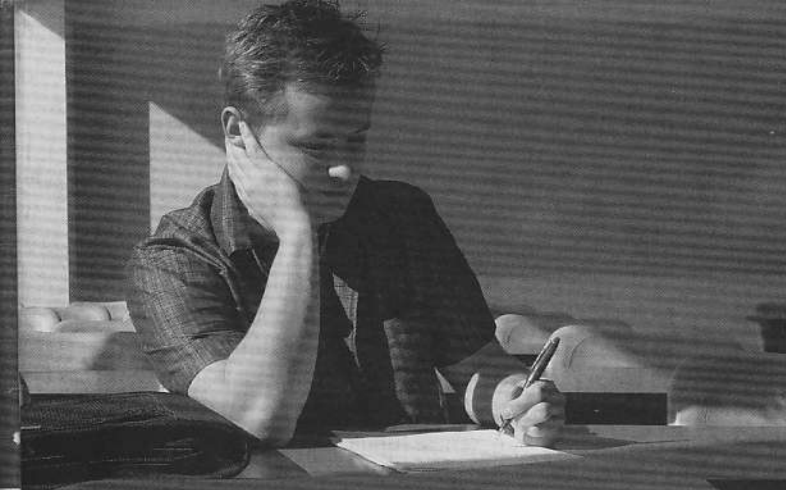
The Spellings report takes American higher education to task for what it describes as "a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms" to ensure that colleges help educate as broad a spectrum of students as possible. Specifically, it charges that the nation's colleges and universities have not done enough to align college and high school literacy instruction, leaving many high school students unprepared to go on to college. In addition, the report charges, many students who do go on to college never complete their degrees, partly because college tuition is so expensive, and partly because, in the commission's words, "most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed." Furthermore, the report complains, "there are disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills" required by today's competitive global knowledge economy and that "the consequences of these problems are most severe for students from low-income families and for racial and ethnic minorities."

The solution proposed by the report is essentially to increase the free-market competition between colleges, heightening the competitive incentives presumably now lagging on campuses to improve the quality of undergraduate education while simultaneously cutting costs. To this end, the report proposes that common standards be established for college-level work and that college students be tested to determine how much they are learning. Without such common standards and tests, the report insists, it is difficult for high schools to prepare their students for college and for students, parents, and taxpayers to compare the quality of education offered by one institution with that of another. Such consumers will be able to assess the return on their investment only if they have a reliable measure of how well different institutions are preparing students for today's marketplace.

Challenges to the Report

Several aspects of the report have drawn legitimate opposition from higher education. It is legitimate to fear that the tests the report proposes for higher education would resemble the intellectually dubious tests that now dominate American schools under the No Child Left Behind Act. It is also legitimate to fear that the report represents what Douglas C. Bennett, president of Earlham College, has called an attempt "to improve higher education on the cheap," that test results would be used to further defund already financially straitened colleges, that the common standards the report calls for would be applied in draconian ways without faculty consent, and that these standards would be developed by corporate managers and public officials with little knowledge of academic culture. Finally, it is legitimate, in our view, to be concerned about the free-market ideology underlying the report and the report's narrowly vocational vision of higher education.

But opposing the report on the grounds that American colleges are too diverse to be judged by any common standard strikes us as fundamentally misguided. Over and over, Spellings's critics insist that any attempt to apply such a common standard to colleges will inevitably result in a "one-size-fits-all" straightjacket that will destroy what is most distinctive about our institutions and the heterogeneous student populations that they serve. Thus in its response to the report, the AAUP complains that the commission seems oblivious to the harm that its "call for standardization . . . would inflict on the diverse missions of our colleges and universities." In another response to the report, Ronald Crutcher, the president of Wheaton College of Massachusetts, asserts that "it would be an enormous mistake to measure each institution by the same yardstick," since "research universities, community colleges,



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public institutions, and private liberal arts colleges have different missions and serve different populations." President Bennett of Earlham complains that the commission comes dangerously close to implying that a one-size-fits-all measure should be used: "The diversity of our institutions' missions and [of] our students calls for a diversity of measures—not some Washington-imposed single test."

Along similar lines, John Churchill, the secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, insists that the report's "demand for common measurement" threatens what has been the strength of American higher education, its "diversity" and "decentralization." And Jill Beck, the president of Lawrence University, argues that we should resist "'one-size-fits-all' test instruments," since "a fundamental strength of higher education is its remarkable institutional diversity." The commission's "misguided benchmarks," Beck continues, "have the effect of trying to homogenize American higher education."

