New Instrument Helps Ensure Accessibility
As we closed another academic year in May, I was reminded that 2009 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Peabody College’s merger with Vanderbilt University. In the decades since that event, Peabody has moved from regional leadership in education to national and international prominence.

Thirty years ago, few would have forecast this outcome. The dire financial straits which brought about the whirlwind Vanderbilt-Peabody courtship made it all too likely that Peabody would face major alterations to its traditional mission in education and human development.

Instead, Peabody has continued to deliver innovative undergraduate programs, reform-minded graduate education, and research leadership across a swath of disciplines, including special education.

Today, our enrollments and faculty size approximate historic highs. Our students are drawn from a national pool of the highly talented, and our faculty members are recognized as among the most accomplished scholars in their fields. Peabody, in short, is more vibrant than ever.

I find it helpful to bear this in mind while surveying the current economic landscape, or reading news stories about the financial crisis in higher education, or encountering another lament about the broken nature of U.S. education. The right combination of reality checks, openness to change, and creative scholarship can yield impressive fruits.

These are surely tough times, but they are leavened with opportunity. We hope that Ideas in Action contains information which may suggest opportunities to readers, as well. Please enjoy this latest snapshot of Peabody College.

With best wishes,

Camilla P. Benbow
Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education
and Human Development
NEW RESEARCH INSTITUTE WILL FOCUS ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES

Peabody gained the expertise of some old hands in a new form this fall with the establishment of the Peabody Research Institute (PRI). The institute maintains a permanent staff of researchers who offer a high level of methodological expertise. Most were formerly with the Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology, which was affiliated with the Vanderbilt Institute of Public Policy Studies.

PRI will conduct research aimed at improving the effectiveness of programs for children, youth, and families. This work may include educational programs as well as other interventions aimed at improving child and family well-being. Institute staff will also collaborate with and provide ongoing support to Peabody faculty on grants, including providing advice on experimental and quasi-experimental education research.

Under the direction of Mark Lipsey, research professor, and Dale Farran, professor of education and psychology, PRI brought with it a number of active projects, including several using meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment for adolescents, the development of evidence-based practice guidelines for juvenile justice programs in Arizona and Tennessee, an evaluation of the effects of a middle school conflict resolution program in Ohio, a meta-analysis of predictors of school success and failure from longitudinal studies, an analysis of achievement gains for pre-K children in classrooms using the Opening the World of Learning curriculum, development of intervention fidelity measures for a pre-K curriculum intervention, and the effects of a pre-K math curriculum when scaled-up for multi-site implementation.

More information about PRI can be found at peabody.vanderbilt.edu/PRI

SUSAN GRAY SCHOOL HONORED WITH NATIONAL ACCREDITATION

Peabody’s Susan Gray School has achieved national accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The school is one of the first in the nation to achieve accreditation under NAECY’s new, more extensive and more stringent standards, which were released in the fall of 2006. NAECY accreditation can help families find high-quality early childhood education programs for their children. To achieve NAECY accreditation, programs volunteer to be measured against national standards for education, health and safety. More than 8,000 early childhood education programs around the U.S. were accredited under the old system, and each must re-apply for accreditation to meet the new standards.

The Susan Gray School’s accreditation is valid until 2013.

The Council made a commitment this year to develop a pilot project on the campus of a Tennessee college or university for post-secondary students who have an intellectual disability and did not receive a high school diploma,” said Council Executive Director Wanda Willis. “Continuing education programs like this are increasingly available on college campuses across the country. At present, Tennessee does not have a similar program available anywhere in the state.”

Vanderbilt will accept its first students in January 2010, after an initial planning year. Working with university, Medical Center, and community disability organizations, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center faculty, staff, and trainees will develop a daytime program that lasts for two years per student.

Each year, eight young adults will take a mixture of undergraduate, life-skills, and technical courses, as well as take part in campus extracurricular activities with Vanderbilt undergraduates.

“The National Association for the Education of Young Children can be found on the Web at naeyc.org. For the Susan Gray School, visit peabody.vanderbilt.edu/sgs.

VANDERBILT TO OFFER STATE’S FIRST POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VKC UCEDD) has received a three-year grant from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities to develop and coordinate a college program for students with intellectual disabilities.

Vanderbilt’s program will be the first of its kind in Tennessee to offer structured post-high school education for these students.

