Hewlett Foundation Sponsors Prize to Improve Automated Scoring of Student Essays

Prize to Drive Better Tests, Deeper Learning

MENLO PARK, Calif. – The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation will award a $100,000 prize to the designers of software that can reliably automate the grading of essays for state tests, Foundation education officials announced today.

The software competition is intended to begin to solve the problem of the high cost and the slow turnaround resulting from the time consuming and expensive task of hand scoring thousands of essays for standardized tests. These obstacles typically mean that many school systems exclude essays in favor of multiple-choice questions, which are less able to assess students' critical reasoning and writing skills. The problem is that critical reasoning is one of a suite of skills that experts believe students must be taught to succeed in the new century. The Hewlett Foundation makes grants to educators and nonprofit organizations in support of what it calls "deeper learning," which embraces the mastery of core academic content, critical reasoning and problem solving, working collaboratively, communicating effectively, and learning how to learn independently.

"Better tests support better learning," says Barbara Chow, Education Program Director at the Hewlett Foundation. "Rapid and accurate automated essay scoring will encourage states to include more writing in their state assessments. And the more we can use essays to assess what students have learned, the greater the likelihood they'll master important academic content, critical thinking, and effective communication."

The competition will determine if current software scoring programs are as effective as expert human scoring and seeks to accelerate innovation for faster and more accurate scoring of student work. If the programs can be shown to be as reliable as human scoring it will increase their acceptance and reduce the need to rely exclusively on costly and time-consuming human scoring.

The competition will be conducted with the support of the two state testing consortia: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which together work with forty-four state departments of education. The two testing consortia recently received $365 million from the U.S. Department of Education to develop new assessments.

The competition will be conducted in two phases. The first will demonstrate the capabilities of existing vendors who create and market software for grading essays. The second phase will be open to the public and will award prize money to competitors who demonstrate software that can score essays as well as human graders.

Open Education Solutions, a blended learning service provider that helps educators combine the best of online and classroom work, and The Common Pool, a consulting business that specializes

in developing effective incentive models for solving problems, designed and will manage the competition. Tom Vander Ark, CEO of OpenEd, says, "Prizes are a proven strategy for mobilizing talent and resources to solve problems." "We're excited about the potential of emerging assessment capabilities," says Jaison Morgan of The Common Pool, "and confident that focused incentives will accelerate innovation."

Dr. Mark Shermis, dean of the University of Akron College of Education, author of [Classroom Assessment in Action](#), and noted expert on automated scoring, will chair the Academic Advisory Board.

The competition will be hosted on Kaggle, a platform for predictive modeling competitions that helps companies, governments, and researchers identify solutions to some of the world's hardest problems by posting them as competitions to a community of more than 25,000 PhD-level data scientists located around the world. "Kaggle has solved problems for NASA, insurance industry leaders, and HIV researchers," says Anthony Goldbloom, founder and chief executive officer of Kaggle. "The ASAP competition is our most ambitious yet, having the potential to touch more Americans than any other project we've run so far."

The vendor demonstration will be completed in January in time for the results to be incorporated into spring test development. The open competition will run through April to allow competitors time to develop new scoring algorithms. A public leader board will monitor progress.

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About The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, http://www.Hewlett.org
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been making grants since 1967 to help solve social and environmental problems at home and around the world. The Foundation concentrates its resources on activities in education, the environment, global development and population, performing arts, philanthropy, and makes grants to support disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

About Open Education Solutions, http://www.OpenEdSolutions.com
OpenEd is a blended learning service provider. We help states, districts, and school networks design schools and solutions that are innovative, personalized, and deliver better results at the same or lower cost.

About The Common Pool, http://www.thecommonpool.com
The Common Pool designs and delivers new incentive models and reframes challenging issues, offering shared interest and investment to meet targeted needs. The Common Pool is deeply invested in using the power of incentives to drive change for the public good. Our strategy is to offer compelling and nontrivial financial rewards to anyone who can solve market failures. Our methods only pay for results and offer important exposure to anyone who can deliver effective and scalable solutions.

About Kaggle, http://www.Kaggle.com
Kaggle offers a platform for predictive modeling competitions that helps companies, governments, and researchers identify solutions to some of the world's hardest problems. By using a competition format to introduce challenges to a community of 25,000 data scientists, Kaggle helps organizations achieve the best possible predictive accuracy. Kaggle has helped solve problems for NASA, Deloitte, and Ford, and it is currently running the $3 million Heritage Health Prize, the largest medical prize ever, to help prevent unnecessary hospitalization. Kaggle's investors include Index Ventures and Khosla Ventures. It was founded in 2010 and is based in San Francisco, California.

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