

March 4, 2005

UO program gives nation's high schools standards for success

By Greg Bolt
The Register-Guard

Governors of the 13 states that last weekend assigned themselves the task of making sure all high school graduates have college-level skills may find that the University of Oregon already has done most of its homework.

Many of the answers the governors are seeking can be found in Standards for Success, a first-of-its-kind program developed by UO professor David Conley and his Center for Educational Policy Research. Instead of asking what students should learn in high school, it looks at what they are expected to know when they enter college.

And with the 13-state effort to raise graduation requirements grabbing headlines nationwide, the program is poised to play a key role in what is shaping up as a dramatic change in the high school curriculum.

"A lot of schools and school districts are using this as their reference point in their own high school redesign projects," Conley said this week. "We're surprised. We have boxes and boxes of material going out every week."

Those boxes are full of workbooks and computer discs that lay out in unprecedented detail the kind of work college freshmen can expect to be assigned. They contain actual test and essay questions from dozens of freshmen courses as well as examples of answers that passed muster with professors.

For all the talk in recent years about education reform, one piece that's been missing is a connection between K-12 and higher education. Educators say Standards for Success is the first program of its kind to bridge the gap between what high schools teach and what colleges want freshmen to know.

"Our problem at the high school level is that it isn't clear anywhere in the nation what it is exactly that college professors want," said Mike Riley, superintendent of the Bellevue School District and an early advocate of the program.

"So when we talk about a college prep curriculum, a lot of that is really guesswork. David is one of the first people that I know of in the country that actually did a systematic study of what colleges want kids to know when they get there."

That two-year study was funded by the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts and involved a nationwide review of freshman-level courses. The resulting product - guide books, CD-ROMs and other material - was then sent out to every high school in the country.

Now Conley is expanding the program. Standards for Success has been licensed by The College Board, the organization that prepares the SAT, and will be used to help assess test results and give students a clearer picture of their strengths and weaknesses.

He's also begun offering a comprehensive audit of high school programs that tell teachers and administrators where their curriculum lines up with the Standards for Success and where they need to refocus to get students ready for college.

Most recently, the center was awarded a three-year federal grant that will allow UO researchers to create high school classes that connect directly to college classes. They would be designed around the Standards for Success guidelines, allowing freshmen to pick up right where their high school class left off.

Those efforts are very close to what the 13-state American Diploma Project Network said it wants to do. Their effort is part of a growing national acceptance that no matter what a student plans to do after high school, he or she needs to be prepared for college-level work.

"I think there is a current myth we need to dispel that not going immediately into a four-year university means there is somehow a less academically demanding pathway for me," said Patrick Burk, chief policy officer for the Oregon Department of Education. "I think what we have seen is just the opposite."

Now, people seeking anything except the lowest-wage service jobs usually need some kind of post-secondary training. Whether that's a professional-technical program at a community college or even training for a high-tech production line, high school graduates have to be able to demonstrate a command of basic communication and math skills to have any hope at a family-wage job.

A big question with any education reform is cost. But Burk noted that much of the Standards for Success material is

available for free and said refining curriculum is something that almost all school districts already budget for.

"So at the local level the issue then becomes, do you have the money for putting together a task force or a process to bring teachers in, bring principals in to analyze your curriculum," he said. "There are some costs there but I don't think they are prohibitive."

It may be more expensive if the state decides to realign the statewide graduation standards. But Burk said legislators in both the Oregon House and Senate have said they are willing to talk about such an effort.

That could mean boosting the current state requirement for three years of English and two each of science and math to four years of English and three years of science and math. But Conley cautioned against an approach that simply adds more classes to the graduation requirement.

"Whenever you start talking about reinventing high schools, I always get a little nervous," he said. "That's because a lot of these efforts get more into structure, not content. Our program really gets into the meat and potatoes; it gets into what goes on in the classroom."

For example, Riley said the preliminary audit of the Bellevue curriculum found that English classes were doing a good job of teaching students to read and analyze fiction literature but not so good at nonfiction. That gives them a clear target for improving the curriculum.

Riley said one of the real values of Standards for Success is that it gives high schools a common set of goals. That will allow them to experiment on ways to improve curriculum and share with others the techniques that work.

"If we're all doing the same thing, then we can all learn from each other," he said. "What I really hope David's work inspires is a lot of school districts trying to work on that same English course so that we're not all reinventing the wheel but can learn from each other."

.