

Chapter 1

Transforming the Graduate

I get it. This is about learning.

— Carlos Ramos, Envision student, reflecting on a realization that came to him halfway through a portfolio defense

It's twenty-seven days until Kaleb Lawson's graduation ceremony, and he has just been told that he is not ready to graduate.

Standing alone at the head of the room, Kaleb can't believe what he has just heard. His face is losing color, and he is struggling to maintain composure. The lights are too bright. The fan of the digital projector whirs too loudly.

The audience, loosely packed in rows of chairs that face Kaleb and the screen behind him, numbers around twenty, an assortment of fellow students, interested parents, and supportive teachers. Fronting the audience is a long table, behind which sit four adults who have been asking questions and taking notes. Obvious to anyone who has ever seen an episode of *American Idol*, this is a panel of judges.

One of the panelists, a digital media teacher named Mr. Harris, breaks an uncomfortable pause: "Your reflections on your leadership skills don't show the depth that we

are looking for. Plus, we don't see evidence that you have practiced this presentation enough. You relied way too heavily on your notes. You didn't make enough eye contact with your audience."

Staring at the floor, Kaleb nods slowly to acknowledge what he has heard. He is taking this hard. Preparation for this presentation was not a matter of days, weeks, or even months. This was years in the making. For the last forty-five minutes, he gave a presentation that told his entire high school story. He showed examples of his best academic work, reflected on his successes and failures, tried to make a case that he was ready to graduate.

"You're not ready, Kaleb," Mr. Harris continues. "You can do better than this. Work with your advisor to revise your reflections. Polish your delivery. In ten days, you need to make a second attempt."

WHY SCHOOLS NEED TO REDEFINE GRADUATION

We'll follow up on Kaleb's story later in the chapter. (Unsurprising spoiler alert: he passes on his second attempt.) But first, let us explain what we just witnessed.

In order to graduate, every Envision Schools student must go through what Kaleb did. We are not referring to the failing part, but the standing before a panel and making a sustained, evidence-based claim that one is ready to move on from high school. It is the culminating moment of what we call a Deeper Learning Student Assessment System, and it is what defines an Envision Schools education.

The concept is nothing revolutionary, an idea as old as the trial of the hero's journey and as traditional to education as the relationship between apprentice and master. It is the PhD defense, the bar exam, the IPO presentation, and the playoff game. Many learning journeys culminate with a challenge that draws on everything that you have learned to meet it, proving to all that you are ready to move on.

But how do we know when a high school student is ready to move on?

In most high schools in America, the de facto answer to that question seems both arbitrary and abstract. Four years of seat time, 120-something "credits." Perhaps a certain number on a standardized test. We count the inputs with one abstraction (course credits) and diffusely assess them with another abstraction (letter grades). After decades of this approach, our high schools have lost touch with any concrete sense of what their students know and are able to do at the end of four years. And with vague purpose have come uninspiring outcomes.

It's not OK. Every organization should know its purpose and should design itself accordingly. For institutions of learning, that purpose must articulate the future for its students. What do we want for our students? What are we preparing them for? What do we want them to know and be able to do by the time they move on? What kind of people do we want them to be?

Transforming a school must start with thoughtful answers to these big-picture, purpose-driven, goal-oriented questions. Although there are different ways to answer these questions legitimately, there are kinds of answers that we should not accept.

For one, the answers must come in the form of words, not numbers or symbols. Test scores, numerical school ratings, and statistics on grades are abstractions of reality, not descriptions of reality.

And a school's overarching goal must be framed around its students, not reflect circularly back on the school. A student's success is its own end; its purpose is not to make the school successful, which is effectively what happens when a school defines its goals in terms of its ranking based on test scores.

The mission of Envision Education—our particular answer to the question of purpose—is to prepare all students, especially those whose parents did not go to college, to succeed in college, career, and life.

Our mission may sound straightforward, but there is an ambitious nuance in the way we have framed our mission. Getting *into* a college is not how we define success for our students; graduating *from* college is where we have set the bar.

Having clearly defined the goal, we could now design our school. Once we had a vision for our students' future, we could establish what it would require to graduate, with all the skills and content knowledge and habits of mind that it would take to succeed in college.

Although the answer to that was not and is not easy, it is easy to see that the traditional graduation requirements are not adequate. An arbitrary number of credits earned over four years, perhaps a standardized test thrown in, will not cut it. Indeed, they don't.

