

## A PROGRESSIVE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: HOW NOT TO RESPOND TO CALLS FOR COMMON STANDARDS

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IN THE RESPONSES FROM HIGHER education to the “Spellings Report,” the 2006 Commission report to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, one particular argument was made over and over again: that educational standardization of the sort implicitly called for in the Report—and by others in the Standards Movement—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 great: their irreducible diversity, which can never be reduced to a common standard or measure of educational effectiveness. And today, as the call for common standards that marked Spellings’ tenure under the Bush administration has now been embraced rather than rejected by President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who is calling for national “college readiness standards,” many in the education world continue to oppose common standards as a threat to educational diversity.

This, we will argue, is the wrong way to respond to calls for common educational standards, particularly in the realm of higher education. Although the “S” word has become virtually synonymous among most academics with pedagogical sterility, we want to make a progressive case for educational standardization by pointing out its unappreciated democratic potential.

The Spellings Report took American higher education to task for what it described as “a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms” to ensure that colleges help educate as broad a spectrum of students as possible. Specifically, it charged that the nation’s colleges and universities had 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 charged, many students who do go on to college never complete their degrees, partly because college tuition is so expensive, but also partly because, in the Commission’s words, “most colleges and universities don’t accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed” (United States, x). Furthermore, the Report complained, “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” (vii).

The solution proposed by the Report was 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 proposed 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 insisted, it would be 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 college with that of another. Such consumers would be able to assess the return on their investment only if they had a reliable measure of how well different institutions are preparing students to succeed outside college.

A number of aspects of the Report did draw legitimate opposition from higher education. It was and still is legitimate, we think, to fear that the tests the Report proposed for higher education would end up resembling the intellectually dubious tests that still dominate American schools under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It is also legitimate to fear that the Report represented what Douglas C. Bennett, President of Earlham College, called an attempt “to improve higher education on the cheap” (1), that test results would be used to further defund already financially straightened 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 its narrowly vocational vision of higher education.

But opposing the Spellings Report on the grounds that American colleges are too diverse to be judged by any common standard strikes us as unduly defensive and unreflective. Over and over Spellings’ critics insisted that any attempt to apply such a common standard to colleges will inevitably result in a “one-size-fits-all” straitjacket 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 American Association of University Professors complained that the Commission seemed oblivious to the harm that its “call for standardization . . . would inflict on the diverse missions of our colleges and universities” (4). In another response to the Report, Ronald Crutcher, the President of Wheaton College of Massachusetts, asserted that “it would be an enormous mistake to measure each institution by the same yardstick,” since “research universities, community colleges, public institutions and private liberal arts colleges have different missions and serve different populations” (2-3). President Bennett of Earlham complained 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 our students calls for a diversity of measures—not some Washington-imposed single test. (1)

Along similar lines, John Churchill, the Secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, insisted that the Report's "demand for common measurement" threatens what has been the strength of American higher education, its "diversity" and "decentralization" (2). And Jill Beck, the President of Lawrence College, argued 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 continued, "have the effect of trying to homogenize American higher education" (3).

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 NCLB (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, NCLB-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. In the wake of the 2010 British Petroleum oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, it is hard not to see national and even international standards as a good thing for the cause of justice and human welfare.

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—and here we agree with Spellings—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 cur-

ricular disconnection to detect the fundamental critical thinking skills that underlie effective academic work in any course or discipline. The majority, however, must 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 in the first place—replaces cumulative socialization into academic ways of thinking and writing. College thus becomes a sequence 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 more standardized curriculum would confer. Even when some courses *do* have such an overarching status, as in first-year composition and introductory courses, there is often little uniformity between such courses, or instructors of other courses don't refer to these courses or even know what is going on in them.

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 instance, don't share an interest in baseball or cooking, it does not follow that they don't have other things in common. Nor does it follow that, 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* 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 a relevant response, whether to agree with it, to complicate its claims, or to offer a critique. Furthermore, though these instructors might expect students at different types of 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 fundamental critical thinking skills should be asked to regroup and figure out how to do its job better.

