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University presidents in NM defend Common Core

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Presidents Bob Frank of the University of New Mexico, Garrey Carruthers of New Mexico State University and Daniel López of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology may sometimes view one another as rivals, but on the issue of Common Core, they stand united.

“The only way to keep up or gain momentum is to have a common core of educational benchmarks that are universal, standardized and measurable. We must play on the same field as the rest of the world – and play as well, or better,” the three presidents said in a column in the Sunday Journal this week. “U.S. needs Common Core in all the states.”

The Common Core State Standards Initiative takes direct aim at K-12 education, but it is also intended to have a profound and positive impact on the nation’s colleges and universities, hence the presidents’ keen interest.

A primary goal is to provide all schools with a single measuring stick to determine basic student competency in math and English/language arts. Another is to overcome the great need for remedial courses high school graduates often require to transition into college. If those goals can be met and maintained, the United States’ standing as the world’s No. 1 superpower will be secure.

That’s how the leaders of New Mexico’s three research universities see it.

Common Core’s website describes the standards as “learning goals for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.” The standards help teachers provide the skills and knowledge students need to be successful and give parents a clear understanding of what is expected of their children.

The presidents also focused their attention on the PARCC – Partnership for Assessment for College and Careers – test that right now is being administered to students throughout New Mexico and much of the country. Last week saw some anti-PARCC demonstrations at high schools statewide.

“While this has created a great deal of controversy, questions and complaints,” the presidents wrote, “we should not lose focus of the bigger purpose behind the testing – to achieve educational excellence through tougher expectations that make our students more competitive and successful.”

As if to underscore Sunday’s message, the NMSU-Grants campus issued a report two days later citing national studies that found “30 to 40 percent of all entering college freshmen are unprepared for college-level math, reading and writing.”

Moreover, the Grants campus reported, its own students “are experiencing low course completion rates in developmental education, critical college gateway and high-demand technology courses, resulting in low associate degree and certificate completions.”

Rolando Rael, NMSU-Grants’ Title V director, said the campus is experiencing “decreasing graduation rates in our degree and certificate programs.”

Title V, a section of the federal Higher Education Act, provides grants for Hispanic-Serving Institutions to expand educational opportunities and improve success rates for Latino college students.

Rael said only 233 degrees were awarded over a seven-year period, an indication that developmental classes “may not be addressing the real learning needs of our students.”

Low expectations

Carruthers, a former governor, frames the issue quite simply.

“The Common Core is essential to education in the United States,” he said in an interview earlier this week.

At NMSU, the biggest problems of the K-12 system are most striking at the two-year campus level. Many high school graduates who need remedial education are steered toward the two-year branch campuses – such as Grants – and affiliated community colleges.

But Carruthers conceded that “NMSU teaches introductory courses on how to go to college, that’s what we do.”

He is anxious to see the language arts segment strengthened to require two years of English composition, which could happen next year. He also would like the math component to require a year of calculus.

In New Mexico, scores for K-12 students are low, Carruthers said, because of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“It’s all about expectations,” he said. “Blessed are those who expect very little – for they shall not be disappointed.”

UNM’s Frank agreed. Common Core is vital because it prepares students for a university curriculum, he said. That curriculum should be universal, across all schools in the United States.

“After years of running local school districts, with inconsistent results, we’ve learned that consistency is valuable,” Frank said. “If everyone is cooking or preparing the same dish, individually, the results are going to be different. But if everyone uses the same recipe, then the results will be consistent.”

Marjori Krebs, an adviser to Frank on educational issues, said Common Core provides a single platform for conversation, adding, “It would be hard to hold a conversation with each district individually.”

An open question is whether Common Core will solve the problems it set out to address.

An article in the summer 2015 issue of the journal *Education Next* – “States Raise Proficiency Standards in Math and Reading: Commitments to Common Core may be driving the proficiency

bar upward,” by Paul E. Peterson and Matthew Ackerman of Harvard University – concludes just that.

But almost instantly, Neil McCluskey, associate director of the CATO Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, said the Peterson-Ackerman report gives way too much credit for the recent rise in proficiency to Common Core.

“At the very least, there should be a huge emphasis on ‘may,’ and the Core probably shouldn’t be mentioned at all,” McCluskey said, noting the jury is still out.

Regardless what Peterson and Ackerman, CATO and McCluskey may think, the three New Mexico presidents stand together.

“National standards,” they wrote, “are key to giving our students the tools to take on the world.”