Good Standardization Demystifies

We see four major problems with this anti-standardization position. First, the wholesale rejection of common standards fails to distinguish between good and bad forms of standardization. The standardized tests that characterize No Child Left Behind (following a long history of assembly-line approaches to schooling) have given standardization such a bad name that it has become too easy to reject standardization *as such* through a sort of guilt by association. As long as we equate all standardization with invidious, No Child Left Behind–style testing or the McDonaldization of American culture, we ignore the existence of other forms of standardization—environmental, health, and safety standards, to mention only a few obvious examples—that most of us readily accept or insist on. Indeed, some degree of standardization is essential not just for a good society, but for one that is accessible as well. How would you like it if, every time you used a computer, you had to learn an entirely new program or adjust to an entirely different keyboard configuration?

Second, the blanket rejection of educational standardization is undemocratic. To say that academic competence can't be judged by any standardized measure mystifies such competence by turning it into a matter of 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 generally accessible. 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 heterogeneous to be explained to you clearly."

Third, attacks on educational standardization simply mirror and reinforce American education's disconnected, fragmented status quo. American colleges today can indeed be proud of their impressive intellectual and disciplinary diversity. What is far less impressive, however, is their record in helping students negotiate that diversity by providing them with the skills needed to make sense of it. Given the discontinuities of the educational system (discontinuities that standardization would help counteract), students have no assurance that what they learn in one grade level, institution, discipline, or course will be recognized, rewarded, and built on in the next. A minority of high achievers manages to see through the curricular disconnection to detect the fundamental critical-thinking skills that underlie effective academic work in any course or discipline. The majority of students, however, have to resort to the familiar tactic of giving each successive instructor whatever he or she seems to want and then doing that again with the next instructor and the next. For these students, giving instructors whatever they want—assuming students can figure out what that is—replaces cumulative socialization into academic ways of thinking and writing. College thus becomes a series of disciplines and courses, each tending to present a different picture of what academic work looks like but few having the overarching status that a curriculum with greater standardization of basic intellectual practices would confer.

Last and most important, it is simply not true, as the anti-standardization argument has it, that colleges are so diverse that they share no common standards. Just because two people, for example, don't share an interest in baseball or cooking, it does not follow that they don't have other things in common—or that, just because several colleges have different types of faculties or serve different student populations, they can share no common pedagogical goals. A marketing instructor at a community college, a biblical studies instructor at a church-affiliated college, and a feminist literature instructor at an Ivy League research university would presumably differ radically in their disciplinary expertise, their intellectual outlooks, and the students they teach, but it would be surprising if there were not a great deal of common ground in what they regard as acceptable college-level work. At the end of the day, these instructors would probably agree—or *should*

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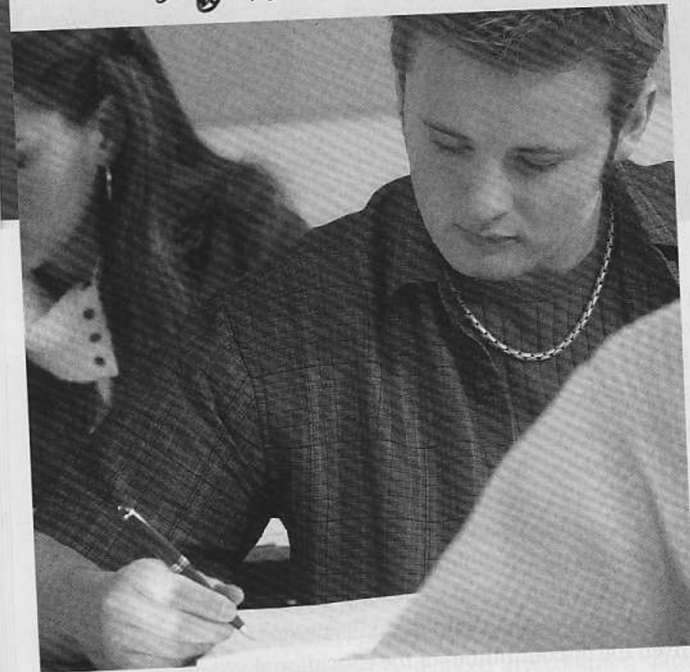

Spellings's critics, however, argue that such agreement is illusory. Thus in his response to the report, Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that though educators may seem to agree on the importance of critical thinking as a standard for college-level work, the term is used to mean so many different things that its usefulness as a standard is undermined. As Shulman puts it, "common educational goals like 'critical thinking' . . . are often invoked for quite different achievements. . . . No single set of measures can do justice to all those variations." Like Spellings's other critics mentioned above, Shulman demands that colleges be free to take "many different approaches to higher education" rather than being forced to converge "on the 'one best system.'"

