

Education Tuning Shows What Students Learned

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NEAL CONAN, host: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. What if your college degree defined what you learned as opposed to the courses you took? Then a bachelors degree in English or physics would mean the same thing to prospective employers in Boston or Bangalore.

Europeans started to experiment with this idea 10 years ago. Now pilot projects are underway in Utah, Indiana and Minnesota, where this idea is known as tuning, as in fine-tuning, and not everybody thinks it's a great idea.

Some professors say tuning could inhibit academic freedom and impose uniform standards on the inherently diverse activity of intellectual study. We're going to hear from both sides today. Later, college essay mills go global. You can get your dissertation done for as little as 20 bucks a page.

But first, the tuning process: If you have questions about what it is, how it would work, give us a call. We'd especially like to hear from educators and from employers. Would this make a difference to the way you teach or the way you hire?

Our phone number, 800-989-8255. E-mail talk@npr.org. And you can join the conversation on our Web site. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

We begin with Phyllis Safman, assistant commissioner for academic affairs in Utah, which is one of the states participating in the tuning pilot project, and she joins us today from the studios of member station KCPW in Salt Lake City. Nice to have you on the program.

Dr. PHYLLIS SAFMAN (Assistant Commissioner for Academic Affairs, Utah System of Higher Education): Thank you, Neal, and I appreciate being asked to be on the program.

CONAN: Well, why did Utah decide to get in on this?

Dr. SAFMAN: Well, Utah was pretty far ahead of the rest of the country in terms of its faculty coming together in about 32 academic disciplines. Faculty meet yearly, and some disciplines meet more often than that. But what tuning does, and what matches what Utah does, is that tuning establishes reference points of student learning outcomes in all of the academic disciplines. And the reference points actually defined what an associate degree is or a baccalaureate or a masters or doctoral degree is.

And so we have been working this way with faculty for many years. One of the – or what the learning outcomes do also is to establish levels of challenges and the competency students need to accomplish and also student workload, which we don't deal with in this country, but in Europe, the credit has gone someplace else. We still have credits. They're the coin of the realm here.

CONAN: Give us a for instance. Say if you were studying, well, physics.

Dr. SAFMAN: Okay, and in fact, we are working with physics. Our faculty in physics has been meeting for 10, 11 years. And so what they're doing with the tuning process is, you know, studying what has been done with the Bologna process in Europe and in Latin America and then determining the competencies now that students need.

Now understand that they have determined competency some years ago, and they review them, really, yearly to make sure that transfer and articulation are possible. That's transfer from a two-year program in to the major, into the four-year program.

So they've already, you know, begun doing this. And what they will do, what tuning will help us do, is to drill down even farther so that we have a more profound understanding of what we expect students to learn and how we expect them to demonstrate it.

This will assist us, also, in being more transparent. Higher education seems sometimes very mysterious to the outside world because, you know, how do we know what a baccalaureate degree is? How do we know what a masters degree is?

And in this way, by doing the tuning process, everyone will know exactly what is expected, including the student, the student's parents and future employers, policymakers. So we will know what students are learning.

CONAN: And so particularly, for example, if you had a degree, an associate degree from XYZ Junior College, sometimes that's not given the same weight as it might be.

Dr. SAFMAN: Well that's true. But in the tuning process, and in Europe they call it the short cycle, it's our associate degree, we will know exactly what a student is learning. Now typically for our associate degree, they are very much involved – students are very much involved in general education. So we look at general education outcomes and learning outcomes, and we drill down to be a little more specific about our expectations.

CONAN: And what difference does it make?

Dr. SAFMAN: Well, I've been in the higher ed for many, many years, and I think it makes a very big difference because we're able to meet what the Higher Education Opportunity Act is going to require of us, and that is that we are transparent in what we're doing and therefore accountable.

If we're able to show what the expectations are, and students are able to demonstrate that they've met those learning outcomes, those learning expectations, then everybody knows more about what's happening in higher education.

CONAN: Well, how do they demonstrate that? Is there a standardized test at the end of the program or something?

Dr. SAFMAN: Oh never. Absolutely not. This is not a ministry of education. We never go with standardization. Professional associations determine their standards, and faculty own the curriculum. Faculty own what happens in the classroom. They determine how students will demonstrate this.

