College admission standards will change

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Proficiency-based admission standards will change the way students get into college and will better prepare students for college-level work, according to a report from the Oregon State System of Higher Education.

The Proficiency-based Admission Standards System, known as PASS, requires students to demonstrate that their knowledge and skills meet or exceed the standards for admission. The new system, which goes into effect in the fall of 1999, ties admission directly to a student's demonstrated proficiency, not "seat time," credit hours or other indirect measures of learning, according the report.

"The current system lulls both faculty and students into complacency and they get a very rude shock when they get here," said James Buch, director of admissions. "The current system assumes if you sit in a room you know something."

The change in admission standards was necessary for two reasons, the report said.

First, school reform legislation enacted in 1991, known as the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, requires all Oregon schools to begin offering Certificates of Initial Mastery in 1996 and Certificates of Advanced Mastery in 1997. A pilot program is currently in progress in the Cottage Grove School District.

OSSHE is obligated to have admission policies that are compatible with the the program in the public education system.

Secondly, OSSHE officials feels the current admission system is not identifying students prepared to do college-level work as well as it might, and the current system cannot be improved without a complete overhaul, according to the report. The belief is that an attempt to raise the required grade point average would lead to grade inflation and more required classes have little effect.

The first challenge in overhauling admission standards was to determine what students need to know to do well in college.

"We have identified what knowledge and skills we think you need to know," Buch said. "It's far more specific than the current standard."

The proficiency-based admission standards, which were adopted by the Oregon State Board of Higher Education in May 1994, are divided into content proficiency areas and process proficiency areas.

Students must prove content proficiency in mathematics, science, social science, foreign language, humanities and literature, and fine and performing arts.

The process proficiency areas include reading, writing, communication competency, critical and analytic thinking, problem solving, technology as a learning tool, systems and integrative thinking, teamwork and quality work.

More than 60 national and state curriculum reports were analyzed to determine the emerging expectation for American students. The educational systems of other countries were examined, and, where possible, their standards were analyzed as well, according to the OSSHE report.

The results were reviewed by faculty members from Oregon institutions of higher education, educators from public schools and community colleges. The analysis of reports, with their comments and recommendations, served as the basis for identifying what the proficiencies would entail.

Currently, officials are developing assessment tasks and performance levels. Prototypes will be available in fall 1996, according to the report.

The SAT and ACT tests will still be used as additional sources to mark demonstrated college-readiness in students. Both tests are undergoing extensive redesign to improve proficiency assessment. According to the report, OSSHE staff is working with representative of both national college admissions tests.

After conversations with admissions officers from other states, OSSHE officials do not foresee any problems for students who want to attend college out-of-state, according to the report. OSSHE proficiencies, reported in numeric form with accompanying explanation of the meaning of each level of performance, will be acceptable and pose little or no problem to admissions offices. Plus, numeric scores could be converted into grade equivalents for institutions demanding such a conversion.

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