

Panel Explores Standard Tests for Colleges

By KAREN W. ARENSON

A higher education commission named by the Bush administration is examining whether standardized testing should be expanded into universities and colleges to prove that students are learning and to allow easier comparisons on quality.

Charles Miller, a business executive who is the commission's chairman, wrote in a memorandum recently to the 18 other members that he saw a developing consensus over the need for more accountability in higher education.

"What is clearly lacking is a nationwide system for comparative performance purposes, using standard formats," Mr. Miller wrote, adding that student learning was a main component that should be measured.

Mr. Miller was head of the Regents of the University of Texas a few years ago when they directed the university's nine campuses to use standardized tests to prove students were learning. He points to the test being tried there and to two other testing initiatives as evidence that assessment of writing, analytical skills and critical thinking is possible.

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed last fall by the secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, has until August to make a report on issues that include accountability, cost and quality. Educators are wary. "To subject colleges to uniform standards is to trivialize what goes on in higher education," said Leon Botstein, president of Bard College. "Excellence comes in many unusual ways. You cannot apply the rules of high-stakes testing in high schools to universities."

In an interview, Mr. Miller said he was not envisioning a higher education version of the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires standardizing testing in public schools and penalizes schools whose students do not improve. "There is no way you can mandate a single set of tests, to have a federalist higher education system," he said.

But he said public reporting of collegiate learning as measured through testing "would be greatly beneficial to the students, parents, taxpayers and employers" and that he would like to create a national database that includes measures of learning. "It would be a shame for the academy to say, 'We can't tell you what it is; you have to trust us,'" Mr. Miller said.

He said he would like the commission to agree on the skills college students ought to be learning — like writing, critical thinking and problem solving — and to express that view forcefully. "What happens with reform," he said, "is that it rarely happens overnight, and it rarely happens with a mandate."

"It does happen with levers," Mr. Miller added, "and maybe the accreditation process will be one. Or state legislators. Or members of Congress."

His push comes as college officials in an era of high tuition say they already feel pressure to justify costs.

But university officials are wary of the notion that testing regimes should be used to measure all the different institutions that make up American higher education — small liberal arts colleges, large public universities,

proprietary schools and religious academies — particularly if there is government involvement.

David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges, a group representing private, nonprofit colleges, said: "What we oppose is a single, national, high-stakes, one-size-fits-all, uber-outcome exam. The notion of a single exam implies there are national standards, and that implies a national curriculum. Then we are on the way to a centralized Prussian education system."

When Ms. Spellings, the education secretary, named the commission, she said that choosing a college was one of the most important and expensive decisions families make and that they were entitled to more information.

There is no unanimity on the commission, but some members also expressed interest in measuring student learning.

Kati Haycock, a commissioner who is director of the Education Trust in Washington, which has supported standardized testing, said in an e-mail message: "Any honest look at the new adult literacy level data for recent college grads leaves you very queasy. And the racial gaps are unconscionable. So doing something on the assessment side is probably important. The question is what and when."

Jonathan Grayer, another commissioner, who is chief executive of the test-coaching company Kaplan Inc., said that with so many students in college and so many tax dollars being spent, "it is important for us to seek

some type of knowledge about how much learning is going on."

"What I am for is for institutions on their own or in groups to seek their own standards to show what they are achieving," Mr. Grayer said. "Whether that should be elective or mandatory, that is something the commission is thinking about."

The question of how to assess higher education has been simmering for years. In the mid-1980's, the Department of Education directed the groups that accredit colleges and universities to include assessments of student academic achievement.

College students have always been graded on exams, but there were relatively few standardized measures of the skills they had when they left college, except for licensing exams and graduate school admissions tests. And even those did not show how much the students had learned.

"The unanswered question in higher education is: How good is the product?" said Robert Zemsky, a commission member who is a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania. "A growing number of people are beginning to want answers. What higher education is about to learn is that they can't play the 'trust me' game anymore."

Part of what is driving the demand for accountability is money. Ms. Spellings has said that about one-third of the annual investment in higher education comes from the federal government and that officials know very little about what they are getting in return.

In addition, there has been growing attention to how many college students drop out and how poorly even graduates perform in the workplace and on literacy tests in an era of rising global competition. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy, given in 2003 by the Department of Education, found that less than a third of the college graduates it surveyed

demonstrated that they were able to read complex English texts and draw complicated inferences.

It is not clear whether the commission would recommend that funding be used as an incentive for testing or else withheld from colleges that refuse to use standardized testing.

Although public universities seem most vulnerable to regulatory oversight because they are subsidized by state taxpayers, Mr. Miller points out that private colleges are subject to regulation, too. They are accredited by groups authorized by the federal government. And they must meet certain standards to qualify for federal grants and financial aid.

"What we call public universities would be under the most pressure," Mr. Miller said. "But the question is, How public are some of the private universities? They depend a lot on public funding, too. And we have shifted more of the cost back to students. So I think consumers and other people will begin to ask questions like this more."

"It would be O.K. with me," Mr. Miller added, if individual institutions like the elite universities in the Ivy League did not want to offer measures of student learning on standardized tests. "But would it be O.K. with everyone?" he asked, referring to their trustees, their donors, potential employers and others.

Of course, being sure that tests measure what students learn is difficult. Peter T. Ewell, a testing expert at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems in Colorado, said it was hard for students to take tests seriously unless they were "embedded in the curriculum."

"You have to provide incentives for students to want to do it and to do their best," he said. Still, numerous colleges are experimenting.

Mr. Miller, in his recent memorandum

and in the interview, pointed to the recently developed **Collegiate Learning Assessment** test as a breakthrough. The exam, developed by the Council for Aid to Education, a former division of the RAND Corporation, asks students to write essays and solve complex problems.

Mr. Miller also cited a recent demonstration project backed by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and a computerized version of a test from the Educational Testing Service in New Jersey.

The University of Texas has worked for several years to address the Regents' mandate that its campuses use standardized testing to assess student learning.

Pedro Reyes, the system's associate vice chancellor for academic affairs, said the campuses first tried to develop their own tests but concluded it was too time-consuming. Next, they turned to an Educational Testing Service exam, but found it "didn't quite get what we were looking for," Dr. Reyes said. The university then turned to the Collegiate Learning Assessment exam, which Dr. Reyes called "a much better tool not only to improve student learning but also to enable conversations about academic expectations and standards."

Not everyone on the Texas campuses is enthralled with standardized testing. John R. Durbin, a mathematics professor at the University of Texas at Austin and former faculty council officer, said in an e-mail message, "It would be a sad state of affairs if the people at the top had so little confidence in our faculty that they really believed outside bureaucrats and committees could help us raise standards."

Mr. Miller expressed confidence that the process would improve learning. "I think the process has been very effective," he said. "The surprising thing is that people who went through it, some of them reluctantly, all felt they had gained."