

One of the Nation's Largest Colleges Is Re-Examining Its Entire Curriculum

By [ELYSE ASHBURN](#)

Miami Dade College offers about 2,000 courses in programs as disparate as drama and veterinary technology. And over the next two years, the college plans to examine every single one of those courses to determine what key skills they are and are not teaching students.

The massive undertaking is an answer to the increasing push from lawmakers, businesses, and college leaders themselves to ensure that students leave higher education able to communicate clearly, analyze data, and think creatively.

"The idea isn't so much that these things aren't already being taught in the classroom," said Lois J. Willoughby, a social-sciences professor and co-chair of a committee working to improve student learning. "By and large, they are," she said, "but we're making them more intentional."

The effort officially gets under way today, with the signing of a "learning-outcomes covenant" at the college's main campus in Miami. Sara Martinez Tucker, the U.S. under secretary of education, plans to be present for the event as part of a nationwide tour of colleges.

"We don't take positions on local college issues," said Trey Ditto, a department spokesman. "But the fact that we're there shows that we do applaud their efforts to create more accountability, which is in line with the objectives set out by the Spellings commission."

That panel, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, included among its recommendations to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings a year ago that colleges should devise tangible measures of how much students actually learn.

Miami Dade, one of the largest colleges in the country, with about 160,000 students, has the heft to potentially affect the debate about how best to do that.

The college, which has both two-year and four-year programs, got input from faculty members, administrators, and local businesses to come up with the 10 key skills it believes all graduating students need to take away with their diplomas (see list below). Those competencies include things like computer skills, ethical thinking, and global perspectives.

The goal of the curriculum review is not to make sure that every course teaches every key skill, but rather to make sure that no student can go through an entire program of study without being exposed to all 10. "We'll see if majors are leaving something out, and I do think we'll see areas

where the curriculum needs to shift and change," said Pamela Menke, associate provost for academic affairs.

Several faculty members, with help from consultants, have developed tests that will gauge students' proficiency in the key areas. Last year the college tested about a fifth of its graduating students to get initial data, and administrators plan to continue testing students to assess how any curriculum changes affect student learning over time.

The data won't allow Miami Dade to compare its students' performance to that of students at other colleges. But administrators said the effort is mostly about self-assessment and improvement. "We aren't using a standardized test bought off the shelf because we really didn't think that would be the best way to assess what our students are capable of," said Norma Martin Goonen, provost for academic and student affairs.

She noted that the college does participate in state testing and national surveys, like the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, that allow administrators to broadly compare the college with peer institutions.

10 Key Skills That Miami Dade College Wants Students to Acquire

1. To communicate effectively using listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.
2. To use quantitative analytical skills to evaluate and process numerical data.
3. To solve problems using critical and creative thinking, and scientific reasoning.
4. To formulate strategies to locate, evaluate, and apply information.
5. To demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures, including global and historical perspectives.
6. To create strategies that can be used to fulfill personal, civic, and social responsibilities.
7. To demonstrate knowledge of ethical thinking and its application to issues in society.
8. To use computer and emerging technologies effectively.
9. To demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities.
10. To describe how natural systems function, and recognize the impact of human beings on the environment.