But we need go no further than Shulman's own prose—or that of other Spellings critics—for an example of the critical-thinking skills whose commonality he denies. Even as Shulman *claims* that the concept of critical thinking is hopelessly diffuse, his writing, like that of Spellings's other critics, *shows* that it involves such basic moves as identifying and accurately summarizing views to which one wants to respond; selecting, framing, and explaining quotations; exploring claims and explaining their implications; making connections to similar or related claims; offering a cogent argument of one's own; moving between one's own argument and the view to which one is responding without confusing readers; citing evidence and showing how it supports one's own argument and not competing ones; and anticipating and answering counterarguments.

These fundamentals—whose ubiquity in the intellectual world Shulman denies—are precisely those that most students fail to learn. And in our view, students will go on failing to learn these fundamentals unless they are standardized across all domains and levels—that is, are represented with enough redundancy, consistency, and transparency that students can recognize them *as* fundamentals rather than as one set of arbitrary preferences competing for their attention among many.

INSTEAD OF DEFENSIVELY INSISTING ON OUR IRREDUCIBLE DIVERSITY, WE IN HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD BE OPENING UP DEBATES ON CAMPUSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY OVER WHETHER THERE ARE COMMON PRACTICES THAT UNDERLIE THAT DIVERSITY.

agree—that college-educated students, regardless of their background or major, should be critical thinkers, meaning that, at a minimum, they should be able to read a college-level text, offer a pertinent summary of its central claim, and make a relevant response, whether by agreeing with it, complicating its claims, or offering a critique. Furthermore, though these instructors might expect students at different institutions to carry out these skills with varying degrees of sophistication, they would still probably agree that any institution that persisted in graduating large numbers of students deficient in these basic critical-thinking skills should be asked to figure out how to do its job better.

Conclusion

In sum, then, there has to be a better way to respond to the Spellings report than to reject the idea of common standards. Instead of defensively insisting on our irreducible diversity, we in higher education should be opening up debates on campuses across the country over whether there are common practices that underlie that diversity. If a consensus emerges that there are, as with good leadership we think it will, we should then work collectively—with the full participation of college faculties—to identify and standardize those practices so that students can more readily master them. Engaging in this standardization process is important, we think, not just because without it No Child Left Behind–style versions of standardization may be imposed on us unwillingly, but because intelligent standardization is critical to our mission of democratic education, which entails being as explicit as possible about the key moves of academic and public-sphere literacy and helping as many students as we can to master them. In our view, higher education does need common standards, even if the Spellings Commission says it does.

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Standardizing Critical Thinking

But how can the fundamental moves of critical thinking be standardized—that is, represented with enough consistency and redundancy across the curriculum that all students, not just the elite few, can see these moves as fundamental? And how can this be done in a way that allows the educational results to be assessed and measured?

The first step is to identify and name these fundamentals in terms that are simple and familiar enough to be grasped and retained by the vast majority of students as they move from course to course but comprehensive enough to do justice to the obvious complexity and heterogeneity of academic practices. Our candidate for such a formulation, as we have suggested, is the dialectical practice of summary and response. On the one hand, summarizing and responding is a familiar argumentative skill that students have practiced virtually every day since childhood ("But you said if I cleaned up my room tonight I could go out with my friends"). As we see it, summary and response gets as close as any formulation can to the pervasive practice of making claims not out of the blue, but as responses to others. On the other hand, summarizing and responding encompasses all the most advanced academic skills, including (in addition to those listed in our article) close reading, interpretation, and analysis; working with factual, statistical, and textual forms of evidence; and even the ethical ability to entertain opposing perspectives, putting ourselves in the shoes of those who disagree with us. And though this summary-response practice is deployed in different ways in different academic disciplines, there is no discipline that does not require that we enter a conversation, stating our views not in a vacuum but as a response to what others in the field have said or might say.

Describing this transdisciplinary practice in more polemical terms, the influential rhetoric and composition specialist David Bartholomae observes that "the best student writing works against a conventional point of view. . . . The more successful writers set themselves . . . against what they defined as some more naive way of talking about their subject—against 'those who think that . . .'—or against earlier, more naive versions of themselves—'once I thought that.'"

If this view is right—that the best student writing engages (challenges or adds to) other perspectives—then why withhold this crucial information from students? Why not be explicit about this key to academic success?

But this first step—highlighting summary-response across the grades, disciplines, and courses—is not enough. A second step is needed in which we go beyond simply explaining that engaging others is the central move of academic culture, but provide training devices—concrete templates or scaffoldings—that enable students to enact this move in their writing.