In Utah, what we have planned is the ePortfolio Assessment. It's similar to the diploma supplement, which is part of the Bologna process. In the ePortfolio, students would have to have in there evidence that they – or evidence that demonstrates that they have, in fact, met the learning outcomes that were expected of them.

CONAN: But how you get there is up to the individual teachers.

Dr. SAFMAN: Absolutely. That's up to the faculty.

CONAN: And we call it – you mentioned the Bologna process. Of course, that's the city in Italy where this project got underway about 10 years ago.

Dr. SAFMAN: That's correct. And it's interesting to note that one of the reasons that this happened was that in Europe, because there are education ministries for the country, students could not transfer from one country to the other, and in fact, they were coming to the United States.

So there was concern about how do we break this down. Well, certainly having a ministry of education will not break it down. Faculty must own the curriculum, and so when faculty began

meeting and breaking – you know, they broke down the barriers, essentially, and determined the learning outcomes, and they began to drill down.

CONAN: We want to hear from educators and from students, I guess, too. How would this make a difference in your profession, in your hiring? Give us a call, 800-989-8255. E-mail us, talk@npr.org. Julie's(ph) on the line with us from Boston.

JULIE (Caller): Yes, hi. I'm calling because I'm a doctoral student and also an adjunct professor, and I taught at several different schools, And what I'm finding is that it's very difficult, even though I think this is a good idea in theory - kids come into college with such a diverse array of skills or lack of skills, when they get to college that they are not having the same kind of platform to start on. So the array of things that they need to learn just to get up to kind of a baseline where they could all learn the same thing would be very difficult. Unless and until we put some kind of tuning system into our high schools, I think it would be difficult to do it at the college level.

CONAN: Phyllis Safman?

Dr. SAFMAN: You know, that's an interesting point. And we don't have much control over what happens in the high schools, although I know in Utah we work very closely with K-12, and they're trying to redefine how they're doing their curriculum. With regard to students coming in at different levels, you're absolutely correct. Some students require remediation or, you know, the term is developmental ed, in order to get up to speed. But I think the tuning process allows us to start where the student is. So the faculty, through pre-tests and through other exams, would know where the student is and can start there.

CONAN: Julie, the same problem, though, wouldn't that attain - obviously kids coming in with very different accomplishment levels, very different skill sets from different high schools, nevertheless that's still a problem with the current system, isn't it?

Dr. SAFMAN: Oh, are you talking...

CONAN: I think Julie – no I was talking to Julie, and I think she left us, but we thank her for the phone call, anyway. And I should point out Utah is particularly well-positioned for this as there is not the density of higher-education institutions in Utah as there is in some other states.

Dr. SAFMAN: That is correct. We have nine credit-bearing institutions, both two-year and four-year institutions and research universities, metropolitan universities. So we're well-situated. We're large geographically, but we're small in population, just a little over three million. Now these are the public institutions. This is the Utah system of higher education, but we do work with the privates, as well.

CONAN: Let's get another caller in. This is Dan(ph), Dan with us from Ewing in New Jersey.
DAN (Caller): Hi there. I have a quick question. I teach mechanical engineering, I'm an adjunct faculty member. And engineering programs have a national accreditation board called ABET. And I was wondering, what is the difference, or is there any difference, between what you're advocating with fine-tuning a curriculum and a typical accreditation board.

Dr. SAFMAN: No, and that's a good question. ABET sets its standards, and the engineering schools must meet them, or their students won't pass the national exams. The professional associations still work with faculty from all of these disciplines in setting those professional standards. So there's concurrence, really. It would be unusual for a school of engineering, let's say in the state of Utah, to do something totally outside the standards set by ABET and by the other professionals in the colleges of engineering. So there is concurrence there. It's not going to be off in left field somewhere.

CONAN: So this, in his particular field, it wouldn't be much difference at all.

Dr. SAFMAN: Oh, I don't think so. As a matter of fact, engineers do meet - that's one of our discipline areas, and we have, you know, any number of types of engineers that meet annually. The faculty work to talk about competencies and assessments and the like.

CONAN: Dan, thanks for the question.