“The Council made a commitment this year to develop a pilot project on the campus of a Tennessee college or university for post-secondary students who have an intellectual disability and did not receive a high school diploma,” said VKC UCEDD Co-Director Elise McMillan. McMillan and Professor of Special Education Robert Hodapp are lead faculty on the grant. Hodapp also is VKC UCEDD Research Director.

For more information on the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center’s University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, visit kc.vanderbilt.edu/site/ucedd/.

SPECIAL COURSE TAPS FEDERAL POLICYMAKING EXPERTISE

Two federal policymakers, Kerri Briggs, assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education for the U.S. Department of Education, and Catherine Freeman, senior program officer for the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science, co-taught a new special topics course in education policy at Peabody College this spring. Both Briggs and Freeman are Peabody alumni.

“We are very excited to be able to tap the expertise of two individuals who have played important roles in the formulation of recent federal education policy,” Camilla P. Renbow, Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development, said. “The course exposed our students to firsthand knowledge of policymaking at a very high level.”

The course, The Development and Implementation of Federal Education Policy, examined the intersection between politics and policy and the institutions and variables – political, legal, financial or public relations – that affect the way issues are resolved. It was designed to

To learn more about the program, visit peabody.vanderbilt.edu/idus.xml.

NEW MASTER’S PROGRAM focuSes on DIVERSITY

Beginning fall 2009, Peabody College will add a new master’s degree program to its roster of programs aimed at working professionals. Learning, Diversity and Urban Studies is a non-licensure program for teachers or others who aspire to understand how diversity influences learning both in classroom and non-classroom settings.

The 30-hour program is based in non-classroom settings. Professor Karon Nicol LeCompte, who directs the program, said that graduates can expect to “strengthen their class-room teaching; pursue positions in other settings, like museums or nonprofit organizations; or move into leadership positions in public schools as diversity officers, professional development coordinators, or curriculum coordinators.”

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CHINESE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS VISIT NASHVILLE, VANDERBILT

Twenty Chinese principals were in Nashville and at Vanderbilt University in the fall to learn the latest information about U.S. education policy and see American classrooms and techniques firsthand.

The program, Educational Leadership Learning Exchange (ELLE), is a partnership between Peabody College, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools and South China Normal University.

“Educational evaluation, teacher development and instructional planning are at the core of many of the principals’ discussions. Seeing these topics through the cultural lens of each cohort yields deep and unique learning opportunities,” Xiu Cravens, assistant dean for international affairs, said. “The principals of each group have continued to capture both the successes of best practices and the ever-present challenges of educating young people of today.”

During the two-week program, participants visited area schools, heard lectures from Peabody education experts, shadowed local teachers and got a taste of Music City through a variety of cultural activities including dinner at the Country Music Hall of Fame, attending a Predators hockey game, dinner at the Adventure Science Center, a visit to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, a celebration with the local Chinese community and much more.

Based on the program’s success over the last three years, the partnership has been extended for three more years.

“The new three-year agreement will focus on instructional leadership for school principals, especially in the areas of building a professional learning community and the enhancement of mathematics and science learning for K-12 students,” Cravens said.

Since the partnership began in 2005, a group of Nashville school administrators and Peabody faculty have traveled twice to South China Normal University, located in the city of Guangzhou.

Additional information about ELLE can be found at www.vanderbilt.edu/lcpeabody/ELLE/ELLEHome.htm.
Findings

We found that the TEEG program has been received most favorably in schools where the program was implemented for two consecutive years.

Not surprisingly, the size of the award was also important, as revealed by teacher turnover rates. “The probability of turnover increased sharply among teachers receiving no bonus award or a relatively small award, while it greatly decreased among teachers receiving large bonus awards,” Springer said.

In addition to data about TEEG, the report includes background information in program design impacted teachers’ attitudes toward performance pay policies, their reported satisfaction with the TEEG program and their professional practice.

“Some of the most significant areas we have found so far associated with program success are how schools determine teachers’ eligibility for awards, how those awards are structured and how schools are selected to participate in the programs,” Springer said. At the same time, he cautions about placing too much weight on year two results. “We need to remain patient, remembering what looks promising in the short-run may not be the case in later years. More time is needed to determine the full potential of bonus programs such as TEEG.”

