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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
The Chronicle Review
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FORUM

How Can Colleges Prove They're Doing Their Jobs?

"Accountability" was one of the flashpoint words in the battles over higher education in the most recent legislative session in Congress. As lawmakers in Washington tried, and failed, to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, they raised various concerns, including: Have colleges been held adequately accountable for their quality and performance? Are institutions affordable? Accessible? Should they be required to meet certain performance goalsand punished if they don't?

At the same time, state governmentswith proliferating demands and limited budgetsare increasingly requiring public colleges to demonstrate that they are serving important economic and social needs. Before state lawmakers appropriate resources for higher education, they want to know if their spending will help meet key goals. The National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education has been organized by the State Higher Education Executive Officers to make policy recommendations.

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Private colleges aren't immune to calls for greater accountability. With tuitions continually rising, students, parents, and other constituencies are demanding proof that students are getting what they are paying for and learning what they need to know.

Congress will revisit the debates over accountability in higher education when it takes up reauthorization again early next year. Given the diverse array of institutions and missions, it's difficult even to define accountability and determine how it should be measured. Many questions remain. How should policy makers begin to tackle the issues involved with making colleges more accountable to the public? We asked eight experts to give us their views.

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CLARA M. LOVETT AND ROBERT T. MUNDHENK

We Need an Honest Conversation

The decision by Congressional leaders not to proceed this year with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 is a blessing in disguise. For a few months, at least, all interested parties will have a chance to save face and rethink their positions. We need a new conversation, one that gets us beyond the inflammatory rhetoric and unproductive confrontation of the recent past. Nowhere is that more essential than on the topic of accountability.

What do members of Congress and their constituents want to know about higher education? First, why does the cost of attending college keep rising faster than the rate of inflation, the Consumer Price Index, and other common indicators? Second, why is colleges' return on investment -- roughly defined as the percentage of admitted freshmen who earn baccalaureate degrees within six years -- generally low? Third, why is that return lowest among students from low-income and certain minority backgrounds?

Such questions are legitimate and will become only more urgent now that a college degree has replaced a high-school diploma as the gateway to the American middle class. Higher education's leaders are at a crossroads. They can perfect the art of stonewalling and dodging bullets -- and insist on being accountable on their own terms -- or they can engage in an honest discussion, even about some matters that they do not like to discuss.

To prepare for a new conversation, college leaders must reconsider, for example, their bold and unpersuasive assertion that regional accreditation processes are sufficient to deal with public concerns. Accreditation is a proven way to protect students and the public from unqualified instructors and fraudulent degree mills; it also enables colleges to help their peer institutions improve the quality of academic programs and management systems. But it cannot answer the questions now before us about the larger implications of diminished access to higher education and low rates of student success.

Nor can qualified promises, like those made by higher-education associations in "Recommendations for Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act," their May 2003 letter to Congress. While they offered to supply "easily accessible information about academic programs and outcomes, *provided that this can be presented in a way that recognizes the missions of individual schools*" (italics added), the proviso clearly places institutional autonomy above transparency and comparability. Legislators and the public are well aware of the diverse and decentralized character of higher education in this country. They observe, however, that graduates of colleges with different missions will nonetheless interact with graduates of other institutions in the work force and society. Thus when determining the outcome of a college education, they are less interested in what distinguishes one type of collegiate experience from another than they are in finding common ground.

For their part, leaders in Congress and state legislatures can bring to the new conversation a willingness to rethink definitions of accountability. For example, some data that Congress requires -- like figures on graduates' job retention and earnings a year after they are first employed, as stipulated in the Workforce Investment Act -- are extremely difficult to retrieve because employees' addresses change and employers are concerned about violating federal privacy laws. Other data, like the "degree or certificate awarded" -- a core indicator in the most recent iteration of the Perkins Act -- are incomplete measures of institutional success.

Some indicators that policy makers have proposed, like graduation rates, do not accurately gauge higher education's performance, because they ignore such realities as the number of students who transfer to other institutions or study part time. Moreover, if graduation rates become the primary triggers of a system of rewards and sanctions, much of higher education could end up where secondary schools have been for some time, producing the desired number of graduates but paying little attention to what they know and can do.

Fortunately, other accountability data exist and should be made available to people outside higher education. Hundreds of institutions already use information on learning outcomes to improve programs and meet accreditation requirements. Individual colleges may assess outcomes in different ways, but they all, except for institutions with very specialized missions, share many of the same learning goals.

