

The Faculty Take on Student Learning

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By [Doug Lederman](#)

PHILADELPHIA -- As national and campus debates about student learning outcomes and now college completion have intensified in the last several years, faculty groups and individual professors have largely weighed in from the sidelines, rarely stepping into the actual fray. Whether that's because they have chosen not to participate, or because the policy makers and politicians leading the discussions have not sought to involve them, is a matter of debate -- and both are probably true.

AFT Higher Education, the division of the American Federation of Teachers that represents more than 200,000 college and university instructors, professional staff and graduate students, hopes to change that state of affairs with a new effort aimed at injecting its members (and professors generally) more directly into national and campus discussions about how, and how successfully, colleges educate students.

The campaign, which was formally begun at the group's [national higher education issues conference](#) here this weekend, included the release of a report, "[Student Success in Higher Education](#)," [a summary](#) of focus groups with students, and a session in which the group's members discussed the reports and the faculty role in student success with several national experts on learning. In the coming months, AFT plans to step up its discussions with national groups and foundations that are working on student success issues and to provide funds to local affiliates to help them with student learning initiatives on their campuses.

What is AFT doing stepping onto a minefield that seems to have little to do with the bread-and-butter wage and working-conditions issues on which it and other faculty unions have historically focused? Sandra Schroeder, president of AFT Washington (State) and chair of AFT's Higher Education Program and Policy Council, acknowledged that AFT has long ceded such terrain to campus faculty senates.

And while it's an obvious understatement to say that AFT and other unions have plenty of wage and work place issues to worry about right now ([see related](#)

article), Schroeder said that the union's leaders know that their whole reason for "trying to keep our profession intact" is its underlying purpose -- educating students -- in which they believe deeply.

The union has chosen to get directly involved, said Lawrence N. Gold, director of AFT Higher Education, because as conversations about student learning outcomes and college completion have intensified (often without meaningful faculty involvement) at the national, state and campus levels, "so much of what our people hear is off-course." Among the flawed ideas, as Gold and AFT see them: calls for nationally standardized measures of student learning, for tying state funding to seriously flawed measures of graduation rates, and for significantly increasing the number of Americans with college credentials without sufficient concern for the quality of those degrees and certificates.

Tempted as many rank and file faculty members might be to respond to what they see as flawed assumptions by fighting back or withdrawing from the conversation entirely, that strategy ultimately does not serve professors or their students well, AFT officials acknowledge. Professors' constant naysaying about efforts to assess student learning allows critics to write them off, fairly or not, as not caring about students -- not a helpful political posture at a time when anti-faculty sentiment appears to be on the rise.

And perhaps more important, the AFT report states, "a lot of what goes wrong with so many curriculum, teaching and assessment proposals is caused by the fact that classroom educators -- along with their knowledge of pedagogy and experience with students -- are not often at the center of the program development process. The perspective of frontline educators should assume a much more prominent role in public discussion about student success and about the most appropriate forms of accountability for assessing it."

The Faculty Perspective

No one reading the AFT's statement on student success will mistake it for the report of Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education or other missives that focus on student learning measures as an accountability tool or urge colleges to produce more graduates with fewer resources.

The document is threaded, for instance, with warnings that colleges and professors will be unable to educate more students -- and to give them a

meaningfully substantive education -- unless public investment in student financial aid increases and state disinvestment in public higher education ceases.

"[T]oo many policy discussions of student success avoid serious consideration of financial factors, as though investment in learning is not connected to student success," the AFT report says. "Paying for college is just about the biggest obstacle [students] face in completing their studies. Concerns about finances also lead students to work too many hours, which hampers their chances for success. Finally, students report that large class sizes, limited course offerings and difficulty in getting enough personal attention from overworked faculty and staff are key obstacles to their achievement."

Elsewhere in the document is an even more direct assertion that the decline in full-time faculty positions and the lack of support given to their part-time replacements seriously hampers student progress. "A real and lasting solution to the problems of college student retention and attainment will not be achieved without greater government support," it states.

But while the report contains numerous nods to faculty concerns that clearly mark it as coming from that perspective, it is perhaps more noteworthy for the common ground it inhabits alongside the student learning establishment. Many might be surprised to read in a document produced by a faculty union a statement like this: "AFT members fully agree that retention is not what it should be and that some action must be taken to improve the situation." (Yes, the intro to that sentence is "Even though the measurement of graduation rates is deeply flawed," but still....)

Or this: "Government has an obligation to hold institutions accountable for achieving demonstrably good results -- our members believe this very strongly." The AFT report's endorsement of "longitudinal tracking of students as they make their way through the educational system and out into the world beyond" is likely to jolt observers who believe that faculty members do not want to be held accountable.

And the AFT's own attempt to define the "elements of student success" -- the knowledge, intellectual abilities and technical skills that students should accumulate as they move through a higher education -- bears a striking resemblance to the Degree Qualifications Profile that the Lumina Foundation for Education released in January (and that a top Lumina official, Holiday Hart

McKiernan, discussed with AFT members at the conference Sunday).

Praise and Pushback

McKiernan strongly praised the AFT report, noting that Lumina officials believe that a successful effort to increase the number of Americans with high-quality higher educations could not succeed without the full cooperation and involvement of faculty members.

Other national figures in the student learning outcomes conversation also welcomed the AFT initiative. Peter N. Ewell, a vice president at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, had several criticisms of the paper itself -- he questioned the link between institutions' resources and their student learning outcomes, for instance, noting great variation in the performance of colleges with similar per-student expenditures. But Ewell called the AFT paper a "very constructive sign of engagement," and said it was a "very positive development to see a faculty union wanting to be cooperative."

"I think this is a sincere effort by AFT," Ewell said.

George Kuh, **project director** of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, said the paper is "largely a summary of what many other knowledgeable people have been saying," and breaks little new ground. But the fact that it comes from a group that represents faculty members who have often been (or been viewed as) recalcitrant about assessing learning is noteworthy, he said.

"It's a clear attempt to bring its membership along to think more deeply and in more meaningful ways about student learning," said Kuh. "It is pretty clear that AFT leadership thinks its members need to be doing more, and when a membership organization wants its membership to do something, there's a challenge. If you're too strident in tone, people may walk." AFT appears to have struck that balance well, Kuh said. "It speaks to its membership from an authoritative, informed and responsible position."

Judging by the audience's reaction during Sunday's discussion about the report, AFT appears not to have gotten too far out in front of its members, as no rotten tomatoes (or even harsh words) flew as AFT officials described the student learning initiative.

But lest anyone think that the rank and file AFT members are ready to join forces with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's push for greater faculty productivity, audience statements during the Q&A session (in which questions were few and far between) quickly revealed otherwise.

"Students are coming into our institutions with no skills -- they can't read, they can't write," said a faculty member at one Pennsylvania community college.

Another noted the success that his institution's federally financed TRIO program had had in retaining significant numbers of academically underprepared students -- as well as how expensive the program was, and therefore difficult to expand. "If there ain't no money on the table" to accompany the demands for greater student outcomes, he said, "we can't get this done."