

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that care with definitions and concepts of student learning is essential if policies for assessment are to support the many areas and types of study essential to the functioning and advancement of our complex society. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding these issues is important for you and your institution.

What is the difference between student learning and student learning outcomes? As best I can tell, student learning is what an individual has; learning outcomes are what someone else can identify among the learning that an individual has. Whether this assumption is accurate or not, there is a difference between what a deeply educated person knows and the manifestations of that knowledge in everything from formal examinations to professional engagement. Tests and other applications reveal certain things, but they do not reveal everything. We all recognize that some aspects of learning are easier to test than others. For these aspects, clear, unequivocal answers produce the necessary assurances. But we also recognize that any test has limitations: tests on the facts of history will not reveal the extent to which an individual can think or work like a historian, for example. Usually, the higher the level of engagement, the more generic testing is replaced by specific assessment of individual work.

These facts and conditions are important to education and accreditation. Student learning is the central purpose. But student learning is not just an abstraction. In reality, student learning is *in* something. It is in one or more fields of study, in disciplines and specializations. It is in terms of facts, procedures, formulas, and other replicables, but also in terms of intellectual methodologies, properties of things, discovery, approaches to the unknown, creativity, and so forth. Student learning is associated with modes of thought, and these vary across fields and disciplines.

All of these properties of student learning create complexities. For example, for us in NASM, there is a general artistic mode of thought that we have previously described in these letters. But within that generality, the mode of thought for music is somewhat different than that of the other arts. The same is true for specializations within our discipline.

When one considers student learning in all of its dimensions, an additional complexity generator comes into view: knowledge and information is rapidly expanding in every field. Yet another complexity is revealed by the relationship of two facts: in some fields, at least up to a rather advanced point, there is a single set of information that is to be mastered; in other fields, this pattern does not hold. It does not show disrespect for the creative aspects of mathematics to assume that everyone taking first-year calculus is covering the same subject matter, and thus, can be tested in somewhat the same way. The subject matter is difficult and intellectually challenging, but deals with a certain clearly definable set of information and operations. But, what about a junior-year course in Modern European History? The teacher of such a course has a vast and ever expanding set of information with which to work. Our imaginary professor wants to present a set of lectures on the arts in the 19th century. What novels will be mentioned and which will not?

What is the likelihood that all professors in America teaching such a course will make the same choices? In situations where there is a vast array of subject matter to choose from, student learning may be consistent, but not the same, and therefore, not comparable. Further, even consistency is not required for student learning. A course on Modern European History could be taught as a survey of factual information; it could be taught in terms of problem-based learning, or in terms of historiography, research methods, and so forth. A large number of such courses cannot be assessed using the calculus model without destroying local independence, including the right to set academic goals and the richness provided by creative differences.

All these complexities are factors in realistic curricula and course development. In each case, someone has to make a decision about content. Students cannot learn everything, or indeed, very much in depth about anything, unless they are working at the highest graduate or post-graduate levels. Students of the arts regularly enter higher education with a great deal of preparation in their respective disciplines. They know and have mastered some things, but not others. Each student is different in this regard. In the past, our society has respected these realities and relied on teachers with the highest possible academic and professional qualifications to make specific decisions about what students study. These decisions may have significant commonality at lower levels, but usually become far more varied as study and learning advance. Thus, advancement requires and depends on eventual loss of standardization, and even common content. For example, in a great deal of arts instruction, professors work with students individually based on student capabilities and needs at a given point in time. Individuality is the rule.

The realities that we have been describing should produce a conceptual barrier for anyone who wants to quantify student learning so that the “performance” of thousands of higher education institutions, programs, and courses can be compared. Since potential governmental imposition of comparisons of this kind must necessarily lead to extreme standardization, and since such standardization hobbles creative advancement, moving in such a direction invites cascading disaster. With regard to student learning, at what point does any evaluation system transfer responsibility for content choice and teaching methodology from teachers to something else, standardized tests or centralized course-writing committees, for example? In many cases in higher education, the answer ought to be “never.” It is extremely important to face the ramifications of attempting to teacher-proof higher education, particularly in terms of our nation’s educational capacity.

