

External Diploma Program and the SCANS Report

The Department of Labor's Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report presents an ambitious agenda to address the education and training needs of both the non-college-bound "forgotten half" and the needs of unemployed and under educated adults. In its final report (sidebar F), SCANS mentioned the National External Diploma Program (EDP) sponsored by the American Council on Education (ACE) as an important piece of the total educational assessment picture.

Although the American Council on Education through the GED Testing program is responsible for one out of every seen high school diplomas awarded in the United States every year, both GED Testing and ACE are aware that many adults are not being reached by the GED Tests. Adult education efforts in general only reach about eight percent of their potential undereducated audience. This may be because many older learners – and especially those who were school dropouts – have very little interest in returning to the kind of traditional classroom or traditional testing arrangements which failed to meet their needs the first time. Yet, with eighty percent of America's workforce already in the workplace today, not only young adults, but also the more mature high school drop-outs need to get turned on" to more learning.

Ace's response to these impediments to adults access to a second chance has been the dissemination, over the last two years of the national External Diploma Program (EDP). This program is a competency-based, applied performance assessment system for out-of-school adults and is especially to the more mature adults not drawn to traditional models of testing and instruction. EDP permits adults to demonstrate that they have mastered those skills needed as worker, citizens and family members. The EDP is designed to expand ACE's programming for adult learners and to complement the GED program, not replace it.

The EDP assessment setting, procedures, and content are unique in several ways. EDP is not carried out in traditional setting but is completed at home and in confidential office visits under the eyes of assessment experts. EDP is based on a national standard of performance, giving credit for what the adult already has learned. Moreover, the SCANS foundation skills listed below and outlined in the SCANS Commission's reports form the backbone of the EDP 65 competencies.

These skills are:

BASIC SKILLS: Reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, speaking and listening.

THINKING SKILLS: The ability to learn, to reason, to think creatively, to make decisions, and to solve problems.

PERSONAL QUALITIES: Individual responsibility, self-esteem (self-competence), self-management, sociability and integrity.

All these skills, but the final two , sociability and integrity, are measured in specific EDP assessment items or are demonstrated by the graduate in their mastery of the total program.

Also, because EDP represents a high-school level assessment rather than a specific workplace-only test, it reflects a well-balanced adult experience. EDP addresses the adult's skill as a citizen and a family member, as well as a worker. The eight life skill themes that form the content of the assessment simulations include artistic and social awareness, as well as scientific and technological awareness.

As recommended by the SCANS evaluation report, standards should be set by consensus. The original 64 competencies generated by the developers of the EDP in 1974 at the Syracuse Research Corporation and the revised 65 competencies accomplished by ACE last year, used the consensus model to determine those skills and the level of demonstration required for mastery. In evaluating assessment systems, the SCANS evaluation report also suggest that a balance of several types of assessment modes be used depending what would be most appropriate for measuring the specific skills. The EDP illustrates this process by using a combination of paper and pencil demonstrations, oral interviews, take-home projects, portfolio demonstration, and research projects.

The EDP provides a framework for validating academic strengths within the context of job and life skills. As the SCANS report suggests improving the schools through a "learning a living" system, EDP seeks to empower those adults who have been learning through living." The goal is for adults, especially those who have historically not had a positive school experience, to see themselves as part of a learning process that lasts a lifetime.