

SUNY's Board Approves Plan for Systemwide Tests of Undergraduates

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The State University of New York will require each of its 64 campuses to regularly test a representative portion of its undergraduate students under a plan that the system's Board of Trustees approved on Tuesday.

The proposal, which the trustees adopted by a vote of 10 to 1, calls on the system's four-year institutions and two-year colleges to test 20 percent of their undergraduates every three years to measure their writing, critical-thinking, and quantitative skills. The testing is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2006.

Officials on each campus will be allowed to select the tests they use, although their choices will be reviewed by a systemwide group of faculty members to make sure that the tests meet certain standards. SUNY administrators and other advocates of the plan said the flexibility would allow campuses to tailor the assessments they use to their curricula. The plan also would allow the campuses that already use tests to keep some of them.

Results of the new tests would be used to track how well individual campuses meet SUNY's educational standards and how much the campuses are able to improve their instruction over time, SUNY officials said. The results also would be used to identify effective teaching practices that might be shared across the system.

The tests would not be used to establish requirements for students to graduate or to enter specific university programs, officials added. Nor, they said, are the tests being created for use in any kind of performance-based budgeting process.

"This is a way to ensure that the students, no matter which campus they go to, will get an education that meets the standard that we want," said Elizabeth D. Capaldi, vice chancellor and chief of staff for the SUNY system. She added that the plan is the most extensive effort of which she is aware to assess a public-university system's performance. "We want to help campuses do a better job in producing student learning," she said.

Candace de Russy, a SUNY trustee, cast the sole vote against the testing program. She favors requiring all campuses to administer the same test, arguing that such an approach is the only way to ensure proper measurement of educational quality across the system. By allowing each campus to choose its own test, she said, the plan creates "illusions of assured quality verified and verifiable by no one."

"Instead of ensuring SUNY hallmarks of quality," Ms. de Russy said at Tuesday's board meeting, "the assessment plan before us will guarantee that the state university remains just a loose federation of independent campuses, ultimately responsible to no one but themselves."