The report presents findings of the first two years of a planned five-year study being conducted by NCPI under a contract with the Texas Education Agency. Scholars from Texas A&M University, University of Missouri – Columbia, and Corporation for Public School Education K-16 were key collaborators on the report. Data about the impact of the TEEG program on student performance is still being collected and analyzed.

“Future evaluation initiatives will continue to explore how the unique characteristics of these state-funded programs — and the plans designed by their participants — influence the quality of teaching and student learning within Texas public schools,” Springer said.

A report detailing NCPI’s evaluation findings of the Governor’s Educator Excellence Grant program — a state-funded performance pay program that operated in 99 Texas public schools from 2005-06 to 2007-08 school years — will be released in 2009. The report focuses on outcomes related to teacher attitudes and behavior, institutional and organizational dynamics, teacher turnover and student achievement gains.

Calculators okay in math class, if students know the facts first

Calculators are useful tools in elementary mathematics classes, if students already have some basic skills, new research has found. The findings shed light on the debate about whether and when calculators should be used in the classroom.

“The study indicates technology such as calculators can help kids who already have a strong foundation in basic skills,” Kmicikewycz, now a teacher in New York City public schools, said.

“For students who did not know many multiplication facts, generating the answers on their own, without a calculator, was important and helped their performance on subsequent tests,” Rittle-Johnson added. “But for students who already knew some multiplication facts, it didn’t matter — using a calculator to practice neither helped nor harmed them.”

The researchers compared third graders’ performance on multiplication problems after they had spent a class period working on other multiplication problems. Some of the students spent that class period generating answers on their own, while others simply read the answers from a calculator. All students used a calculator to check their answers.

The researchers found that the calculator’s effect on subsequent performance depended on how much the students know to begin with. For those students who already had some multiplication skills, using the calculator before taking the test had no impact. But for those who were not good at multiplying, use of the calculator had a negative impact on their performance.

The researchers also found that the students using calculators were able to practice more problems and had fewer errors.

“Teachers struggle with how to give kids immediate feedback, which we know speeds the learning process. So, another use for calculators is allowing students to use them to check the answers they have come up with by themselves, giving them immediate feedback and more time for practice,” Rittle-Johnson said.

And, for many of the students, using calculators was simply fun.

“Kids enjoyed them. It’s one way to make memorizing your multiplication facts a more interesting thing to do,” Kmicikewycz added.

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Their concern is fueled in part by the recession and in part by
that previous entering classes had assumed was a given.
financial aid packages and deeply wary of taking on the
debt to a wider range of schools. Many were in search of the
best of high school seniors submitted record numbers of
applications in higher education politics and policy, including finance. He
receives his share of calls looking for expert commentary on
William R. Doyle, assistant professor of higher education,
Along with Public Agenda, NCPPHE conducted opinion research
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and fees increase 439 percent. Lawmakers, education policy
Lawmakers, education policy experts, and the public all believe that college is rapidly
becoming unaffordable.

Along with Public Agenda, NCPPHE conducted opinion research in
December that showed 67 percent of those surveyed believed
that access to higher education is a problem for many qualified
students. Still, the cost of higher education has not deterred
access,” he says, “we always go back to cost and price. Costs
have risen faster than income, faster than inflation, faster even
than health care. ‘This has been consistent and it has gone on
over time. The percentage of students borrowing to fund their
educations has increased, and they are borrowing more.’

According to Doyle, while the solutions are complex, the issue
can be straightforwardly defined. “When it comes to college
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Lawmakers, education policy experts, and the
public all believe that college is rapidly becoming
unaffordable to many qualified students.

Michael K. McLendon, associate professor of public policy
and higher education and associate dean and chief of staff at
Peabody, says a number of “chronic challenges” are responsible
for cost increases. They include the labor intensive nature of
the education sector, which means high costs for health care
and benefits; the end of mandatory retirement; the rapid growth
of state Medicaid expenditures, which has sapped state
appropriations; and investments in information technology.

“There has also been, over the past decade or two, a higher
education arms race,” McLendon says. “There are costs associ-
ated with intense competition and prestige seeking throughout
U.S. higher education.” This competition has led to a wide range
of large capital investments to attract both talented faculty
and students.

While federal and state governments are still major players
in higher education funding, cost increases have been born
primarily by students and families. The Delta Project on Post-
secondary Education Costs, Productivity, and Accountability
has collected data showing state appropriations per student
decreased from 2002-2005. While they made up some ground
in 2006, appropriations have not returned to previous levels.
Over time, students’ share of educational costs at public four-
year institutions has gone from one third to nearly one half. In
the private sector, students enrolled in master’s or bachelor’s
institutions pay 75-85 percent of their educational costs.

