

Today's News

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Commission on College Accountability Calls for a Broader Approach, Using More Data on Students

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Washington

Educators, public officials, and business and civic leaders must abandon a "gotcha mentality" and develop a fresh approach to college accountability, according to a report scheduled for release today by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. A new approach, the commission says, should be based on shared goals and priorities, rigorous measurement of progress, and continuing discussion.

Current accountability systems too often are cumbersome, inefficient, and focused on minimum standards rather than on a broader vision, says the report, "Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education."

"The problem has been that we've been playing dodgeball," said Paul E. Lingenfelter, executive director of State Higher Education Executive Officers, the nonprofit association that organized the commission. "We need to stop trying to deflect blame and realize we all have different roles to play."

The report's most controversial recommendation calls for a national "unit record" system, in which colleges would be required to provide the government with specific information about each student's academic achievements, financial aid, and more. Some higher-education groups have criticized that idea, which is being studied by officials at the U.S. Department of Education, as posing a risk to student privacy. But the commission's report calls the current system, in which the government relies on data supplied in summary form, outmoded and inaccurate. A new database, it says, should have fail-safe privacy safeguards and criminal penalties for violations.

Among other things, the report recommends:

- That state policy makers, such as governors, legislators, and members of higher-education boards, should establish clear goals for higher education based on state needs and priorities. The goals, the commission suggests, should focus on improving college-going and retention rates, educating students for the state's work force, and encouraging economic development. Statewide data systems should be created to inform policy and budget decisions that will close achievement gaps and ensure that resources are allocated fairly.
- That the federal government should sustain, and even increase, financial support for research and student financial aid.
- That college leaders should set institutional goals that are in line with public priorities and should monitor their progress toward those goals. Colleges should establish explicit expectations for academic programs and demanding standards for institutionally-supported research.

The report also says that faculty members, students, and business and community leaders should be partners in the debate about how to best meet the nation's educational needs, providing advice and feedback to higher-education and political leaders.

The report is a "clear recognition that there are several actors in this debate," said Thomas D. Layzell, a commissioner who is the president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, as well as the president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers group. "It's a two-way street."

Commission members, who spent 10 months drafting recommendations, plan to distribute the report widely in Congress, in state capitals, and on college campuses.

The full text of the report is expected to be posted soon on the organization's [Web site](#).

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