“MAPPING BACKWARDS” FROM GRADUATION

In 1998, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe published a seminal book called *Understanding by Design*, a culmination of two decades of evolving thinking on how to assess student learning. As with many watershed moments in a field, their thesis resounded not because it was radical, but because it crystallized what our common sense already knew.



Teachers are designers, they argue, and belong to the field of design professionals that includes architects, engineers, and graphic artists. Students are the primary clients, and “the effectiveness of curriculum, assessment, and instructional designs is ultimately determined by their achievement of desired learnings” (p. 7).

Curriculum, then, is a means to an end. Therefore, the most effective way to design curriculum is “backward”: you start with the end—identifying the learning goal—and then map out the steps that will get you there.

Again, this is good common sense, but what made *Understanding by Design* such a landmark was not simply its call to map backwards but its challenge to make assessment the entry point of design:

Rather than creating assessments near the conclusion of a unit of study . . . backward design reminds us to begin with the question, What would we accept as evidence that students have attained the desired understandings and proficiencies—*before* proceeding to plan teaching and learning experiences? (p. 8)

Though built on the thinking of those who came before, Wiggins and McTighe’s eloquent spin on curricular design caught us at the right time, a turn-of-the-century moment when the American collective consciousness started to question its approach to education. Fifteen years later, “mapping backwards” is now a stock phrase in the world of education, and performance assessment has gone from a commonsense idea to common wisdom to a mandate of the Common Core.

We summarize *Understanding by Design* not simply because we believe in it but because we seek to broaden its scope. Schools themselves, not just the courses offered within them, are a means to an end. Like teachers, school leaders are designers. Everything that Wiggins and McTighe say about the design of a course can and should be applied to the design of a school.

This is the thinking that informed the design of Envision Schools. If we were to begin with the end, we had to start by envisioning the graduate. And if we were to gather evidence that the graduate was indeed ready to move on, we needed to design a meaningful and holistic assessment of the graduate. To apply backwards design to a school as a whole, there had to be something substantive and rigorous from which to map backwards—not simply a ceremony handing out diplomas.

The solution that emerged is our Deeper Learning Student Assessment System.

Once it was in place, we discovered that such a cumulative assessment system is the single most effective way to move from having a school mission to living a school



mission. It has become our unifying theory—the element of school transformation that catalyzes all the others.

DEFINING SUCCESS: KNOW, DO, AND REFLECT

Before designing a way to measure our graduates, we had to determine what to measure. As we've said, the goal for our students is college success. We are not content with getting students into college; we want them to navigate the university with confidence in their knowledge and skills and with perseverance in the face of inevitable adversity. Put more plainly, we want them to graduate instead of drop out.

Research by such thinkers as David Conley (2005) helped us take inventory of what's needed for success in college. When Conley surveyed professors on this question, they responded with a refrain: intellectual skills and habits of mind; “these were considered by many faculty to be more important than specific content knowledge” (p. 173).

The professors emphasized some of the general skills we would expect: critical thinking, analytical thinking, problem solving, reading and writing skills. But they were equally adamant about the importance of certain attitudes:

an inquisitive nature and interest in taking advantage of what a research university has to offer; willingness to accept critical feedback and to adjust based on such feedback; openness to possible failures from time to time; and ability and desire to cope with frustrating and ambiguous learning tasks. (p. 173)

The implications of Conley's study were clear as day: the high school must do more than teach content to its students; it must teach intellectual skills and instill habits of mind.

The next step was exciting but daunting: How do we wrestle this complex picture of what it takes to be a successful student in college into a measurable and manageable set of outcomes for our high school students? Our mission statement was too general. The state standards were incomplete. What we needed to create was our own *graduate profile*.

Key term: graduate profile—a community-wide vision statement describing what a learner should know and be able to do before he or she graduates from the school

In creating our graduate profile, we didn't have the luxury of working from a clean slate. We are still living in traditional structures. Colleges still have course-credit requirements and are still looking at transcripts and test scores. Our state still has content standards; our district has curricular requirements. Content knowledge hasn't lost its importance; it's just sharing space.