In the current recession, families are thinking twice before
borrowing to pay their share. Some have had no choice.
The fall in home values has meant that families have less
equity to borrow against to send their students to school. With
unemployment rising and worried about their own
job security, parents also are reluctant to take on additional
debt, whether through home equity loans or other means.

When credit markets froze in the fall, many private lenders
stopped making student loans, and the government was
forced to intervene.

All the parties in the funding equation are scrambling. “What
we are seeing in the current economic climate is movement
in all directions,” says Doyle. Of particular concern is a “pathol-
ogy” he describes that occurs during economic downturns, one
that can be deeply counter productive. During bad times, state
institutions raise tuition significantly just as incomes go down
and unemployment goes up. This reduces college opportunity
for low-income students. On the other hand, when the econ-
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on tuition increases, thus precluding the opportunity to build
reserves.

Doyle, who was raised in California, is paying special attention
to what is happening in his home state. Systems for the University
of California and California State University have raised their respec-
tive tuitions by 10 and 9.3 percent for the coming year. They are
also turning away students. “This year is the first time ever that
San Jose State University turned down eligible students,” Doyle
says. Perhaps most worrying, Governor Arnold Schwarzeneg-
ger has proposed eliminating the Cal Grant program, which has
been in operation since the 1950s and which experts laud for
its focus on low-income students. The proposal would wipe
out planned grants to more than 118,000 entering students.
Current students also could see their aid cut
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The federal government has a role in student aid by making grants to qualified students, and as both a direct lender and a guarantor of private lending. While Pell Grant limits have been increased, says McLendon, “The grant has lost much of its purchasing power over the last 30 years. Today the Pell grant covers merely 40 percent of the cost of attendance of an average public four-year institution and less than 13 percent of the cost of attendance at a private four-year college or university.”

The Obama administration has voiced a strong commitment to student aid, and is seeking to turn the Pell grant into an entitlement program. To fund it, the administration plans to eliminate the Family Federal Education Loan Program, which subsidizes college lending by the banks, and to shift the savings into the Federal Direct Student Loan Program. Doyle is not sure the effort will succeed. While costs for direct loans are lower than for the FFELP, he thinks scaling up direct lending poses an enormous challenge. Private, as well as nonprofit, lenders are protesting that they are being cut out of the picture and will likely fight to retain some kind of role as originators or servicers of direct loans. And while institutions have long wanted a Pell entitlement, many financial aid administrators argue that the FFELP creates competition among lenders, improves choice, and helps to reduce loan defaults. It remains to be seen how the current debate will play out. In the short-term, more families may benefit from expanded tuition tax credits.

Colleges and universities have sought to minimize tuition increases by developing new sources of revenue, even as they have been raising their prices. Charitable giving has soared, as does the research enterprise and technology transfer. Institutional efforts have not been sufficient, however, to mitigate cost increases in what has become a very competitive sector. The recession has also meant that private colleges and universities have lost billions in their endowments. The effects have been widespread and deeply felt on campuses, through budget cuts, hiring freezes, and more strenuous actions. Despite endowment losses, the vast majority of private institutions offering bachelor’s or master’s degrees derive most of their revenue, in the range of 80 to 90 percent, from tuition. For these colleges and universities, as with airlines, the worst thing is an empty seat. “They have grown very sophisticated at adjusting their prices,” says Doyle, by adopting various enrollment management models, depending on their institutional goals. To differing degrees, institutions choose whether to emphasize enrolling students who are highly talented but require more aid, or enrolling students capable of paying full tuition. This spring, several private institutions acknowledged efforts to recruit more of the latter.

Ironically, Doyle points out, “An institution can use up much of its financial aid budget by enticing well-off students with small grants. This leaves many of the truly needy without the larger financial aid packages that would allow them to attend.” Many public universities are beginning to adopt enrollment management strategies similar to those of private institutions.

Despite the wealth of negative news, both Doyle and McLendon see opportunities within the affordability challenges currently facing higher education, if people are willing to look for them.