DAN: Okay, can I just have one quick follow-up on that?

CONAN: Sure, go ahead.

DAN: There's a number of universities, however, that teach engineering that then have worked very diligently on making a better curriculum or some would say an advance on the type of curriculum, and they do this sort of outside the ABET accreditation rules. Does your program allow for that type of flexibility or once a university would agree to this fine-tuning, are they sort of set in stone at that point?

Dr. SAFMAN: Oh, there's nothing set in stone. As a matter of fact, all fields change because of the new research that comes out in every field. And so that's what determines, you know, how people are thinking about issues and how they're handling them. So there is nothing set in stone here. Because learning outcomes are set doesn't mean that it's standardized or it's set in stone. No, we expect those to be reflected in the new research that comes out.

CONAN: So as long as you could - you have that skill set that you're expected - those goals are met, anything - any how you get there is okay.

Dr. SAFMAN: That's correct. That's correct.

CONAN: Dan, is that...?

DAN: Thank you.

CONAN: All right, Dan. Thanks very much, appreciate it. And quickly, this has just gotten underway, when are you going to have an occasion to step back and say it's working or not?

Dr. SAFMAN: Well, the Lumina Foundation for Education has funded us for this test year, and Utah's very fortunate. It has two internationally recognized - a physicist and a historian, the physicist William Evenson, and Norm Jones is the historian. So we'll be working this year, and then we will step back at the end of the year and take a look.

CONAN: All right. Stay with us if you would. Phyllis Safman, assistant commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education, with us from Salt Lake City. We're talking about the tuning process, a way to grant college degrees that's being tested in Utah, Minnesota and Indiana based on skills and knowledge, not just an accumulation of credits. 800-989-8255. We'll hear from a critic when we come back from a short break. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. Everybody takes Psych 101, but not everybody learns the same things. We're talking today about a new pilot project in higher education called tuning, designed to uniformity to college degrees in the same disciplines around the country.

So if a student wants a degree in, say, physics, he or she would learn the same skills for that degree no matter what college they attend. Today we want to hear from teachers and employers. Teachers, how would you feel about teaching within this project? Employers, would this make a difference?

Give us a call, 800-989-8255. E-mail talk@npr.org. There's also a conversation on our Web site. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Still with us is Phyllis Safman, Utah's assistant commissioner for academic affairs. And joining us now here in Studio 3A is Gary Rhoades, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors. Before that, he was a professor in higher education at the University of Arizona. Thanks very much for coming in.

Dr. GARY RHOADES (General Secretary, American Association of University Professors): Thank you for having me.

CONAN: And I know you've been listening to the first part of our conversation.

Dr. RHOADES: I have, yes.

CONAN: I gather you're not one of the boosters of this idea.
(Soundbite of laughter)

Dr. RHOADES: Well, I come to this in two roles, partly as the general secretary but also partly as someone who has been studying this stuff for a couple of decades. And I think as one of the recent callers said, the adjunct faculty member, it sounds nice in theory, but how does it actually work out in practice?

And there's a bit of an irony here because the Bologna process was set up, in part, as the Finnish professor indicated, to compete with the U.S., basically to be able to have the sort of mobility that we already have in the U.S.,. And also to connect more closely because, historically, continental European higher education has not connected to the labor market very directly – to do that, which again they're trying to imitate us.

So there's sort of a comical irony here of the head of the dog chasing the tail of the dog, which is trying to follow the head of the dog. We're basically modeling ourselves on a Bologna process that is modeled on trying to compete with the U.S. and which addresses problems that we actually don't have, and has the potential of creating problems that we don't want to have, like uniformity.

So the genius of American higher education, historically, has been precisely the fact that if you study physics at one place versus another, you may get a very different education. That contributes to the dynamism and the competition within the system, both institutionally and among professors. And Europe is only now beginning to struggle with how to do that. We actually solved that problem 100 years ago.

CONAN: Well, as I'm listening to Phyllis Safman, and physics I think is one of the areas they are looking at in Utah, that if you studied it in Massachusetts or in California, you could still get a very different education. You would just end up at the end of the process knowing the same stuff, and your degree would mean the same to an employer no matter where you went, not just in this country. We live in a globalized economy. It would mean the same thing if you're looking for a job, maybe in Japan or in India.