In the end, we structured and balanced our graduate profile around three simple verbs: **know**, **do**, and **reflect**. The prepared graduate *knows* the content and the discrete skills of her academic subjects. She can *do* what typical college courses demand (research, analyze, inquire, and create) using her intellectual, interpersonal, and executive skills to make things happen. And she has the ability to *reflect*, a habit of self-awareness and revision that sets her on the path of continued growth.

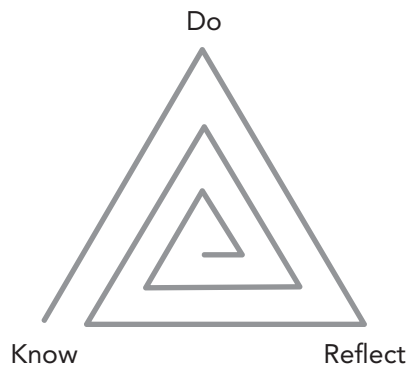
We created a template that helps our teachers develop their course syllabi so as to reflect our graduate profile. See the Envision Schools Course Syllabus Template in the appendix.

THE ENVISION SCHOOLS GRADUATE PROFILE

Here are the specifics of our Envision Schools graduate profile, with annotated commentary:

Envision Schools graduates are ready for success in college and future careers because they know, do, and reflect (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Envision Education's Know-Do-Reflect Triangle



Envision graduates **KNOW**. They master academic subjects, which makes it possible to

- Meet the University of California's A-G Requirements
- Pass the California High School Exit Exam
- Demonstrate proficiency on California state standards tests
- Perform successfully on college entrance exams

KNOW covers more traditional graduation requirements. But notice that we align our course requirements to meet the prerequisites of our state's university system. Most public high schools don't. We couldn't well say that we are preparing kids for college if we didn't do this.

Envision graduates **DO**. They

- Use core competencies required to perform the role of a college student: **inquiry**, **analysis**, **research**, and **creative expression** in core content areas
- Use the four C's: **communicate** powerfully, think **critically**, **collaborate** productively, and **complete** projects effectively
- Participate in at least one Workplace Learning Experience in which they do real work and complete a project that not only benefits their workplace but also demonstrates their ability to use leadership skills as well as inquire, analyze, research, or express themselves creatively in the workplace (We will talk more about the Workplace Learning Experience in chapter 5.)

DOING is where our graduate profile rises above traditional graduation requirements. It gets at the important distinctions between knowledge and skills, between passive and active learning, and between learning content and applying it. DO is where we address what the college professors have been calling for. A Psychology 101 professor doesn't expect background knowledge in psychology, but she expects incoming students to know how to conduct inquiry and write a research paper.

Envision graduates **REFLECT**. They

- Recognize and acknowledge growth, accomplishments, and successes as well as areas for future growth and development
- Revise work to proficiency based on feedback from teachers and peers

When students **REFLECT** on their growth and on the quality of their work, they develop habits of mind that are as essential to college and career success as their knowledge and skills. Self-awareness, persistence, confidence, and equanimity are not personality traits one is born with but habits of mind that can be developed with practice.



Video 2. Envision Defense Montage

In this “highlight reel” from several portfolio defenses, Envision students talk about education and why it matters, demonstrating the power of knowing, doing, and reflecting.



THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ENVISION’S DEEPER LEARNING STUDENT ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

As Wiggins and McTighe (1998) remind us, once you have described your educational goal, you must design a way to measure whether you’ve reached it. Measuring the **knowing** was relatively straightforward; traditional means—course grades and standardized tests—were adequate, not to mention still expected by the colleges. Measuring the **doing** and **reflecting** is where things get complex. But here again, we didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. Portfolios have long been the means by which people demonstrate what they can do. And the PhD defense has long served as a ritual of formal reflection. These two analogues would form the basis of our assessment system.

Critical elements of the Deeper Learning Student Assessment System include

- *Evidence of academic work.* Students assemble a portfolio of their best work across the core academic disciplines, including science, math, language arts, social studies, and world languages. In addition, students are required to produce a college-ready research paper and a multimedia product, and to complete a Workplace Learning Experience, or internship. The assignments that are eligible for a portfolio, referred to as “tasks,” are embedded in the regular curriculum rather than presented as an adjunct to students’ studies.
- *Rubrics.* Each task is evaluated against carefully vetted standards that are clear, challenging, and attainable. The evaluation rubrics used to measure the quality of tasks were developed with educational experts at Stanford University. The rubrics are shared with the students at the start of the freshman year, giving them a clear understanding of exactly what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated.
- *Reflection.* As each task is completed, students write a reflection that describes both the end product and the process they used to create it. They reflect on what they’ve learned, what they would have done differently, and how they will apply this learning to future projects. In addition, students must describe how they applied at least two deeper learning competencies to complete the task. Examples might look something like these:
 - “During our science project, my group got stuck on a part of the process; I collaborated productively by taking leadership of the group to help us agree on a solution and a way to move forward.”
 - “I managed my project effectively by creating an action list organized by due dates, and then I checked the list and adjusted it regularly to keep myself on track.”

