



Graduation by Exhibition

by GLEF Staff

Although many students enroll at University Heights High School in the Bronx because it is an alternative school offering a second chance at a diploma, they soon discover that they've got their work cut out for them. Instead of having to pass a certain number of courses, they have to demonstrate that they meet a set of detailed standards of learning and achievement. "No student gets a diploma simply for being here a certain amount of time. Our students have to prove they measure up," explains faculty member Phil Farnham.

University Heights students demonstrate their accomplishments and prove their skills to a "roundtable" of peers, teachers, community members, and other critical friends — a system known as "graduation by exhibition." The school requires students to present evidence of skills in each of seven areas, such as thinking critically; communicating clearly with numbers, words, and scientific data; and demonstrating responsible citizenship.

The evidence that students can offer ranges from traditional standardized test scores and research papers to videotaped performances and digitized collections that show a student's work over time. The standards that each presentation is judged against, however, stay constant and explicit.

After three years, the roundtable process seems to have had a positive effect for these students from mostly low-income, minority families. Three-quarters of all graduates go on to college. Students who pass with distinction have, as a rule, experienced comparable success at the university level.

This has created an atmosphere in which it is assumed that all of the school's students will succeed at high levels and be prepared for college. "It's what happens when you build on the expectation that all students must prove their competence to their community and to themselves," says Paul Allison, a University Heights teacher.

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