Spellings' critics insisted, however, that such apparent agreement is illusory. Thus in his response to the Report, Lee Shulman, then-President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argued 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 put 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" (1). Like Spellings' other critics mentioned above, Shulman demanded that colleges be free to take "many different approaches to higher education"

rather than being forced to converge “on the ‘one best system’” (1).

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 denied. Even as Shulman *claimed* that the concept of critical thinking is hopelessly diffuse, his writing, like that of Spellings’ other critics, *showed* that it involves such basic moves as:

- Locating a controversial issue or problem;
- Accurately summarizing the views of others;
- Framing and explaining quotations;
- Offering one’s own argument and explaining why it matters;
- Moving between one’s own position and the one being responded to without confusing readers;
- Weighing evidence;
- Anticipating counterarguments;
- Drawing conclusions.

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 instructor’s arbitrary preferences competing for their attention among many.

In sum, then, there has to be a better way to respond to the call for common standards in higher education than defensively insisting on our irreducible diversity. Instead, 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 acquire them. Engaging in this standardization process is important, we think, not just because, without it, NCLB-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 success, and helping as many students as we can to master them. In our view, higher education *does* need common standards, even if some of those calling for the standards have a political agenda many of us disagree with.

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, in our view, 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 complexity and heterogeneity of academic practices. Our candidate for such a formulation, as we have already suggested, is the 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 (e.g., “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 universally human call-and-response practice of making claims not out of the blue, but as responses to others. On the other hand, summarizing and responding encompasses all of the most advanced academic skills, including (in addition to those listed earlier) 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 Shulman’s comments demonstrated above) 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 naïve way of talking about their subject—against “those who think that ...”—or against earlier, more naïve versions of themselves—“once I thought that.” (641)

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 responding to others is the central move of academic culture, and 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 teachers once suggesting to him 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 \_\_\_\_\_. (641)

For students unsure about the basic shape of academic discourse, a scaffolding like this could help them make a claim and indicate why that claim matters by

showing what alternate claim it is correcting, supplementing, complicating, or otherwise is in dialogue with.

Following Bartholomae's lead, we have published a textbook, "*They Say*"/"*I Say*", 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 \_\_\_\_\_.

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 are open to improvisation. These complaints also ignore the fact that, while experienced writers unconsciously absorb models like this through their reading, most students do not. Most students will never make a move like "My point is not \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_," or even "I agree (or disagree) because \_\_\_\_\_" 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 textbook addressed to graduate student writers across the academic disciplines, John Swales and Christine Feak explain that to establish the importance of their own claims, writers must "indicate the gap in previous research" by "reviewing previous research" (244). In a textbook addressed to thesis and dissertation writers, 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 \_\_\_\_\_. (20-21)

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 ..." (National Academy of Education).

Likewise, 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" (Nature Publishing Group). 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.

Dialectical templates like these 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, so overwhelming students that they come away with no solid grasp of academic literacy's basic shape. This trap can be avoided by developing exit examinations—and gearing courses and programs around them—that ask students to enter the academic conversation. For example, at the completion of any course or program of study, students could be asked to compose exit essays, using templates like the following that reveal the extent to which they have learned to frame and then enter a conversation in their field:

Before I began my major in \_\_\_\_\_, I, probably like most people, assumed that \_\_\_\_\_. But having studied the field, I now see that it's far more complicated, primarily because \_\_\_\_\_.

In contrast to some researchers in the field of \_\_\_\_\_ who suggest \_\_\_\_\_, other researchers suggest \_\_\_\_\_. My own view is that \_\_\_\_\_.

Though assessment templates like these might look disarmingly simple, completing them would actually require students to command a full range of academic competencies, from demonstrating familiarity with basic information in the field and knowledge of its key terms, concepts, and controversies to the ability to manage basic writing mechanics.

Is this, then, 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. For 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 it is we want students to learn the more chance we have of making academic critical literacy available on a mass democratic scale.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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