

Trying to find a measure for how well colleges do

By Richard Perez-Pena, New York Times

How well does a college teach, and what do its students learn? Rankings based on the credentials of entering freshmen are not hard to find, but how can students, parents and policy makers assess how well a college builds on that foundation?

What information exists has often been hidden from public view. But that may be changing.

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind federal education law, students in elementary, middle and high schools take standardized tests whose results are made public, inviting anyone to assess, however imperfectly, a school's performance. There is no comparable trove of public data for judging and comparing colleges.

Pieces of such a system may be taking shape, however, with several kinds of national assessments – including, most controversially, standardized tests – gaining traction in recent years. More than 1,000 colleges may be using at least one of them.

“There’s a real shift in attitudes under way,” said David C. Paris, executive director of the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, a coalition of higher education groups. “We used to hear a lot more of, ‘The value of college can’t be measured,’ and now we hear more of, ‘Let’s talk about how we can measure.’ ”

In January, the New Leadership Alliance released guidelines calling on colleges to systematically “gather evidence of student learning” – though not explicitly advocating standardized tests – and release the results. The report was

endorsed by several major organizations of colleges and universities.

Advocates say the point is not to measure how each college's students perform after four years, which depends heavily on the caliber of students it enrolls in the first place, but to see how much they improve along the way. The concern is less about measuring knowledge of chemistry or literature than about harder to define skills like critical thinking and problem-solving.

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