Doyle believes we need to have more discussion about college costs throughout society, and especially between states and their higher education institutions. State financing used to be a relatively stable form of revenue, he says, though in recent years the boom and bust cycle of state financing has become more pronounced. He reported on the trend at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April. There is a need, Doyle says, for stronger partnerships between state systems and state governments to moderate these fluctuations. “Both sides could do a lot better,” he says. “Institutions tend to think of the high points in funding as the norm, and they need to do a better job of anticipating the down years. States, on the other hand, should stop using their financial aid budget by enticing well-off students with small grants. This leaves many of the truly needy without the larger financial aid packages that would allow them to attend.”

In terms of federal funding, Doyle says the government needs to make sure the PELL grant is sufficient to cover costs by tying it to some kind of index, perhaps income. By putting more money on the table, the government may have an opportunity to incentivize different behaviors by states and institutions. He also thinks the federal government needs to recognize the role its own regulations play in driving costs. Many research universities are struggling under the weight of regulatory overhead, particularly in areas like health care and the social sciences.

McLendon has outlined several areas of opportunity he sees for institutions. These include: cutting weaker programs or those with less societal impact, focusing on core areas of institutional distinction, conducting more rigorous assessments of student development and establishing output measures, and pursuing innovative degree and pricing strategies. Families, McLendon says, also “should begin preparing earlier and more aggressively for children’s education. Not only do families no longer have government to rely upon for subsidizing their children’s education, as they did in the 1960s, now they may question whether the equity markets are as reliable as they had once been.”

When it comes to financial aid, Doyle believes the goal should be clearly focused on college entrance and those students with the greatest financial need. “We need to keep the students on the margin foremost in mind. Right now there is overwhelming support for higher education, and there seems to be no support for discriminating on the basis of income.”

To watch a video of Michael McLendon lecturing on Funding American Higher Education visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEmZykM2ZM &feature=channel_page.

William R. Doyle

One trend Professor William Doyle has been observing closely is the growth of merit-based state scholarship programs. In the early 1990s, Georgia established its HOPE scholarship program. Other states quickly adopted similar programs. In general, the programs award scholarships based on students’ academic performance in high school and encourage college attendance in-state.

It is not entirely clear how these programs became popular. Doyle said, “We’ve speculated about the influence of conservative ideology—reciprocity rather than entitlement—about a desire to stem brain drain, or a need for better incentives to encourage college attendance. We did not find a relationship to political leanings, but there are relationships to academic performance and continuation.” Whatever the reason, the programs are popular with middle-income voters, who view them as another means to help pay for college.

Increasingly, though, student aid administrators and policymakers are voicing concern that merit-based programs siphon off crucial funds from need-based programs. According to the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs, in 1996-97, need-based grants made up 84 percent of total grants. By 2006-07, the percentage had dropped to 72.

Doyle says that for middle income students, the question is not so much whether they will go to college but where they will go. For students from low-income backgrounds, the question is whether they will go. “Public policy hasn’t kept up with what we know,” he says. “There needs to be more recognition that we have to apply the money at the margins.” But it is unclear whether low-income families carry the political clout to bring about the needed changes in financial aid.
A new collaboration between Vanderbilt Peabody researchers, public school teachers, and local agencies promises to improve the language and literacy skills of young learners in Nashville and may provide a model for professional development of pre-kindergarten teachers elsewhere.

Peabody faculty members Deborah Rowe and David Dickinson, in partnership with Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools and other community agencies, won a three-year, $3.4 million federal grant in September to strengthen language and literacy skills in pre-kindergarten classrooms. Their project is entitled Enhanced Language and Literacy Success (ELL Success). “Our goal is to use this project to build models of professional development and pre-k instruction that can be disseminated throughout MNPS and other Tennessee districts,” Deborah Rowe, associate professor of early childhood education and a project co-leader, said. The project is one of just 31 funded nationally by the U.S. Department of Education through its Early Reading First grant program. A second Tennessee project, centered in Nashville elementary schools: Alex Glenview Elementary, Kirkpatrick Elementary, Stratton Elementary and Warner Elementary.

Over three years, the project will serve approximately 700 children enrolled in 31 pre-k Title I classrooms in seven Metropolitan Nashville elementary schools: Alex Green Elementary, Cumberland Elementary, Glenn Enhanced Option, Glenview Elementary, Kirkpatrick Elementary, Stratton Elementary and Warner Elementary.

**HOW IT WORKS**

ELL Success will provide professional development, literacy coaches, classroom materials and other programmatic supports for pre-k teachers and their students. Classroom implementation began in January.