Thus it should be possible to develop, at the association level, general agreement on core outcomes like "critical thinking" and "ability to analyze balance sheets" for programs and degrees across institutions. Colleges can then use their own assessment systems to document whether they have achieved those outcomes. Such documentation can provide clear and comparable public accountability data without the legislative imposition of state or federal standards, and be higher education's contribution to the new conversation.

Much remains to be done to ensure the consistency and widespread use of the data. But clearly they can provide information relevant to the concerns of the public, even though they are now typically buried in jargon-laden, internally focused reports. It is time for colleges to unpack those data, translate them into language that intelligent laypersons can understand, and lift the veil of secrecy.

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NANCY SHULOCK

No Less Than a Cultural Shift

A major obstacle to making public higher education more accountable is the failure to define accountability in terms of a public agenda. As Robert D. Behn, a lecturer in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, noted about the public sector in *Rethinking Democratic Accountability* (Brookings Institution Press, 2001), we cling to punitive definitions of accountability in which "accountability holders" threaten consequences for "accountability holdees" in one-way power relationships. Such definitions, he said, are not appropriate in today's world of distributed and shared governance, which incorporates broad public participation.

His words are especially relevant to higher education. Policy makers often request micro-level data that they think can embarrass colleges or otherwise force them to "shape up"; they are keen to compare institutions and less interested in learning why institutions are not comparable. Rather than compare graduation rates, cost per student, or time-to-degree across institutions with vastly different missions and types of students, state officials should monitor whether each institution is doing its part to help promote the state agenda.

For example, to enhance economic development, research universities could be held accountable for attracting external research support and promoting business start-ups. Comprehensive institutions could be responsible for placing engineering and computer-science graduates in local industry. And community colleges could be charged with meeting work-force needs through contract education with local businesses and certification in specific fields. Similarly, to increase student access, research and comprehensive institutions could be held accountable for admitting a proportion of community-college transfer students, while community colleges could be required to enroll more students who live in specific underserved areas of the state.

Moreover, when it comes to producing an educated citizenry and work force, it's clear that different institutions and sectors of education are interdependent. We read every day about new ways to transcend traditional boundaries: dual enrollment of students in high school and college, middle colleges that serve high-school students on college campuses, virtual advanced-placement academies, and other "P-16" reforms that connect elementary and secondary schools to higher education. We're well aware of the shared governance and decentralization in higher education, not only within institutions but also among campuses, systems, and state offices.

But unfortunately, despite the rhetoric about state-level goals and public agendas, most state accountability systems do not produce evidence to determine whether educational outcomes in the state are adequate for civic and economic health. Instead they generate loads of data to monitor individual campus performance, operating on the faulty assumption that a set of effective institutions will produce effective outcomes for the state as a whole.

Consider just three examples that demonstrate the fallacy of that viewpoint:

- Institutions may all have impressive graduation rates, yet the state may be educating far too few people to sustain a healthy civic and economic life.

- Community colleges may be preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions, and universities may be graduating transfer students at high rates, but large numbers of transfer-ready students may never enroll in a university, as a result of overcrowding or geographic inaccessibility.

- Graduates of teacher-training programs may have high passing rates on certification exams, but the state could have a serious teacher shortage.

Accountability must be for state, not institutional, outcomes. Because policy makers are familiar only with the old institution-centered model, it is crucial that higher-education executives demonstrate how good performance data can be useful in setting broader policies. Those executives should produce readable reports that use data to diagnose a state's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Policy makers can then use those reports to organize discussions about key performance issues, set appropriate goals, and hold institutions accountable to those goals. For example, if data show shortages of graduates in technical fields that are important to a state's economy, money could be used to increase enrollment in those disciplines.

What is needed is no less than a cultural shift. Instead of a top-down focus on institutions, we need collective accountability by which educators and policy makers come to understand that the educational health of a state is the result of a number of factors: the efforts of colleges and elementary and secondary schools, social and economic conditions outside the direct control of educational institutions, and policy makers' choices in designing, maintaining, and supporting their education systems. Institutions must be held accountable for performance. But the outcomes for which they are accountable must be derived from overall state needs.

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CHARLES B. REED AND EDWARD B. RUST JR.