Dr. RHOADES: But again, we're solving a problem we don't have. Our students are not having difficulties getting jobs in other countries. It's the Finnish students who are having trouble having people in the U.S. recognize their transcripts.

So – and in fact, again, it's a theory-versus-practice issue. We can say in theory that everyone will learn the same competency, but the problem with these sorts of competencies is they often turn out to be lowest common denominator competencies. Instead of recognizing that, let's pick Minnesota, which is one of the...

CONAN: Dumbing down is...

Dr. SAFMAN: Yes. But let's give the example of Minnesota. So we have Carleton College, a fine liberal arts college, and the University of Minnesota. In physics, do we really anticipate that the people who go to those two places will learn the same things?

The University of Minnesota has a physics department probably – I haven't actually checked the numbers – but my guess would be at least five to ten times larger than Carleton's. The lab facilities at the University of Minnesota are quite different than they are at Carleton.

Both students in physics are getting an outstanding education, but I think it's rather unrealistic to believe that they're going to learn the same thing. And that actually is at the heart of academic freedom, not just how you learn something but what you learn. And the dynamism of our system is that it allows for a variety of interpretations of what we should be learning in physics and chemistry and history and the like.

CONAN: Let's give Phyllis Safman a chance to respond, and then we'll get to more callers.

Dr. SAFMAN: Thank you, Gary. You're right. There appears to be an irony, but that's pretty superficial, and let me correct something that was said before. There is no uniformity in this, that as I said before, the professional associations essentially set the standards, and I think the faculty, for the most part, teach to those standards.

What happens is that higher ed in this country has been accused of not being transparent and not being accountable. As a matter of fact, that's what came out with the Spellings Commission. Now I think the Spellings Commission would've moved us, or wanted to move us, to a ministry of sorts, but you know, fortunately that was beaten back. But we still have the Higher Ed Opportunity Act, where we're going to have to show the transparency.

Also which, there's no dumbing down here. If anything, there's ratcheting up. And that's been a hallmark of the tuning process and certainly the tuning process as we're going to do it. But there is no uniformity, and there is ratcheting, definitely ratcheting up in what the expectations are, but certainly not dumbing down. We have no evidence that there's dumbing down here.

Dr. RHOADES: Well, let me give an example...

CONAN: And very quickly. We want to give other people a chance.

Dr. RHOADES: Yeah. You spoke to the articulation agreements, the ideal that this will make it easier for people to move from two- to four-year institutions.

We've had articulation agreements in American higher education for many years, as you know. And the increasing is that in fact, what contributes to enhanced transfer of students from two- to four-year institutions or graduation rates is not articulation agreements. It's investment in the personnel, both faculty and support personnel, who support those students's learning. So we tend to sometimes in this country, I think, focus more on the testing and less on the investing.

CONAN: All right. Let's see if we can get some callers back in, and let's go to Melanie(ph), Melanie with us from Athens, Ohio.

MELANIE (Caller): Yes, hi. I home school my young children, and I had never previously heard of this idea of tuning. But this is exactly, I guess, the method that spoke to me for how I am teaching my children, rather than putting them in the public school system, you know, that there's not just one path to, you know, educating children and stuff.

And I think that this idea of tuning is just really wonderful. I've never heard of it before, but I think it's very on par.

CONAN: Would this translate down into the K-12 area where people like Melanie are homeschooling their kids, Phyllis Safman?

Dr. SAFMAN: Well, I think so, and I work with a math specialist, high school math specialist in K-12, who is doing just that and working with the other math faculty who teach in K-12. So that's being done.

Might I comment, though, on something that Gary said? Transfer in this country is not as solid as you think. It works well in Utah because it was faculty led. And even Jerry Merisotis, who is president of the Lumina Foundation, has said, and I believe it, that you cannot do from top down on faculty, and that's in fact what ministries do.

But transfer is successful here because it was faculty-led. The other is that no, transfer is not the be all, end all of completion. It certainly, and Gary's correct in that you would have all kinds of other, you know, other elements here that support students' success. But articulation is very important, and it is not solid in this country.