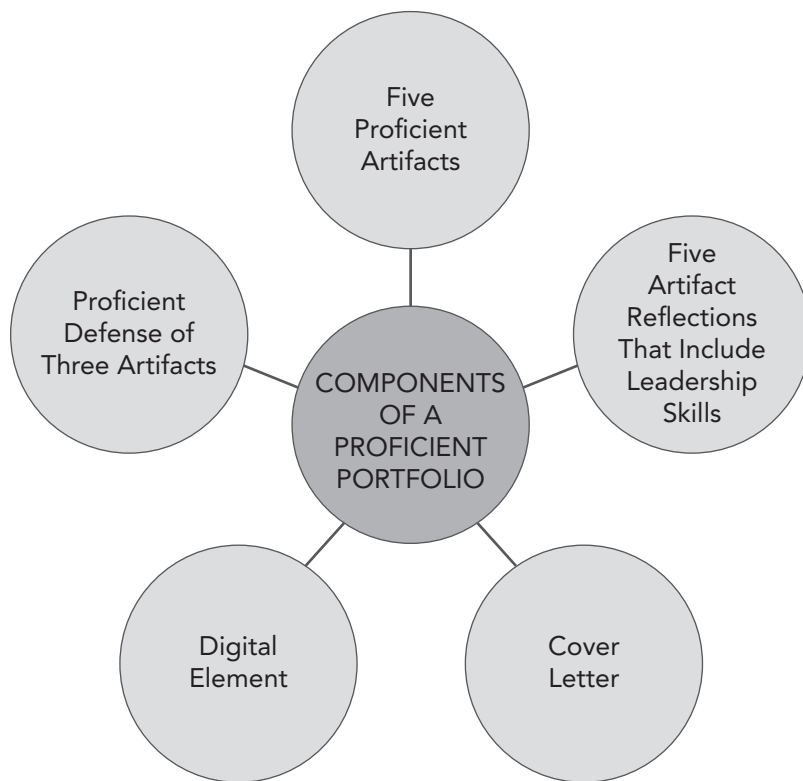
Figure 1.2 maps the structure of Envision’s Deeper Learning Student Assessment System.

Five Proficient Artifacts

Forming the backbone of the portfolio are five pieces of deep and rigorous academic work, all meeting or exceeding a standard of proficiency (more on how we define proficiency in the next chapter). Students must populate their portfolios with one each of the following:

- A **research paper**
- An **inquiry**
- An **analysis**
- An artifact of **creative expression**
- An artifact from the **Workplace Learning Experience**

Figure 1.2 The Structure of Envision's Deeper Learning Student Assessment System



Significantly, this list is not a list of the traditional subject disciplines: science, English, math, and social studies. In our first iteration of the portfolio, it was. But our thinking has evolved over time. Conley's work challenged us to think more deeply about what it means to prepare students for college success. Discipline content is of course important, but what is more important, and has been neglected, are key academic competencies demanded of all college students across disciplines. We continue

to imagine our students as freshman in college, scanning the course syllabus on their first day in Psychology 101 and feeling relieved when they see the types of assignments they have already mastered in high school.

Our portfolio targets four core competencies that we see as vital for college readiness. (The fifth item on our list, the Workplace Learning Experience, draws from one of the previous four.) Each one of these is assessed as its own rigorous performance task.