A More Systematic Approach

How can colleges make themselves truly accountable to society? Higher education has its own set of assessments, but the gap between those assessments and government and public perceptions of institutional performance is large enough that we need to find new approaches.

Most accountability mechanisms in higher education are created by individual institutions and the associations that accredit them, and are designed to measure learning as a yardstick for institutional improvement. Such measures are, by definition, self-referential and are difficult both to translate to the public and to use in comparing institutions. Further, a connection between the quality of student learning and what federal and state governments spend on higher education is difficult to make.

As a result, when government and institutional leaders try to gauge accountability, too often they use "productivity" measures like enrollment, time-to-degree, and graduation rates, rather than true assessments of what students have actually learned, to determine the level of resources to provide.

Given the wide variations among colleges, a single national accountability system would be neither practical nor appropriate. But it is time to take a more systematic approach to accountability. "Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Options," a recent report by the Business-Higher Education Forum, for which we served as co-directors, proposes a framework that defines specific roles for institutions, regional accrediting organizations, federal and state governments, and national research organizations. Each player must understand how it fits into a larger structure of public accountability for student learning, based on broadly shared values about what must be done, who must be served, and how quickly.

Colleges can begin by defining and clearly communicating their own goals for student learning and then providing evidence that they have met them. Institutions already take learning assessments into consideration when they prepare for accreditation reviews. Now it is time to broaden their internal agendas to include public audiences. For example, the California State University System conducts an annual review of its teacher-education programs by surveying principals of the state's elementary and secondary schools to assess the quality and preparedness of its graduates who have become teachers. The system makes the results of that review public every year and uses them to identify successful efforts and areas that need improvement.

Regional accrediting agencies need to continue serving as a bridge between individual institutional assessment and public accountability. They should keep working at the national level with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to develop better ways to measure student-learning outcomes and communicate their work to the public. They should pay special attention to the changing demographics of American students, including the growing number of part-time students and the expansion of nontraditional course-delivery methods, like distance learning.

State governments should build accountability systems that distinguish between institutional performance and aggregate statewide performance. Institutions bear the primary responsibility for setting goals and documenting outcomes, but states should monitor the flow of students among institutions (including their transitions from high school to college), trends in student transfers, and patterns of enrollment and graduation among returning adult students.

The federal government should maintain its traditional focus on equity and economic opportunity in higher education. The nation's commitment to provide all students, regardless of their economic circumstances, access to college through federal need-based aid has never been more important. Equally important is the federal government's continuing role in research and data collection that tracks the movement of students across state lines.

Finally, national research organizations should undertake an agenda that is the equivalent of clinical-trial research on student learning in higher education. Such an effort will require a more sustained, focused, and disciplined commitment than is now being made to comprehensive longitudinal studies, using a variety of research measures. Our current national data tell us about student enrollment, or "seat time," measured in the credits that students accumulate, and about attrition patterns, but not much about what students have learned.

A stronger framework for public accountability that includes clearly defined roles for each of the key players will bring us closer to improving performance and enhancing public confidence in our higher-education institutions.

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THOMAS D. LAYZELL

Focus on a Larger Context

Some of the most interesting -- and challenging -- discussions about accountability are occurring at the state and local levels, where economic and political pressures are forcing all of the groups with a stake in public policy to work together. The pressures faced by states and their regions are so severe that they require systematic and coordinated responses, involving public officials and representatives of higher education, business, and nonprofit organizations.

Whether the discussions taking place are called round tables, summits, or meetings about "public engagement" or "stewardship of place," they all build on traditional public-service and outreach efforts -- but with a significant difference. The variety of perspectives, the complexity of the issues, and the level of coordination and resources brought to bear demand a new way of thinking. They require all participants to focus on a larger context than one defined by their individual roles and problems.

That new orientation extends to higher education. Discussions about accountability will continue to focus on traditional issues like graduation rates and productivity. But they will also increasingly ask colleges to focus on what it will take to achieve broad public goals, like raising levels of educational attainment, creating jobs, and improving public health.

As states struggle with quality-of-life and economic-development issues, pressures on colleges to help develop and achieve public goals are only going to increase. Thus, while they are just one facet of the discussion about accountability in higher education, colleges should consider what makes public agendas most effective. A successful public agenda will:

- Encourage broad participation. The involvement of leaders from both the public and the private sectors is essential for marshaling the necessary resources and increasing support for the agenda. Public schools are important partners in our efforts in Kentucky, as are organizations concerned with economic development, public health, and work-force training.

