

SUNY plans to try standardized tests

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By Rick Karlin

State University of New York students may for the first time take a standardized test to show how well the 64 campuses are functioning.

Although such tests are routine in public elementary, middle and high schools, such an approach has never been used in the vast SUNY system, which serves more than 411,000 students.

"It will be a universitywide process," said SUNY spokesman Dave Henehan.

A pilot program for the test is set to begin next fall and run for two years. There is no firm starting date for the full-scale version of this test.

Students at the University at Albany were not thrilled with the idea. "I don't like it," said Lauren Summers, a sophomore from Queens. "You do your testing in high school."

"It's just for them," she said, referring to officials who want to implement the exams.

"What is the point?" wondered Crystal Smith, a senior from Westchester County. "We took the SATs already in high school."

Faculty members across the state, too, are starting to question the idea and in some instances protest it, saying it's unnecessary and too much of a one-size-fits-all idea for the diverse SUNY system, which runs the gamut from two year colleges to university research centers such as UAlbany and Stony Brook.

"We're not a cookie-cutter system," said Ivan Steen, a UAlbany history professor and vice president for academics at the United University Professions, the union representing professors and other employees.

Resistance seems especially strong among SUNY's community colleges. The Faculty Counsel, comprising staffers in the two-year schools, earlier this month sent a letter to SUNY Chancellor Robert King expressing "consistent and determined opposition to universitywide assessment," as the planned tests are called.

Plans for this testing program have been under active development since June when the SUNY trustees quietly approved the idea.

The test, Henehan explained, will cover skills such as math, writing, social sciences and information management, which consists largely of computer literacy. And there may be more than one test, Henehan said.

Relying on essays and other nonmultiple choice questions, it is unlikely to be a graduation requirement. Instead, it is viewed as a way to help gauge the effectiveness of various programs throughout the SUNY system.

A lot of unanswered questions about the plan remain. "We're not really sure how this thing is going to play out," said Frank Maurizio, communications director for UUP.

In addition to questions about how a test or testing program would apply to a large, diverse system, it's also unclear how much it would cost. "It sounds like an unfunded mandate, if you will," Maurizio said.

Others have wondered if the tests may provide fodder for SUNY critics or cost-cutters, if the results end up pitting campuses against one another.

Henehan, though, noted that other state systems including Florida, Texas, Illinois, Arkansas, Georgia and Massachusetts have similar initiatives.

The concept of a systemwide assessment tool has been around for several years. One SUNY trustee, Candace de Russy, has long championed the concept, although it's unclear how much input she had in the most recent plan.

Members of the faculty senate for SUNY's four-year campuses are scheduled to discuss the testing plan during a meeting later this month.