

U. of Phoenix Says Test Scores Vindicate Its Academic Model

Students gain skills quickly, study finds

By Goldie Blumenstyk

THE UNIVERSITY of Phoenix is often derided by traditional academics for caring more about its bottom line than about academic quality, and every year, the annual report issued by its parent company focuses more on profits than student performance.

Now the institution that has become the largest private university in North America is releasing its first “Annual Academic Report.” The university’s leaders say the findings show that its educational model is effective in helping students succeed in college, especially those who are underprepared.

Freshmen at the University of Phoenix enter with reading, writing, and mathematical skills that are, on average, below those of other college students, but according to data from standardized tests, Phoenix students appear to improve in those skills at a greater rate than do students at other colleges.

And in a comparison of students who enter college with “risk factors” that often contribute to their dropping out, Phoenix’s rates of completion for a bachelor’s degree were substantially higher than for institutions over all.

William J. Pepicello, president of the 330,000-student university, said those and other findings, shared in advance with *The Chronicle*, show that the 32-year-old, open-access institution is fulfilling its goals.

“This ties into our social mission for our university,” said Mr. Pepicello, in an interview at the company’s headquarters here. “We take these students and we do give them a significant increase in skills.”

Phoenix for years has been extensively measuring and monitoring student progress for internal purposes, using the data to change the content and design of its courses or to reshape its approach to remedial education.

It decided to develop and publish this report—distinct from the financial reports that its parent company, the \$2.6-billion Apollo Group Inc., regularly provides—as “a good-faith attempt on our part” to show the university’s commitment to growing public demand for more accountability by institutions of higher education, said Mr. Pepicello.

He and other university leaders fully expect some challenges to the findings, but they say the institution, by publishing the report, is showing its willingness to confront scrutiny of its educational record from within academe. “It lets us, in a public forum, talk to our colleagues about what we do and how well we do it,” said Mr. Pepicello.

The introduction this academic year of a test that could be administered to both campus-based and distance-education students—the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress

PHOENIX

exam, by the Educational Testing Service—also made this kind of reporting possible, he said. Nearly two-thirds of Phoenix students attend online.

Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, said that although he had not yet seen Phoenix’s data, its decision to publish such a report was “a very positive development.”

Even if the university has chosen to release data that put it in the best light, as others often do, Mr. Callan said the report will be a significant piece of the national debate over what value an institution can add to a student.

“For higher education, it is a positive and useful and constructive approach,” Mr. Callan said. Publication of the report, he added, was in line with other efforts by the university, including its recent creation of a research center on adult learners (for

U. of Phoenix Cites Gains in Student Learning

The University of Phoenix’s “Annual Academic Report” includes data on its students’ performance on a national standardized test, the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP). The data indicate that in several areas, Phoenix students on average showed improvement that was comparable to or greater than the average gains over all.

Mean MAPP test score	Freshmen	Seniors	Difference
Critical-thinking skills			
U. of Phoenix	109.85	112.13	2.28
All institutions	109.96	112.09	2.13
Reading			
U. of Phoenix	116.45	119.27	2.82
All institutions	117.20	119.72	2.52
Writing			
U. of Phoenix	112.22	114.47	2.25
All institutions	113.74	115.21	1.47
Mathematics			
U. of Phoenix	109.47	112.65	3.18
All institutions	113.04	114.43	1.39

The MAPP, which was developed by the Educational Testing Service, is scored on a scale of 100 to 130. The test is used by about 300 institutions.

which Mr. Callan is an unpaid adviser), “to be part of the discussion on the outcomes of higher education.”

A MIXED REPORT CARD

In the report, some of those outcomes look better than others. “It certainly is not perfect,” said Mr. Pepicello of some of the test scores. “It is where we are.”

In its report, Phoenix shows the results from its 1,966 students who took the MAPP test this year, compared with the national sample of more than 376,000 students from about 300 institutions.

In reading, critical thinking, and writing, Phoenix freshmen scored below those in the population over all, but the change between those scores and those of its seniors was greater than for the population at large. The change was more marked in mathematics, although Phoenix freshmen and seniors’ scores were both notably lower than those of the whole test-taking pool.

Bill Wynne, the MAPP test-product specialist at ETS, said that without knowing more about the makeup of the comparative samples and other information, it was not possible to characterize the statistical significance of the gains the university was reporting, except that they were at least as good as those reported by the national cross section. “The magnitude of the change is in the eye of the beholder,” he said.

Mr. Pepicello said he wished the seniors’ scores were higher, particularly in math, but he considered all of the findings positive because they indicated that students improve when they attend. “This doesn’t embarrass me,” he said. “This is really good information for us to really improve our institution.”

(Phoenix did not track the progress of individual students, but MAPP officials said the university’s pool of freshmen and seniors taking the test appeared to be large enough and random enough to justify its using different groups of students for comparisons.)

In another test, involving a smaller pool of students, the Phoenix students’ “information literacy” skills at such tasks as evaluating sources and understanding economic, legal, and social issues were also comparable to or significantly higher than the mean scores in several categories. Adam Honea, the provost, said the findings from the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills test, developed at Kent State University, were important to Phoenix, since “information literacy is a goal of ours.”

The report includes data on the university’s degree-completion rates that differ from those found in national reports, because those graduation-rate reports track only students who enter as first-time freshmen; most of Phoenix’s students enter with some college credits. The Phoenix report shows that 27 percent

of its students graduate at the associate-degree level, which is the same as the national rate; 38 percent at the bachelor’s level (versus 43 percent nationally); and 60 percent at the graduate level (versus 61 percent nationally).

But because the university caters to students who have jobs, have delayed entry to college after high school, have families, or have other characteristics known to contribute to dropping out of college, the report also assesses the university’s degree-completion rates in comparison with statistics from national studies on students with similar characteristics.

In that analysis Phoenix’s results are far better. For students with two risk factors, the bachelor’s completion rate at Phoenix was about 55 percent, compared with 20 percent for the national pool; for students with five risk factors, the Phoenix completion rate was more than 30 percent, while the national rate was less than 20 percent.

Such students “are much more likely to finish in our world,” said Mr. Pepicello.

DIVERSE POPULATIONS

The report also shows that the university’s student body and faculty are more diverse than those in higher education at large. At Phoenix, more than 15 percent of the 22,000 full- and part-time faculty members are African-American, and nearly 6 percent are Hispanic, as of 2008. Nationally, based on statistics in the report from 2005, about 5 percent were African-American and about 3 percent were Hispanic.

The student population at Phoenix is about 25 percent African-American (compared with 12 percent nationally in 2005) and nearly 13 percent Hispanic (compared with 10 percent nationally).

The report is also likely to stir some controversy on another front: It seeks to show that despite the indirect government subsidies the University of Phoenix receives, it saves taxpayers money, while other institutions cost them thousands of dollars per student.

The report does so with an analysis—which the university fully expects to ignite some debate—that calculates the costs of state financing, Pell Grants, and federal loan subsidies but also the taxes paid by Phoenix and the taxes forgone to federal and state treasuries from nonprofit colleges’ earnings on endowments and gifts.

By that calculation, Phoenix officials contend, a typical public university costs the public \$11,700 per student, a typical private one more than \$9,200, and a typical for-profit college only \$22 per student. By contrast, Phoenix officials say their institution saves the public more than \$322 per student, largely because of the taxes its corporate parent pays.



For web posting only. Bulk printing prohibited.