- Focus on broad, strategic goals that provide opportunities for people to improve the quality of their lives and enhance their economic status. Too narrow a focus misses the mark. For example, two of the six goals in the Kentucky Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997 call for increased broad support for the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville, in recognition of the importance of research institutions in economic development.

- Take a long-term approach. The issues that lead to creation of a public agenda often have deep historical roots. Quick fixes solve nothing. An organizational framework and a culture of commitment must be developed to sustain the agenda over time. Its viability cannot be left to chance or to the presence of particular leaders at particular moments.

  As was done in Kentucky, incorporating the agenda into law is one effective means of fostering a long-term approach. The state's Council on Postsecondary Education was assigned responsibility for developing the agenda and proposing revisions to it. The council was also charged with monitoring and publicly reporting progress toward the goals. A joint committee from the executive and legislative branches was established to provide oversight of the public agenda by top policy makers. Such measures don't guarantee long-term thinking, but they certainly encourage it.

- Establish clear and realistic priorities that can be measured and monitored -- and revised and refined as circumstances require. In Kentucky, an initial priority was to increase college enrollments and attendance rates. That is still a priority, but our success with enrollments has led us to emphasize other objectives, like increasing the number of degrees at various levels and in specific fields.

- Coordinate policies and practices with goals. For example, faculty activities that are associated with the agenda -- like working with public schools to improve teacher quality or with state and local economic-development agencies to create and attract jobs -- should be treated as important activities in promotion and tenure decisions.

- Regularly analyze what it will take to reach each goal. That includes not only how much money is needed but also how to organize and perform activities efficiently and effectively.

When it comes to designing a system of accountability, states and colleges should align measures with the public agenda and gauge actions that are key to achieving that agenda. Each state's circumstances differ. A state lagging in educational attainment may emphasize enrollments and degree production, while another may place more weight on research activities to stimulate economic development.

Accountability systems also produce data that can easily be interpreted as answers when, in fact, they are questions. It is vital that information be analyzed to determine what additional questions it raises, and then to pursue them. A failure to do so may lead to unfounded judgments or to solutions to problems that do not exist. Retention rates and graduation rates are examples. They often appear to produce answers about institutional performance when they really are inviting inquiry into the stories behind the rates.

In addition, accountability measures must be revised and refined to adjust to changing circumstances. Those that are no longer useful should be modified or discarded to avoid data overload. For example, the pressures on state governments to support prisons or Medicaid have left meaningless most of the measures that define the relative contributions of students, institutions, and states to the cost of higher education. New evaluations are required in today's fiscal environment.

The primary purpose of any accountability system is to improve colleges' performance, not to attack or defend it. It's in the best interest of all of us to work together.

Thomas D. Layzell is president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

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JOSEPH C. BURKE

The Word 'Public' Is the Key

Colleges must balance academic, public, and market demands in order to be accountable. But the demands of the collegiate, civic, and commercial cultures often compete with each other. Collegiate culture presses for the professional accountability of faculty participation, which can produce gridlock in decision making. Civic culture emphasizes the political accountability of serving public purposes, which can slip into serving the party in power. Market accountability promotes service to clients' needs, which can divert higher education from fundamental purposes to momentary fads.

A lack of agreement on public needs further increases the antagonism among the different groups. People in higher education complain about being criticized as unresponsive when government and business leaders are unclear about their priorities or change them in tune with election or market cycles. Governors, legislators, and business leaders continually call for colleges to start new programs and services, yet castigate them for trying to be all things to all people. Meanwhile, many people outside higher education criticize it for a lack of accountability but accept no responsibility for creating effective accountability systems.

Edward P. Weber, an associate professor of political science at Washington State University, asked the right question in a 1999 article on accountability in the journal *Administration & Society*: "What does an effective system of accountability look like in a world of decentralized governance, shared power, collaborative decision processes, results-oriented management, and broad civic participation?" And, one must add, in a world of market forces. It should incorporate the following characteristics:

- Public agendas. A representative group of college, business, and government leaders should identify an agenda that specifies what each state needs most from its higher-education institutions, as well as what financial resources are required to achieve those goals. The group should set indicators, targets, and timetables for such objectives as increasing college and public-school collaborations, providing access and affordability to higher education, ensuring adequate graduation rates and job placements, and promoting research and service programs for economic and civic development. Existing state higher-education boards representing all of the interest groups should coordinate the effort.

