

Members of the board:

I'm Betty Travis, chair of the System Faculty Advisory Council and a Professor in the Division of Mathematics and Statistics at UT San Antonio.

Thank you for the invitation and this opportunity to speak with you today concerning student assessment of learning.

I'd like to begin by stating that we support assessment and accountability at all levels, beginning with the regular and systematic assessment of our students up to and including the accountability of faculty and administrators for the education of these students. We regularly test our students and many of us are now using additional assessment instruments, such as student portfolios, major projects, and student presentations, believing that testing as the single source of information about student learning is woefully inadequate.

Although we favor regular and systematic assessment, we have identified several challenges and concerns we'd like to share with you today:

The Board has vested in the faculty authority over the curriculum. Our responsibility as university faculty is to create new knowledge and to share that knowledge through our teaching-in essence, to determine the curriculum. Who better to decide what should be taught in a biology class than a faculty researcher who made contributions to the human genome project? Who better to decide what the curriculum of calculus should be than one of our world-famous mathematicians? Who better to decide what to teach in a writing class than a winner of the Pulitzer Prize? We feel that we are in the best position to determine the learning needs of our students,

A major challenge for all of us, and I'll admit, a particular concern for us, is the testing element for student learning, especially the possibility of standardized tests. Part of our authority over the curriculum includes the responsibility to experiment with content and the delivery of instruction. We want the cutting-edge research done by our faculty included in our instruction; something that could be hampered by structured tests and a time-delay between development and delivery of new tests. I imagine that the biology curriculum being taught today is different than what it was just two weeks ago. Can tests respond fast enough for these: exciting times and include up-to-the-minute research results? When we are in control of the curriculum and our tests, it can happen because we will incorporate these newly found results into our lectures and into our assessments of student learning. Can tests, outside of our immediate control, respond as quickly and as well as we: can?

We believe that standardized tests especially, will eventually result in standardized curriculum, which in turn discourages flexibility and innovation and undermines the fundamental principles of academic freedom.

We are concerned about a 'dumbing down' of the curriculum if minimum standards of achievement, are set among all our institutions, since many times the minimum becomes the maximum and our students will suffer for it. We are concerned that this might devalue the aesthetic nature of some of our courses and discourage creativity of thought. We are concerned that it teaches our students a false confidence in factual knowledge over inquiry.

Another concern of ours is with the validity of any tests that are developed: are they testing what they should be testing'? We are concerned decisions will be made, based upon test results, before the validity of the questions is established. One of the members of our Executive Committee is a Professor of Pharmacy. Pharmacy is one of those areas that has national testing for their students. He states that it took 12-years of discussions and revisions before their national board felt that the testing results could be trusted; that the validity of the questions had been established. So, our concern is that decisions will be made about our campuses, our students, our faculty, our curriculum before the validity of the questions can be assured.

Another challenge and concern is the cost and the enormous amount of time, effort, and infrastructure support that would be needed: time, money and support that could go into more direct forms of support for students and faculty. I know the time and effort that goes into my developing a single test for 70 Calculus students; I can't imagine what it would take and how many professional staff would be involved in developing not one, but (if we include testing in majors) literally hundreds of tests for over 140,000 students.

This additional, expensive layer of testing bureaucracy is one of our concerns.

We see a challenge with transfer students, who perhaps take their basic core courses elsewhere, but who would be tested at our institutions. Would their data be included in our results?

And, when do we test any of our students in the core curriculum? We can't do it at the end of their first two years, since many students wait until the very last semester of their senior year to take their math course or other core courses. We also have students who take 10 or 15 years to complete their degree, as they are raising families, working full-time and taking one or two classes each semester at night. As you know, many of our institutions do not have the traditional 1 S-year old college freshmen who complete their education in 4 years, so there is no set time for them to complete a required course of study. We want to encourage the non-traditional students to begin and complete their education. When during their 10 or 15 year college career are they tested?

We are also concerned about unintended negative consequences. We believe that it could lower the UT system's intellectual credibility and adversely affect the recruitment and retention of both our students and our faculty. Several of our institutions already have a shortage of faculty and have to rely heavily on adjuncts since they are unable to compete with other states for qualified faculty. We are concerned that our students will choose to go elsewhere, especially if testing has high stakes attached to it.

We look forward to working very closely with Dr. Sharpe's office and Dr. Rodrigues as the proposal is developed and we certainly hope that, as assessment instruments are developed, our concerns are addressed and the challenges can be met.

We believe in accountability and in assessing the learning of our students. But it's an extremely complex process that will take time, money, and a tremendous amount of effort to do it right. And let's do it ONLY if we can do it right.

Thank you for your time,

Comments in response to questions by Regent Loeffler:

We look at these as challenges, not just concerns and in working with Dr. Sharpe's office and Dr. Rodrigues we hope to meet the challenges.

We would like to see three items included in any tests that are developed:

1. The testing be as least-intrusive as possible to the students, perhaps imbedded into final exams.
2. Testing not have high-stakes associated with it.
3. Tests are faculty-generated and faculty developed.