Higher education accreditation has supported the concept of “teacher-led” curriculum development and evaluation. Consensus-based accreditation standards for student learning are normally written in terms of competencies, and accreditation reviews focus on how each institution or program is developing those competencies in students. In some fields, and in some cases in all fields, there are specifications associated with meeting threshold requirements. Algebra II is not a substitution for Calculus I. But the specific approaches used to develop and evaluate the required competencies are considered the prerogative of each institution and its faculty. Accreditation evaluators have the expertise to make a specific judgment about fulfillment of each standard in a way that respects each specific institution’s choices of means and specific content, including innovative approaches. These judgments are not merely “subjective,” but rather based on years of education, training, and experience in the subject area being reviewed. This feature of specialized accreditation is what enables standards to be applied without standardization, especially in those fields such as the arts where there are many content and method choices for addressing common subjects and where loss of the need for standardization and common content often occurs at an earlier stage than in a number of other fields.

What about individual student learning? A critical distinction is being lost in the current assessment climate. There is a difference between an institution's responsibility for student learning, and a student's responsibility for student learning. The institution must connect the student with particular bodies of studies or work. It must promote a relationship between the student and the studies undertaken. It is responsible for assuring itself that the student has gained a certain degree of knowledge or proficiency as a condition for awarding a credential. It is responsible for advancing knowledge in the disciplines being taught, improving teaching methodologies, and developing assessments appropriate to subject matter. The institution has many responsibilities associated with student learning. But the institution cannot be responsible for the personal relationship a student develops with a body of knowledge and skills. Student learning, holistically conceived and ready for use in the world, resides more in the nature, content, and orientation of this personal relationship than with anything the institution does or can do. The institution can nurture this relationship and provide examples of what this relationship is like when it is working, but the institution cannot create this relationship in the mind of any individual. Only the individual can do so.

Thoughtful assessment takes this fact into account and thus places accountability within a framework of responsibility. Among other things, these personal relationships with fields and their content are the sources of creativity, innovation, exploration, and many other things necessary for advancement in every field, and thus in our society as a whole. An institution that has many students developing this personal relationship with advanced disciplinary content is truly engaged in "higher" education.

Traditionally, accreditation has worked in ways that support the multiple factors involved in the development of student learning in terms of personal relationships with fields and disciplines. This includes careful calibrations concerning what is a common standard and what is not. It includes respect for the expertise contained in the faculties and administrations of each institution. Indeed, the qualifications of these individuals are addressed in the standards. Accreditation recognizes the vastness of subject matter and the dynamic and often unplannable nature of advancement. It recognizes that institutions must make choices, and that institutions need to be free to make such choices and adjustments to them all within the common framework that standards provide. Accreditation understands when standardized assessment is possible, appropriate, and necessary, and when it is not. Accreditation understands the destructive power of pretending that there is one way when there are many, of believing higher education is merely a technology, or that every course or curriculum called by the same name is or should be exactly the same.

Those who see student learning in terms of content in all its complexity are being challenged and attacked by those who see it in terms of test scores in all their simplicity. It is natural that holders of the latter position would sustain an attack on accreditation. A good number of individuals in government are asking for proof that expenditures of taxpayer dollars are producing results in terms of numbers they can trust. This request is particularly interesting with regard to American higher education, because our system is opportunity based. There are few barriers to entrance. This means that many will enter the system and be unable or unwilling to achieve the level of personal engagement with subject matter that enables them to stay and advance to graduation. The opportunity-based system has many benefits, but a certain amount of failure must be expected. A wise farmer does not declare his entire crop a disaster because a certain low spot in his field failed to yield at average or highest levels. But such lines of argument are common in today's higher education policy arena: a specific problem anywhere is represented to be a general "systemic" failure that, in turn, calls for more centralization, and usually, massive governmental intervention. But what is the reality? Large numbers of students, high graduation rates, and high

academic and professional standards are incompatible except in the minds of those believing that institutions are 100% responsible for student learning, that every solution is technical and thus predictable, and that people are all the same.

The results of American higher education in the personal relationships to subject matter developed and honed by students are easy to see. Millions of graduates over the years have produced an explosion of achievement unprecedented in the history of the world. A higher education policy or an accreditation policy that discounts or denies this achievement of true student learning in favor of judging success by comparisons of test scores is substituting a part for the whole in a most dangerous way. It is attempting to substitute individual and local knowledge and responsibility with bureaucratic systems, and to change the natures of teaching, learning, and evaluations associated with different bodies of content so that learning can be centrally counted, compared, and if history is a good indicator, eventually controlled in detail.

In our next letter, we plan to consider the relationships among accreditation, innovation, and improvement.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Best wishes,

Samuel Hope
NASM Executive Director