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New Commission on College Accountability Debates Standards, Rewards, and Punishments

By [MICHAEL ARNONE](#)

Washington

American colleges must develop clearer means of communicating their value to lawmakers and the public if the institutions and the U.S. economy are to remain vital, college officials said on Monday at the first meeting of a new commission on college accountability.

More than 25 people, including leaders of state-college systems and experts from various college associations, are members of the new panel, called the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. The commission was organized by the State Higher Education Executive Officers association to influence public policy and is being paid for by the Ford Foundation.

Participants in Monday's meeting discussed how well American colleges are doing in making high-quality education both accessible and affordable, and in helping state and national economies. Those at the meeting also talked about how the institutions might do better by setting measurable performance goals, rewarding institutions that meet them, and punishing those that don't.

"We'd better take a hard look at what higher education is and is not doing so we can be globally competitive," said former Gov. Frank Keating, an Oklahoma Republican who is the commission's chairman. Accountability measures are necessary, he said, to ensure that American colleges retain the excellent academic programs that have made them the first choice for college students worldwide.

Colleges need to know how they contribute to the needs of their states, and communicate that clearly to policy makers, said Margaret A. Miller, director of the National Forum on College-Level Learning at the University of Virginia. As of now, not enough colleges do so, she said, adding: "It's outrageous that we don't know more about our chief product."

Colleges and lawmakers should work together to create accountability standards, participants in the meeting said. But two commissioners disagreed on whether colleges should set standards on their own, or rely on government agencies to make sure that institutions set standards high enough so that students are well taught.

Because consumers want to attend good colleges, "we will not find it will be a race to the bottom" if colleges enforce accountability standards on their own, said Kenneth H. Ashworth, a former commissioner of higher education in Texas.

But Thomas D. Layzell, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, replied, "I don't think you'll find a race to the top, either," if colleges have no incentive to push students to work hard.

Accountability standards must be described in plain terms that drive home their importance to colleges, those attending the meeting said. Such clarity is especially important for faculty members, whose

endorsement of accountability standards is crucial to success.

The standards need to offer not only punishments but also rewards, said Larry Isaak, president of the Midwestern Higher Education Council. He advised officials not to "base accountability measures on 'gotcha'" -- punishing poor performance without recognizing success.

In becoming more accountable, colleges face several challenges, said Stanley O. Ikenberry, a commissioner who is the former president of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. They must focus on the skills that students acquire, make sure institutional accountability standards and procedures are transparent, and articulate institutional core values well enough that those values can withstand government and business pressures, he said.

While all colleges must find common standards, Mr. Ikenberry said, each state and institution must handle the details of reaching those goals on its own.

The commissioners will meet again over the summer and write a draft report incorporating comments from Monday's meeting. They plan to distribute the draft at another meeting to be scheduled for October or November, gather comments, and then write a final version.

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