At the center of the effort is the Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum, developed by Dickinson and Judith Schickendanz of Boston University. OWL offers a comprehensive early learning curriculum, with daily routines, activity centers, and an emphasis on written materials. The curriculum systematically teaches vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and letter knowledge across varied settings. For example, each OWL unit guides teachers in introducing 100 new words that increase vocabulary, are useful in the classroom, and help children understand stories. High quality story books and non-fiction works are incorporated in OWL units, as well. Teachers will receive instruction in large and small groups on how to use the curriculum and will be taught methods for encouraging and teaching emergent writing in addition to using OWL. Throughout the program, student learning and instructional quality will be monitored (see the accompanying sidebar), and teachers will receive feedback on how to improve their instructional techniques.

The Vanderbilt-based project team will collaborate with Gregory, the pre-k teachers and principals in the selected schools, and Tywanna Peoples, MNPS pre-k coordinator, to implement the program.

**ADDRESSING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY**

Three of the included schools have high numbers of English language learners, comprising 22 percent to 62 percent of the school populations. These students, the researchers say, will benefit from classroom experiences designed to build their language and literacy skills in English while celebrating the fact that children know more than one language. "Some of the participating elementary schools serve significant numbers of families who speak languages other than English, and our project has specific features designed to support English language learners," Rowe said. "The program increases the emphasis on pre-school writing, offering library programs to help foster home literacy and implementing a summer program operated by the YMCA to reduce summer learning loss and smooth the transition to kindergarten." The YMCA of Middle Tennessee and the Nashville Public Library are both involved in the project.

Classrooms will help children learn English as well as support learning of their first languages by providing books and strategies for the children's families to use at home. The goal is to help students use their growing language skills as a resource for learning English. Research has shown that bilingual competence contributes to long-term literacy while also fostering the ability of children to maintain strong family connections and a positive sense of self.

**Measuring the Success of ELL Success**

ELL Success has set ambitious goals for improving the language and literacy outcomes of its student participants, including those who are English Language Learners. The goal is for all children to demonstrate age-appropriate understandings and skills in the following areas:

- English vocabulary and associated word knowledge
- Comprehension and production of connected discourse
- Automatic letter recognition
- Phonological awareness and segmentation, and knowledge of letter/sound correspondences
- Purposes and conventions of print

Technology, too, will play a role, in this case by helping teachers to know whether children are learning new words and language structures. For example, Words We Know is a receptive vocabulary assessment tool that will be administered using the Livescribe smartpen, which automatically records children’s responses. After use, the pen is docked and responses are automatically uploaded to a data base that generates output for that child and links it to prior performances. Data will be sent automatically to the literacy coach who will print out the bar graph, share results with the teacher, and discuss strategies for supporting individuals.

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**By Melanie Moran & Kurt Redbeck**

"This will better prepare our pre-k children to be successful in their kindergarten experience..." —Denise Gregory

Word Up! ELL Success
New Instrument Helps Ensure Accessibility

Standardized testing is an inescapable part of modern education, however, these tests often fail to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Vanderbilt University Learning Sciences Institute researchers Stephen N. Elliott, Peter A. Beddow and Ryan J. Kettler have developed a decision-making instrument called the Test Accessibility and Modification Inventory (TAMI) to address the issue of accessibility for students with special needs.

“This tool, the TAMI, should help all test developers systematically apply principles of universal design to advance the accessibility of tests for all students, not just students identified with disabilities. TAMI is helping test developers achieve their dual goals of better tests and better testing practices,” Elliott, Dunn Family Professor of Education, director of the Learning Sciences Institute and director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Educational Psychology, said. “Teachers and test developers alike have told us that the TAMI advances their goals of better and more inclusive assessment for students with disabilities. These educators eagerly tell us that these students have learned significantly more than they had previously been able to show on less accessible tests.”

“We define accessibility as ‘the extent to which an environment, product or service eliminates barriers and permits equal access to all components and services for all individuals’,” Beddow, a research assistant in special education and a member of the Learning Sciences Institute, said. “In the case of standardized testing, this means developing assessment tools that do not place students at a disadvantage because of difficulties with reading, comprehension or other problems when it comes to being able to understand the question posed and its corresponding answer set.”