By **research**, we mean that students will present an argument about a historical, social science, scientific, or other issue. To demonstrate their mastery of research, they must select a writing sample that embodies the following expectations, which are aligned to the Common Core Reading and Writing Standards for Literacy:

- Responds to a research question
- Develops an argument
- Supports the argument with evidence
- Analyzes the evidence
- Knows and uses accurate content knowledge
- Structures the argument in a coherent way
- Uses discipline-specific writing conventions to communicate ideas

By **inquiry**, we mean that students will formulate a question that can be explored by scientific or historical investigation. To demonstrate mastery of inquiry, they must select a writing sample or lab that embodies the following expectations:

- Formulates an investigable question
- Designs and performs the investigation
- Collects data/evidence, and analyzes and interprets it
- Draws conclusions and assesses the validity of the conclusions
- Knows and uses accurate content knowledge
- Structures information in a coherent way
- Uses discipline-specific writing conventions to communicate ideas

By **analysis**, we mean that students will demonstrate the ability to read and think critically and communicate their ideas powerfully, with work that embodies the following

expectations, which are aligned to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

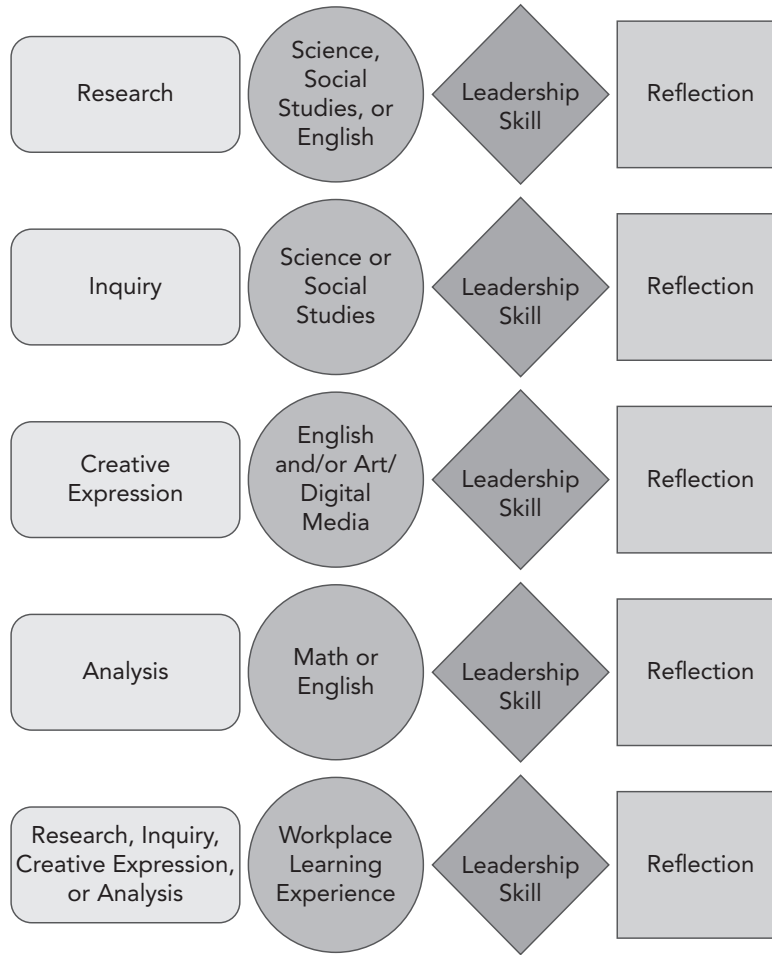
- Develops an argument
- Supports the argument with evidence
- Analyzes the evidence
- Organizes and structures ideas for effective communication
- Uses language to skillfully communicate ideas

By **creative expression**, we mean that students will think critically and creatively and communicate their ideas powerfully, persuasively, and artistically. We expect students to demonstrate an understanding of artistic thinking and artistic practice. Students shall use the arts as a tool to investigate and discuss topics and concerns that are relevant to artistic traditions and their lives. To demonstrate mastery of creative expression, they must select a piece of work that embodies the following expectations:

- Shows command of the technique of the artistic discipline
- Constructs and makes a work of art with personal meaning and intent
- Explains the connection of the work of art to artistic and cultural traditions
- Envisions, explores, and persists with an aesthetic idea
- Questions, discusses, and judges own work

By laying down these core competencies as the foundation of the portfolio, we proclaim their priority. But let us be clear: the traditional subject areas are not sidelined by this design. We don't have research teachers and inquiry teachers and analysis teachers; we have history teachers and science teachers and English teachers. Instead, the content-area requirements overlay the core competencies. Intentionally, our design reflects our pedagogical philosophy: competencies are the foundation on which content knowledge is built. Figure 1.3 shows how it works.

