

Measuring Academic Program Performance and Accountability by Student Achievement and Progress

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The A+ Plan for grading K-12 public schools has enjoyed much success in its first year. This new method of requiring accountability of our public schools has motivated teachers, students, and parents to ensure that our schools live up to their full potential. By focusing on a clear goal student learning Florida's K- 12 schools have been able to direct energy and resources to effectively produce measurable results. Florida's public university programs should be rated in a similar fashion as part of a comprehensive A+ plan for Florida. We can make a quality Florida University System even better, just as we have already improved our K-12 schools.

Through the A+ plan, many teachers, principals, and school boards in Florida have been energized and inspired to make changes in teaching instruction, particularly in some of the low-performing schools. Additional and different resources have been provided to improve student performance. Competition has resulted in increased funding through incentive and improvement dollars. Most importantly, the A+ plan has fostered community spirit and support to help the poor performing schools and to recognize the high achieving ones.

The State University System has already developed methods to rate and grade professors and college students. Why can't we develop standards to rate university academic programs based upon student achievement and progress? Evaluation and ratings often produce dramatic improvements and necessary changes.

Though resisted initially, the A+ plan is now being applauded throughout the state. As one superintendent of a large urban school district stated, "The A+ legislation has certainly caused an unprecedented focus on student achievement." In fact, since the plan was enacted in 1999, there have been dramatic improvements in the public schools throughout Florida. Originally, 78 schools received a grade of F. In one year, all of those schools moved up at least one letter grade. In 1999, only 44% of students at F schools passed the FCAT in writing. After the implementation of the A+ plan, 81% of students at these schools passed, an increase of 37% in only one year.

Evidenced by the success of the A+ plan, Florida universities can use a similar grading system as a method to encourage action within their own programs to strive to meet performance goals. By assigning a grade or number to university programs and monitoring the changes in the programs' grades over time, universities can use that information to improve teaching and to gain additional resources based upon student performance. As a further benefit, these data will be available to show policy makers and the public whether improvement is occurring in these state funded educational programs. It will also aid students in making important choices about where they attend college.

To achieve that end, grades should be assigned to programs among similar institutions using similar measures. A rating system based on common standards would naturally foster competition for excellence among university programs, just as it has in our K- 12 schools.

We know that common standards can be developed for university-level programs. The Florida College-Level Academic Skills Test ("CLAST") is one current method by which learning is measured and performance compared. Students who have earned at least 18 hours of college credit are required to take the CLAST exam or, through alternate methods, secure an exemption in order to earn an Associate of Arts Degree. This is a clear example of the use of a test to measure the knowledge gained over a specific period of time in the fields of reading and math. These results can then be compared from university to university. According to the Student Attainment of College-Level Academic Skills in Florida in 1997-98, which is published by the Florida Department of Education, "The figures and tables. . . can be used to monitor trends, to evaluate the effects of curricular changes, and to compare institutional performance with statewide community college and university norms and the performance of 'sister' institutions."

Ranking of colleges and universities already occurs on the national level to some extent. A current external ranking source is U.S. News and World Report, which ranks colleges and universities around the nation. As part of its scoring, data are gathered from and about each school in 16 areas related to academic excellence. This ranking system is not perfect, but it is a starting point. A ranking system similar to the A+ plan for K-12 schools would be more effective.

One of the universities in the top tier of the U.S. News and World Report rankings is Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Alverno is currently measuring the success of all of their programs through an "ability based curriculum" that centers around eight abilities which serve as standards that programs, faculty, and students are expected to meet. Alverno College's unprecedented success is evidence that rating cannot only be done, but can be used to improve the quality of higher education.

The Florida Board of Regents recently established accountability measures in order to monitor university progress. These measures are a good beginning. However, the majority of these performance indicators are quantitative measures. For example, those measures include the number of degrees granted, diversity of students, graduation rates, retention rates, cost per student, and number of accredited programs. Student learning,

however, is currently not measured. Some of the current quantitative measures could be used while incorporating qualitative measures to gauge learning.

Universities, particularly at the undergraduate level, must begin to assess the quality of their programs in an understandable and clear way. It is imperative that universities can show that a student's knowledge is much greater upon leaving an institution than when he or she entered. University academic programs must be held accountable for not only teaching but for making sure that what is being taught is actually learned. Universities should also be held partially accountable for making sure their students are employed in their chosen field and successful once employed. For instance, in most undergraduate courses there should be an expected level of knowledge gained, and it should be tested. The student scores received on a uniform test in each basic course given at all universities would be one criterion for measuring student achievement and success. This test would not necessarily be a factor in a student's grade in the course. Other factors to grade a program could include peer reviews of programs, graduation rates, and employment in the chosen field of study at the time of graduation. We could then apply a grade or score to each program, which would be a great aid in the student decision-making process.

With the influx of additional state funding for program enhancements designed to increase program quality, Florida must be able to show that the additional money is making a positive difference in students' education. Moreover, measuring knowledge is imperative if Florida universities want to compete with the proliferation of Internet based education and the increased emphasis on competency-based learning as opposed to time-based learning.

It is time for Florida to rate its own university programs using standards developed with the input of administrators, faculty and students. Program ratings, coupled with a meaningful reward system, will encourage academic accountability.

Florida now has the opportunity to lead the nation in measuring university education. With the creation of an understandable qualitative review system for university programs, and its inevitable success, student learning will rightfully be the main priority and focus among Florida universities.

About the Author

Steven J. Uhlfelder is a partner in Holland & Knight in its Tallahassee office and practices in the administrative and governmental law area. He is Chair of the Holland & Knight Charitable Foundation.

Mr. Uhlfelder has distinguished himself in public service to the state of Florida. He is a member of the Florida Board of Regents and its immediate past Chairman. He also served as a member of the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, General Counsel for the Florida Department of Community Affairs and Special Counsel to the Governor.

As Executive Director of the state's first mandated Constitution Revision Commission, Uhlfelder helped guide a review of the Florida Constitution.

As Chairman of the Florida Children's Coalition he led the successful effort to obtain \$23 million for the initial funding of the state's pre-K program. He was recognized by the *Tallahassee Democrat* as Volunteer of the Year in 1990. (For the past 10 years, Steve has been a tutor and mentor in the public schools in Leon County.) He served as a Florida Public Affairs Chairman for the American Heart Association. He was recently named by Governor Jeb Bush to Co-chair the Governor's Mentoring Initiative, an effort to recruit thousands of volunteers to work with Florida's at-risk children.

Mr. Uhlfelder is admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of Florida and the United States District Courts for the Northern District of Florida. He served as Chairman of the First District Court of Appeal Nominating Commission and is a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

Mr. Uhlfelder is a former member of the American Bar Association's House of Delegates and is the former Chair of the ABA's Standing Committee on Election Law. In addition, Mr. Uhlfelder served on the Board of Governors of the Florida Bar for four years.

Mr. Uhlfelder is the author of numerous articles, including "The 1978 Constitution Revision Commission: Florida's Blueprint for Change," 18 *Nova Law Review* 1489, 1994; "A Decade of Election Law Reform," 10 *New York University Review of Law*, 1981; and "Machinery of Constitution Revision," 6 *Florida State University Law Review* 575, 1978.

Mr. Uhlfelder earned his B.S.B.A. in 1968 from the University of Florida and his J.D. in 1971 from the University of Florida, where he was a member of the Florida Blue Key and President of the Student Body.

A native Floridian, Steven Uhlfelder is married to Mifflin Hollyday Uhlfelder. They live in Tallahassee and have two children, Daniel and Ali.

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