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Prior Learning Assessment and Competency-Based Education

The AAUP is greatly concerned about the growth of two strategies of doubtful value that are being promoted primarily as pathways to generate lower quality degrees for more students at institutions of higher education across the country.

These two strategies are somewhat related. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is designed to grant credit for college courses to students for information or skills they already possess. It can take a wide variety of approaches, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests or the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTE) exams but the goal remains the same: to have a standardized exam replace faculty and course work.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) takes this idea and proposes it more broadly, designing whole programs divorced from the classroom and faculty. It promotes itself as a way to allow students to learn on their own and prove what they know through tests rather than through coursework.

We do not object to exams to determine competency in areas where they are historically common place, most notably in technical programs and some health care fields. The problem that is developing is the drive to push standardized exams into fields where they are not an adequate measure of learning – the arts, the liberal arts, social sciences, and some areas of science.

At one level, there is a high degree of unfairness. Suppose there is a standardized exam that exists for an upper level course on the Vietnam War (there is just such an exam provided by DANTE). Someone could take the exam, pass it, and get the same credit as someone who actually took the course, did the reading, took the exams and quizzes, wrote a term paper, and discussed many issues with the professor and his/her fellow students. Clearly, the person who took the course would most likely have gained a much more sophisticated understanding of the war but on paper it would appear the same as the person who spent a couple of hours taking an exam. The result is a cheapening of the degree and of the college experience for the individual.

Much of this drive for PLA and CBE is being driven by the organization, Complete College America, funded primarily by the private Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation. Corporations, like Pearson, who are supporting this drive see it as a way to turn public higher education into a profit center for their own gain. Advocates believe this approach could get more people more credentials, especially those who have started but not completed college. This is a fundamental misreading of the situation. Most students who don't complete their degrees fail to do so because of financial problems. Instead of inventing new gimmicks, these organizations and members of Congress should advocate for the restoration of the financial support that has been taken away from our colleges and universities. They should advocate, at both federal and state levels, for more grants to low-income students and a lower-cost loan program. Finally, they should push our higher ed administrations to devote most of their financial resources to the instructional missions to produce lower tuition and more full-time faculty.

Nationwide, on average, only about 24 percent of our four-year public university budgets pay for instruction, according to the national Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) reports.

Nevertheless, the Department of Education and some members of Congress have embraced these models, especially CBE. Last week, Rep. Jared Polis (D-CO) introduced HR 2859 which would waive rules and regulations to allow the Department of Education to fund experiments with CBE. **We are opposed to HR 2859.** It would encourage the expansion of competency-based education into inappropriate areas in the curriculum. At best, expanded beyond its traditional role, CBE is an incompetent educational model. It seeks to replace faculty and education with testing. In doing so, it would create a two-tiered educational system. One filled with less expensive tests and less opportunity to learn for our low income students, while wealthy students could take advantage of a traditional high-quality education. It does not seem to us that the federal government should be promoting more inequality in higher education.

These radical changes are being driven by organizations that know little about higher education and are not practitioners or experts in the field. We at the AAUP know what the problems are in higher education that are driving up costs (administrative bloat, grandiose spending on construction, out-of-control spending on athletics, and reductions in state funding) and it is the cost of higher education that is the biggest barrier to degree completion. The AAUP, by contrast, has for a century worked to improve higher education and maintain standards of excellence, including shared governance and academic freedom. And the AAUP is led by faculty who have devoted their careers to higher education: they are the experts. Rather than more tinkering with the academic side, we need a sharp focus on the enormous sums misspent by administrations nationwide on areas that are peripheral to the academic mission.

We ask that you help us monitor this situation, notify DOE that you share our concerns about this strategy, and that you join us in defending a system of higher education that is the envy of the world. We would like to have you work to create a committee to examine this new direction taken by the DOE that includes AAUP members and report on the effect this is having on institutions of higher education and student success. We would also like incentives proposed to encourage colleges and universities to redirect funds toward the academic mission to better serve our students.