The circles denote the subject areas through which the corresponding core competency (in the rectangles on the left) must be performed. This gives students the opportunity to exercise some choice in how they show what they know. But those choices must be strategic, because each artifact must come from a different subject area. For example, if a science artifact is used for research, then a social studies artifact must be used for inquiry. In this way, the portfolio signals, to students and teachers, what kind of work needs to be produced in their content classes.

Figure 1.3 Envision Schools' Four Core Competencies

Five Artifact Reflections That Include the Four C's

Students must write a reflection on each of the five artifacts, in which they tell the story of how the artifact was created, what it taught them about the core competency it represents, and how it demonstrates their growth as a learner. In addition, the reflection must connect its artifact to one of the four C's: *communicate* powerfully, think *critically*, *collaborate* productively, or *complete* projects effectively. The reflection explains how this artifact is evidence of growth in that skill.



Video 3. The Four C's

How do the four C's—*communicating* powerfully, *thinking critically*, *collaborating* productively, and *completing* projects effectively—help students get to and succeed in college? Listen to teachers and students discuss the difference these skills make in taking ownership of their own education.



The Cover Letter

The purpose of the cover letter is to provide students with an opportunity to build their defense. Done well, the cover letter also creates a sense of closure and accomplishment—a chance to share what they know and can do with people who are important to them. At the core, a cover letter introduces the portfolio and sets the defense stage where students share what they know, can do, and reflect on.

The short reflections completed after each artifact serve as scaffolding for the cover letter. Because the cover letter synthesizes a student's mastery of the core competencies and the deeper learning outcomes, the cover letter itself is a major reflection—three to five typed pages. A cover letter is like a college admissions personal statement, only richer because the students draw their examples from deep student work and experiences in their school.

The Digital Element

Once students have reached proficiency on five tasks and the cover letter, they upload their certified artifacts (including reflections for each artifact) into the digital archive. Certified artifacts are then available to all Envision staff members so that we can share student work with each other as well as measure how we are doing.

Finally, students prepare a digital presentation driven by their cover letter to organize and highlight the three artifacts that are part of their portfolio defense.



Proficient Defense of Three Artifacts

This is the final step of the portfolio process, and what Kaleb was doing when we started this chapter. In a culminating rite of passage, each student identifies and publicly defends three of the certified work artifacts from his portfolio. Citing this work as evidence, the student defends his mastery of the Envision four C's and details how the presented work both meets the school's criteria for graduation and supports his personal and professional goals. The event takes roughly one hour, with over a third of it devoted to a rigorous Q&A session with the panel.

THE POWER OF PORTFOLIO DEFENSE

Envision schools are not the only ones doing this. We are part of a growing group of schools all over the country that are tying graduation to a powerful academic rite of passage, generally known as a defense of learning. The idea is catching on in high schools and middle schools because of our field's maturing understanding and rising estimation of performance assessment (more on that in chapter 2).

What students defend, and to whom they make their defense, varies in creative, practical, and school-specific ways. At Kamaile Academy, a school on the leeward coast of Oahu that serves disadvantaged native Hawaiian youth, students must not only argue their mastery of academic skills but also explain their plans for embodying the value of *kuleana*, or responsibility to the world, one of the cultural values of the school. Local community elders join teachers on Kamaile's defense panels.

At Health Professions High School in Sacramento, California, students defend a year-long, cross-disciplinary senior project. It starts with an extended explanatory research paper on a chosen medical issue, evolves into a stance expressed in an argumentative essay, and is then taken to the streets in a public advocacy campaign, working in collaboration with a local medical professional. Anyone who watches a student defend one of these projects knows, without having to read the school's graduate profile, what kind of student Health Professions has aspired to mold: "a student prepared for college and career, a responsible citizen, an independent critical thinker, a lifelong learner, and an excellent communicator."

That's the mark of a well-designed defense of learning—watch one, and you know exactly what the school is about: whom it serves, what it values, and the quality of work its students produce. It's the ultimate in "show, don't tell." Schools have long codified their goals in the form of mission statements, standards, declarations of values, and the like. The premise of performance assessment—that to evaluate skills we must observe



them in action — challenges schools to take the aspirational words in their handbooks and on their posters and embody them in real-life student performances.