CONAN: Melanie, thanks very much for the call, appreciate it.

MELANIE: Thanks.

CONAN: Let's see if we can go now to David(ph), David from Canton, Ohio.

DAVID: Hi, Neal, thanks so much for taking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

DAVID: I couldn't agree more with the gentleman that you have on the show and some of his points of view - how the program seems nice in theory but how in actuality, it's the non-uniformity of our current graduates which really makes up the strength of the workforce.

In general, I think that it's a really bad idea for a large university to implement this type of program because it would need to be specialized to each degree. For example, I was a business major in school, and when I graduated the degree was basically, in the eyes of the employer, just a - okay, you went through the program, you passed go.

But what they really wanted to know about, and what really affected my being hired somewhere, was what else did you do? What else did you accomplish during school as far as internships, work experience and also extra-curricular activities.

So I really think that at the point right now, it'd be difficult to implement in a large university. And in some majors, like business, it's really not necessary because the current employment forces that work.

CONAN: I can understand that part. But Phyllis Safman, Utah not all that densely populated a state, a pretty small one, but nevertheless you've got some big universities there. How is this going to apply in David's example?

Dr. SAFMAN: Well, remember that we're dealing with each academic discipline. So we start with two, and we'll eventually hope to go to the 29 that meet regularly - there are actually 32, but they're combined into 29 academic disciplines.

So what it will allow the institution to do, particularly in compliance with the Higher Education Opportunity Act, is to say we know our students are learning. This is how we know. This is the evidence we have. And given something that you had said, David, that in Utah, we're planning the ePortfolio, which is similar to the Diploma Supplement that's used in the Bologna process. The only difference is that Utah's ePortfolio will actually provide the evidence that students have met various learning outcomes. And that's a little different. So, that's what an employer, prospective employer, would see. And I think it would be very helpful.

CONAN: Gary Rhoades?

Dr. RHOADES: You know, here, we're onboard with Phyllis in that we're not looking for a national model. But there are other models rather than state-led. There are voluntary models. The Association of American Colleges and Universities is promoting exactly the sort of portfolio idea that Phyllis just referred to without trying to standardize it in some way at the state level. And, ironically, to standardize it in a way that touches the publics but not the privates. So, we're sort of adopting a half-baked Bologna process if we're only doing publics not privates, and especially if we're doing state by state, and especially if we're doing...

CONAN: You might want to work on your metaphor there...

Dr. RHOADES: Yes.

CONAN: ...half-baked bologna. I think there's...

Dr. RHOADES: Yes.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Dr. SAFMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CONAN: ...a little shutter there. Let's take (unintelligible).

Dr. RHOADES: Well, I want it to shutter.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: Let's talk with Elena(ph). Elena with us from Middleville in Michigan.

ELENA (Caller): Hi, thank you for taking my call. I am on a leave of absence from school. And I am eventually going to get my BSA degree in theatre. And one of the fun/annoying things about transferring is that many institutions that have BSA degrees do not allow you to transfer credits. I was pretty lucky, the school I'll be attending in the fall, I am going to be able to transfer my credits.

So, I definitely think that this process of looking at, you know, what people learned rather than the credits accrued or where you've got them from, would definitely help for people in the arts that, you know, are going to be, you know, transferring to different institutions or when they graduate - because there is a lot of that, sort of, people that go to name brand schools have an easier time getting jobs, getting recognitions, than people that don't. And anything that can remove that sort of elitism that isn't really productive or helpful, I think, would be an excellent thing.

CONAN: And Gary Rhoades, that same thing applies in areas other than the arts too.

Dr. RHOADES: I believe that that's absolutely the case. But if you think that the Bologna process, either in Europe or in the U.S., is going to change the status of having gone to an Ivy League school, either public or private or not, then you're expecting too much of the Bologna process because that's simply not - is not going to happen. That sort of status attachment is going to maintain regardless of whether we have these sorts of transparent standards, which - I'm in support of transparent standards, it's a question of how you get there and it's a question of who's defining them and how much variety is allowed within them.

CONAN: But wouldn't this allow a student like Elena to get her credits accepted in another institution?