The researchers emphasize that they are not using TAMI to water down standardized tests, but instead to make the tests more appropriate to the students taking it, while ensuring that the knowledge being assessed and demonstrated is of the same depth.

“We anticipated that there would be a need for a tool that could be used to analyze and modify test items for this purpose because of our involvement with a similar project, the Consortium for Alternate Assessment Validity and Experimental Studies,” Beddow said.

Recent regulations under NCLB permit states to create separate tests for students in special education who have demonstrated past difficulties with standardized assessments. These students must all have Individual Education Plans and need to be identified as having a disability that is believed to be the cause of their failure to perform at expected grade level.

The researchers began by developing an item modification guide that was used to modify a set of questions given to students with and without identified disabilities, and in both their original and modified forms. They partnered with testing boards in Indiana, Idaho, Arizona and Hawaii to carry out their initial research.

“The findings largely confirmed our hypothesis,” Beddow said. “We were able to close the achievement gap with the regularly performing students by modifying the questions that might have been problematic for students with special needs.”

TAMI is the result of a thorough revision of this initial guide. It consists of two parts: an item analysis, which uses multiple categories with detailed rubrics to judge the actual questions, and a computer-based test analysis that can be used to assess the accessibility of a specific computer-based test delivery system. The item analysis takes into account factors like the clarity of the question’s wording, whether or not necessary visuals are included and the choice of wrong answers, which are the parts of standardized tests that can be problematic for students with special needs. Revising questions with an aim towards streamlining and simplifying unnecessarily complex questions is the focus of the item analysis.

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— Peter A. Beddow

High Stakes Tests: Why TAMI is Important

In the seven years since No Child Left Behind began issuing mandates to public schools, high-stakes testing has taken on an increasingly larger role in students’ academic careers. Nationally administered tests, like the SAT or ACT, are constantly evolving to meet the needs of both students and educational institutions and are still one of the best single indicators of future academic success. High-stakes testing is administered at the state level, however, are not always subjected to the same amount of scrutiny when it comes to addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities. Yet they are being used more and more for making important decisions regarding grade-level promotions, teacher performance bonuses and whether or not students graduate high school.

“Modifying these types of tests is not just a matter of ensuring computer literacy,” Beddow said. “It is also about making sure that the screen is legible, that answer selection is simple and intuitive, and that audio is available to those who need it. The goal of this part of TAMI is to make sure that the computers are not further complicating the test or altering the validity of the students’ responses.”

Research is continuing into how TAMI might be used to influence future assessments for all students.

Kettler is a research assistant professor of special education and a member of the Learning Sciences Institute.

The project was funded by an Enhanced Assessment Grant from the U.S. Department of Education in the Consortium for Alternate Assessment Validity and Experimental Studies.

TAMI is being distributed to state assessment departments and testing companies in all 50 states. The instrument is currently available to be freely used by the public at www.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TAMI.xml.
SCHOOL CHOICE: EXAMINING CHARTER SCHOOLS, HOMESCHOOLING, VOUCHERS AND MORE

The Handbook of Research on School Choice—Mark Berends, Matthew G. Springer, Dale Ballou, and Herbert J. Walberg; Routledge, 2009

As parents and policymakers increasingly worry about the quality of public schools, alternatives such as charter schools, magnet schools and vouchers appear more attractive. But experts wonder: What difference do schools of choice make?

A new book from the National Center on School Choice at Vanderbilt explores that question from a variety of angles. The Handbook of Research on School Choice brings together top research on major forms of school choice, including their effectiveness, for charter schools, vouchers, homeschooled, magnet schools, private schools, virtual schools, supplementary education services and tuition tax credits.

The concept of school choice can no longer be defined as just school vouchers, tax credits and charter schools. Students in consistently low-performing traditional public schools can move to higher-performing traditional public schools, or attend after-school tutoring programs free of charge.

With this growth has come increased opportunities for many children who might not otherwise have had the chance to participate,” Matthew Springer, a co-author and director of Vanderbilt’s National Center on Performance Incentives, said.

The book was edited by National Center on School Choice Director Mark Berends, Vanderbilt’s Matthew Springer and Dale Ballou, associate professor of public policy and education, and Herbert J. Walberg, distinguished visiting fellow with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

Kennedy is chair of the Vanderbilt Peabody Department of Special Education. Erik Carter, M.Ed.’98, Ph.D.’04, is an assistant professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Lisa Cushing is an assistant professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.