Regardless of the variations on well-designed defenses, the transforming effect that they have on learning communities is similar. For one, defenses help schools focus on the fundamental. There is a logic to defense design — that need to distill — that converges on a set of performance tasks that express what is elemental to the core subject areas and to college and career readiness in general: research, textual analysis, experimental design, mathematical reasoning, historical argument, artistic judgment, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Most defense systems are built around some subset of this list. Not incidentally, they also align with and encompass the essence of the Common Core.

Just as defense helps teachers focus their teaching, it also helps students make sense of their education, seeing it not as a collection of credits but as a multiyear project toward a unified end. We never encounter students as eloquent about their learning as students who go to a school that requires them to defend. These students have a deep understanding of what they must learn. They are asked not just to do the work but to reflect on what it means. If they don't pass, they try again.

Designing and implementing portfolio defenses is a huge job for all involved: the students, teachers, and school leaders. But we haven't met anyone who regrets it once she is able to look back. And we can't name another mechanism that offers a school more leverage for transforming itself into a place of deeper learning.

SO THAT'S THE GOAL; HOW DO WE GET THERE?

We've laid out an ambitious goal for our students and their teachers.

So now what? What happens when a school implements a deeper learning assessment system? What needs to change to ensure its success? The answer is "Everything," and the chapters that follow tell the rest of the story.

But here is the sneak preview: deeper learning means rooting a school's curriculum in performance assessment (chapter 2), best served by project-based learning (chapter 3). It means nurturing a school culture of trust (chapter 4), without which many teenagers won't take the risks or develop the self-confidence to succeed in what is effectively a four-year project. It means structuring a school into human-scaled learning communities that allow teachers to mentor students over multiple years (chapter 5). And it means a different kind of school leadership (chapter 6).

All of these changes are good ideas in their own right. But for us, they became necessary changes when we committed to our Deeper Learning Student Assessment System. That system became the focal point of our schools' design, from which everything else maps backwards.



Video 4. Tiana: Profile of a Deeper Learning Student

Deeper learning makes a real difference: for Tiana, her deeper learning education at City Arts and Tech High School meant becoming the first person in her family to go not only to college but also beyond tenth grade. Within a few months at CAT, she realized she had what it took to imagine that future for herself. She and other students reflect on the opportunities and the mentors that got them where they are today.



THE REST OF KALEB'S STORY

Years later, when we interviewed Kaleb and asked him to recollect that day when he did not pass his first defense attempt, he admits that he cried when he got outside the building. In addition to being disappointed in himself, he felt embarrassment for failing in front of a crowd, and, perhaps most stingingly, shame over letting down people who believed in him. At the top of that list was Tony Harris; the panelist who delivered the bad news was also his advisor and one of his most trusted mentors.

Justin was also on the panel and remembers that Kaleb's failed first attempt had been a surprise. By senior year, Kaleb had emerged as one of the sharpest minds and most thoughtful communicators in the class, and as his English teacher for the past two years, Justin knew Kaleb's work firsthand. In American Literature, Kaleb wrote an essay on the author James Baldwin that would prove to be a seminal moment in Kaleb's intellectual awakening and a linchpin artifact of his graduation portfolio.

But on reflection, we had to admit that our surprise was also testament to how far Kaleb had come in the three years he had attended our school. Neglected by an absentee father and raised by a working-class mother, Kaleb came from the toughest neighborhood we served. His biracial background—half black, half white—made him question his identity. He had spent years bouncing around dysfunctional schools. When he came to us as a sophomore, Kaleb was angry and academically ill-prepared. His sophomore year was punctuated by academic setbacks, outbursts of rage, even the occasional fight; Tony Harris had to coach Kaleb through every one of these episodes.

In short, this was a kid who was no stranger to inconsistency and setback, nor to the process of overcoming it. After the tears dried, he went back to work. Over the week that followed, Kaleb rewrote his reflections on his “four C” skills, grounding them with more evidence of his growth over time. He developed an overarching and unifying metaphor, polished his delivery, reorganized his speaking notes to be more user-friendly, and tidied up his PowerPoint slides. He rehearsed in front of the mirror, start to finish, multiple times. These were all things Kaleb knew how to do and admitted he should have done the first time.

Keep in mind that Kaleb already had a college acceptance letter in his back pocket. So during a time when most college-bound seniors have long since succumbed to the lethargy of senioritis, Kaleb, faced with the threat that a diploma would not be handed to him on graduation day, was wrestling his way through a transformational learning experience.

