



An “Uncommon” View of the Common Core

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Last fall, David T. Conley (CEO of the Educational Policy Improvement Center) and I collaborated on a white paper for Lumina Foundation comparing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for pre-college education with college-level standards proposed by the Foundation’s *Degree Qualifications Profile* (DQP). In the paper, we propose “a path” for “connecting K-12 and higher education.”

There is much to commend in both the CCSS and the DQP. They share the perspective that more intentional teaching and learning, through which all involved are more aware of and intent on achieving clearly defined educational outcomes, will produce better results. But we also found that each initiative lacks awareness of the other. And that is a problem. Having been developed with little attention to the expectations of post-secondary educators, the CCSS, we suggest, “define necessary but not sufficient knowledge and skills for college readiness.” Similarly, because the DQP gives little consideration to the preparedness of students for college study, it is “insufficiently informative to high school students readying themselves for postsecondary studies.” We concluded that “a comprehensive strategy to align and unite the two could lead toward more common language and mutual understanding of what it means to be fully ready to succeed in college.”

What are the prospects for the recommended rapprochement? If the history of educational reform in the U.S. is indicative, they are not bright. P-12 education and higher education remain today what they have been for many decades, vast archipelagos with little in the way of transport or communication between them. High school teachers rarely have the opportunity to compare notes with their college and university colleagues. Where are the forums that bring together college deans and school principals? School superintendents may encounter college presidents at Rotary Club meetings, but what are the chances that they will sit down to discuss serious issues of college preparedness? Even the vocabularies differ. For the chair of a college department of English, increased “retention,” the percentage of freshmen returning for their sophomore year, represents an institutional priority. For a high school English teacher, “retention,” a decision not to promote a student from one grade level to the next, signifies a profound disappointment for all concerned.

The issue Dr. Conley and I address is thus larger than the alignment of two substantive and influential documents. What is needed is a two stage process to bridge these two islands. The process we propose would focus first on greater awareness of the CCSS among college educators and of the DQP among high school teachers and administrators. There is much that might be gained if each group were to make practical use of these documents in their present form. We then propose a more ambitious second stage, one in which the principals involved in the CCSS and DQP projects would work together to create greater synergy between the two.

Viewpoint

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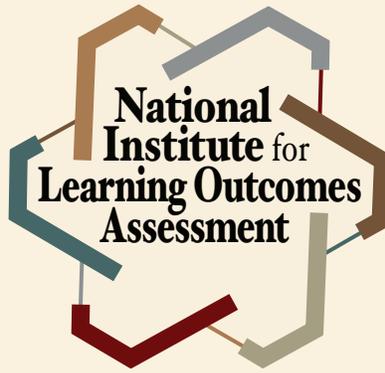
Behind these recommendations lie two assumptions regarding educational outcomes. The first is implicit in both the CCSS and the DQP: both high school and college teachers must more effectively encourage and assure their students' learning if they share a focus on outcomes—on defining them, expressing them in terms useful to their students, measuring their accomplishment, and using what they learn thereby to teach even more effectively. But the second may be no less important. It is that both high school and college teachers must develop a broader view of outcomes. Beyond their commitment to effective learning in their assigned courses, the most effective teachers will be those who seek and who track the overall success of their students.

For high school teachers, this attention to student success beyond the walls of their respective classrooms will include awareness of the curriculum as a whole, attentiveness to graduation and drop-out rates, and, above all, interest in how well their students fare. Such a teacher will find the DQP essential to acquainting college-bound students with expectations they face in applying for and succeeding in college.

For college faculty, a broader view of outcomes will look in two directions. First, as the DQP makes clear, professors must understand that their classrooms are not islands, but neighborhoods in a larger community. In order to contribute to degree-level outcomes defined by (and that in turn define) their institutions, they must understand them and make an explicit effort to address them. But professors genuinely committed to student success will pay attention also to student preparedness, and that means learning about the CCSS, discussing them with high school teachers, and examining whether college requirements show awareness of what high schools accomplish. The connection between these two perspectives is obvious: only those students who present evidence of adequate preparation when entering college are likely to achieve the outcomes proposed by the DQP.

Together, the CCSS and the DQP offer a platform for serious and productive discussions among K-12 and post-secondary educators. But the platform must be used to do something that neither the CCSS nor the DQP can accomplish alone—provide a coherent path for a nation seeking to have at least 60% of its adult population earn a high quality postsecondary credential.

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