Bartholomae provides an example of such a training heuristic when he recalls one of his undergraduate literature teachers suggesting that, whenever he was stuck for something to say in his writing, he try out the following "machine": "While most readers of _________ have said _________, a close and careful reading shows that _________." A scaffolding like this could help students unsure about the basic shape of academic discourse make a claim and indicate why that claim matters by showing what alternate claim it is correcting, supplementing, complicating, or otherwise in dialogue with. If for "most readers" we substitute "analysts of these statistics" (or "of these economic data" or "of these sociological patterns"), we can see how this scaffolding can be adapted to virtually any discipline.

Following Bartholomae's lead, we have published a textbook, *"They Say/I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, in which we provide templates like the following that prompt students to engage dialectically with the views of other thinkers and writers:

> In recent discussions of _________, a controversial issue has been whether _________. On the one hand, some argue that _________. From this perspective, _________. On the other hand, however, others argue that _________. In the words of one of this view's main proponents, "_________." According to this view, _________. In sum, then, the issue is whether _________ or _________.
>
> My own view is that _________. Though I concede that _________, I still maintain that _________. For example, _________. Though some might object that _________, I reply that _________. The issue is important because _________.

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At first glance, it is easy to dismiss such formulaic devices for being too mechanical and prescriptive. But these complaints ignore the fact that such models can be modified to meet the needs of particular arguments, voices, audiences, and contexts. The complaints also ignore the fact that, while experienced writers unconsciously absorb these models through their reading, most students do not. Most students will never make a move like "my point is not _________, but _________" or "at this point you may object that _________" unless given explicit prompts for doing so.

Indeed, there is even reason to believe that it is not just humble undergraduates but graduate students and faculty members as well who need explicit help making these key academic moves. In a recent textbook addressed to thesis and dissertation writers across the academic disciplines, Irene L. Clark offers the following formulas for entering academic conversations: "Some scholars who write about this topic say _________. Other scholars who write about this topic disagree. They say _________. My own idea about this topic is _________."

Along similar lines, the National Academy of Education requires applicants for its postdoctoral fellowship to complete the following template in fifty words or fewer: "Most scholars in the field now believe . . . ; as a result of my study. . . ."

Similarly, the editors of the leading science journal *Nature* feel obliged to provide prospective contributors with writing guidelines that follow a classic summary-response format, requiring that all submissions open with a clear declaration not just of the authors' central findings, but of how those findings compare with "previous knowledge." If, as these examples suggest, even those at the highest reaches of academe need explicit help making the standard moves of academic critical literacy, think how much more struggling undergraduate and high school students need it.

In introducing standardized templates like these, teachers need not ignore the often wide differences in students' cultural backgrounds and learning styles. Middle-class students, for instance, often resist becoming the type of intellectual critic that the templates assume, while some women and minority students resist the contentiously argumentative persona that the templates might seem to require. These in fact are excellent topics for classroom discussion and debate. But in our view, the skills modeled by these templates can only empower students of all backgrounds, even in those discussions in which the merits of such templates (and the skills they model) are being weighed and debated.

This standardized approach can also help meet one of the key challenges of outcomes assessment: avoiding what might be called the laundry-list trap, in which so many different assessment criteria are offered that assessment ends up mirroring the fragmented academic curriculum itself and students come away with no solid grasp of academic literacy's basic shape. This trap can be avoided by developing exit essays—and gearing curricula and programs around them—that ask students to enter academic conversations. For example, at the completion of their college careers, students could be asked, as they are at California State University–Northridge, to write essays based on an article of current interest. Students would identify the text's basic arguments, defend their own position, and, ideally, imagine opposing perspectives. Or, at the completion of their majors, students might write exit exams modeled on templates like the following:

- Before I began my major in _________, I, probably like most other people, assumed that _________. But having studied the field, I now see that it's far more complicated, primarily because _________.
- One school of thought in the field of _________ suggests that _________. Skeptics, however, might object that _________. My own view is that _________.

At the same time that assessment essays like these would test students' critical-thinking skills, they would also test traditional skills like familiarity with the basic knowledge of the field, its key concepts and terms, and how its different schools of thought can be challenged and put into dialogue.

Is this a one-size-fits-all approach? Yes. And that's precisely why we think it has a chance to work, especially if it can be implemented democratically, with a high degree of faculty buy-in. The more we proliferate multiple objectives and standards, the less chance there is that large numbers of students—or teachers, for that matter—will assimilate any of them. Conversely, the more we standardize—that is, collectively streamline, simplify, and reinforce—what we want students to learn, the more chance we have of making academic critical literacy available on a mass democratic scale.