The oral defense often feels higher stakes to the students than it really is. For Kaleb, the heavy lifting had already been done. He had already written the papers and performed the experiments and created the art that needed to fill the portfolio. His teachers had already guided him through the revisions that lifted his work to standard and had, as content specialists, signed off on that work as college ready. By most measures, Kaleb had already proven he was ready for college.

So why did he have to go through all this? Was this unnecessary abuse, a trial that amounted to little more than theater?

No. The oral defense is essential to the overall assessment. It must be passed, and the students who have had to show up in the summer for a third or fourth attempt, delivering their defenses to empty classrooms, can attest that it is not theater.

But Kaleb and his peers do overestimate the relative weight of the oral defense, for two good reasons: first, public speaking is inherently nerve wracking, and second, it is natural to invest symbolic significance in the final step of any journey, even though every step was vital to reaching the destination.

This is by design. We *want* students to attach major significance to this culminating experience. It is designed to give their graduation meaning and depth, to give them something concrete to point to, celebrate, and be proud of. In fact, we see the defense as the achievement of the pedagogical sweet spot, a created space that requires and inspires the learner's best effort while still cushioning failure's fall with second (and third and fourth) chances. In other words, although Kaleb was sweating it now, his teachers knew he was going to do fine in the end and that they would be there to support him along the way.

And he did do fine. Ten days later, Justin sat on the panel for Kaleb's second attempt at his oral defense and remembers how much more smoothly and persuasively Kaleb made his case. "Unlike the first time, I felt well prepared," Kaleb recalls, "and because I could feel that it was going well, I got increasingly confident. I started strong and got better from there. Before it was even over, I knew I had passed. It felt so good!"

After he passed, Kaleb went on to be the first in his family to attend a four-year university (Bob's alma mater, St. Mary's College) and, more crucially, would graduate from that university with a degree in sociology. He now works as a compliance officer to prevent discrimination and abusiveness in the banking industry.

"The grad portfolio taught me lessons that I have carried into the work world," Kaleb told us when we recently asked him about it.

For example, the job I have right now came out of a temp position. It wasn't handed to me, and I could tell that it wasn't going to be. First, I had to figure out what I wanted. Then I had to size up the situation, document my work, prove my diligence. In the end, I had to *make a case* [emphasis Kaleb's] that I was someone this firm should bring on full time. And I had a sense of how to go out about it because I had *practiced this before* [emphasis ours].

As I continue to work in a large organization, I am realizing this is true about everything. If you want something—change a policy or get a promotion or whatever—you have to make the case. And it's not just doing the work; you have to show the work. . . .

I remember that all of us seniors were frustrated by the grad portfolio requirements at the time. I mean, we had already done all these big assignments, and we didn't understand why we had to go through this extra step of reflecting on them.

Kaleb was part of the first Envision class ever to put together a graduation portfolio and defense; as pioneers, they were particularly resistant to the process because it was easy to imagine school without it. (Over the years, as younger students have watched

seniors prepare for and deliver their defenses, the process has become embedded in our school culture and is no longer resisted as it was during that pioneer year.)

We were used to the normal way of doing school. You churn out an assignment or take a test, usually after cramming for it, you hope you get an A on it, and you move on.

But the graduation portfolio forced us to go beyond just doing the work. We had to learn how to be confident about our own work. If you can do that in a safe high school environment, that's the place to start. It was so positive . . . so smart what you guys made us go through back then.

Even the trauma of failing that first attempt?

Kaleb recalls,

I was crushed. I went outside, and I was crying. But it wasn't long before I could appreciate why Mr. Harris failed me the first time. I felt that he respected me, rather than letting me sell myself short. What I realized, even then, was that Mr. Harris believed in me more than I did. And in order to pass the defense, that needed to change.

No, this is not theater; it is backwards design. This is what we must do if we are to send students off into the world and expect them to succeed. Because what we see up there during an oral defense, the culminating moment of a four-year project, is not Kaleb convincing his teachers that he is ready to graduate; it is Kaleb making—and winning—the case to himself.



Video 5. Student Profile, Portfolio Defense

An Envision student and teacher talk about preparing for the “final moment” of the portfolio defense; Yvonne reflects on her growth as a student and a learner.





REFERENCES

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