Dr. RHOADES: Mm-hmm. Yes, but credit acceptance internationally, in Europe, is a major problem as compared to in the U.S., where it is a relatively minor problem. And where it is a problem, and where we've been working on it for quite some time in articulation agreements between two and four-year institutions, in spite of longstanding efforts, we have not made a whole lot of progress in that area.

CONAN: Okay. Elena, good luck.

ELENA: Thank you very much.

CONAN: Appreciate it. We're talking about the tuning process, also known as the Bologna process. Our guest are Phyllis Safman, who's with the – is the assistant commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education, and Gary Rhoades, who's the general secretary at the American Association of University Professors.

You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And here's an e-mail from Laura(ph) in Kansas City. This sounds like No Child Left Behind at the college level. My degree is in English, and it almost sounds like it would be more difficult for instructors to explore current topics in any field, really, because it wouldn't match the pre-approved set goals. I guess I'm leery of controlling what higher level education can accomplish and explore. And we've gotten a lot of comments like that, Phyllis.

Dr. SAFMAN: Oh, let me just read this very briefly to you. These are the learning goals. It's the reference points of knowledge and understanding - any academic understands that - the context of modes of application of knowledge and understanding that's ratcheting up what a student can do, and the fluency in the use of increasingly complex data and information - that applies to every field, the breadths and depths of topics communicated along with the range of audiences that are of that communication, and then last, the degree of autonomy gained for subsequent learning.

You tell me how you standardize under that. There's no standardization. Also, Gary mentioned the American Association of Colleges and Universities. We work very closely with them. I've had this discussion with their president, Carol Geary Schneider. We are absolutely opposed to standardization. And we in Utah are using, as the broad swath, four of their essential learning outcomes that they develop with policymakers and business and industry leaders, which are knowledge of human cultures in physical and natural worlds, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, integrative learning.

And so, all of these are determined by faculty, how you reach them. There's nothing standardized about that. And I think we're hard put to say that, oh, you know, those are very standardized and we can't do that. That's what education is about.

CONAN: And we just have a little time left. I wanted to ask you, Gary Rhoades, is there anything in this pilot project supported by the Lumina Foundation in three states over the next - course of the next year, anything that you can look at the end of this year that would convince you, hey, this might be a better idea than I thought?

Dr. RHOADES: I think that what would convince me that it might be more successful than it is intended is, first, the investment was larger. Second, the timeframe was longer. The Bologna process has been going on for 10 years. It has still touched a minority of the institutions in Europe. So, we have a huge challenge in the U.S. And third, there was a very important question early on about secondary education.

The European system is constructed on top of an upper secondary education. It is essentially like our general education in the United States, which obviously our high school education is not. So, if we're really going to fine-tune, I would encourage us very strongly to, as much as possible, build in articulation with the K through 12 education system.

CONAN: And Phyllis Safman, I'm sure you'd like more money to do a much longer project...
(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: ...or will accept that beginning, but at the end of this year, how would you measure success? What would be success for you?

Dr. SAFMAN: It would be a success if the faculties say, yes, we have learned something from this. We have agreed on how we're going to drill down and how we're going to be transparent about this process. That would - as far as money, we get so little anyway that, you know, the \$150,000 that we've gotten from Lumina is a gift that we're most appreciative of.

But I think we'll learn a lot this year. But I have to tell you, Utah was on its way to doing this anyway. And I think we've been able to, you know, do a pretty good job with what we've been doing. This is going to deepen our understanding and, ultimately, serve our students better.

CONAN: And we'll check back at the end of the year and see how everybody is doing and how deeply minds have been changed, or not.

Gary Rhoades, thank you very much for being with us today.

Dr. RHOADES: Thank you.

CONAN: Gary Rhoades who's with the American Association of University Professors, formerly a professor of higher education at the University of Arizona. And Phyllis Safman, who's the assistant commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education, with us today from member station, KCPW, in Salt Lake City. Thank you both for your time.

Dr. SAFMAN: Thank you.

CONAN: Coming up, hey, students, don't want to write that paper on transcendentalism? If money isn't a problem, or your conscience, try an essay mill. They've gone global. Stay with us. We'll talk about it.

I'm Neal Conan. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

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