  For example, the Pew Charitable Trusts has supported round tables, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges has sponsored summit meetings, at which government, business, civic, and education leaders have established priorities for what their states need most from both their public and private colleges. At a summit in Mississippi, such leaders set goals that included educating better teachers; increasing college-participation rates; raising the number of graduates in science, math, and computer science; and expanding work-force training and university research to spur economic development. It's too soon to assess what impact those recommendations will have, but such round tables and summits may serve as models for the future.

- Public reporting. Some people contend that higher education has too much reporting. "Measuring Up," a biennial report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, grades the 50 states on their higher-education performance. Most public and many private colleges also report their results. Yet few institutional reports receive wide circulation among state and campus policy makers or the public.

  Another problem is that such reports represent separate efforts that fail to answer a crucial question: How well does the state higher-education system and each of its institutions respond to public needs? The reports lack a list of common indicators that link together results from the state, the higher-education system, and individual institutions, which would allow policy makers to determine the source of successes and shortcomings. Such indicators should measure college and school collaboration, degree completion and job placement, efforts to increase the access to and affordability of higher education, and research and service projects that serve state needs.

- Public quality assurance. Performance reporting demonstrates responsiveness to public needs; quality assurance assesses the performance levels and quality controls of campus programs. Higher education already has more quality checks than any other profession: accreditation, assessment, academic audits, and satisfaction surveys of students, alumni, and employers, to name a few. The fatal flaw is that the results are often kept private and rarely reported publicly. Accountability demands that colleges publish at least summaries of the results of accreditation, academic audits, and satisfaction surveys, which satisfy the public need to know and the academic need for candid peer critiques.

The word "public" is the key, for accountability in a democracy is always public. Adopting such characteristics of accountability would balance academic, civic, and market needs. That might even revive an old belief that higher education is an enduring public benefit for all Americans, not just a fleeting private benefit for college graduates.

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CAROL T. CHRIST

Strive for Openness

To read the headlines about accountability in higher education, one might conclude that colleges are failing to meet their responsibilities in major ways. Yet Americans' confidence in higher education is extremely strong. For two years in a row, a *Chronicle* opinion survey has found that public trust in colleges ranks near the top of the list for all kinds of institutions; in the most recent poll, nearly 93 percent of respondents agreed that higher-education institutions are among the most valuable resources in America. Why, then, all the calls for accountability?

The answer lies, paradoxically, in the high value that the public attributes to higher education. Never before has a college education been more important to economic well-being. The lifetime income differential attributed to a college degree has been rising; a male college graduate's first job today typically pays 81 percent more than does a male high-school graduate's, compared with 33 percent more in 1973. But the cost of college has grown significantly, too. When people see a good, a product, as at once vitally important and expensive, they become concerned about who has access to it, how it is distributed, and why it costs what it does. Indeed, legislative calls for greater accountability from higher education focus principally on those three concerns.

We in higher education have, in many ways, misjudged the issue. Those within academe who urge greater responsiveness to government's calls for accountability have focused on measuring learning outcomes. There is nothing wrong with that -- except that it misses the point. Learning outcomes are very much an issue in the debate about accountability in elementary and secondary education, where parents and legislators are worried about falling test scores and whether children can read, write, and make computations.

But when members of the government, the news media, or the public call for greater accountability from our colleges, they are rarely complaining that students are not learning enough. At heart they are concerned about which students have access to learning, at what price, and whether and when they graduate. They want to know about students' success in the job market, not how much they have learned about literature, astronomy, or anthropology.

Many people in higher education bristle at what they see as inappropriate interference with their work in calls for accountability. After all, our colleges are replete with levels and systems of measurement. We rate applicants for admission. We grade students' performance in almost every course they take. We evaluate faculty members for tenure and promotion. We review books and articles for publication, grants for financial support. We assess departments and programs. We accredit professional-degree programs and institutions. We believe that we are scrupulously accountable to ourselves, and we are affronted by any claim that we are not adequate to the task.

But being accountable to ourselves is insufficient; it does not fulfill the contract that accountability implies. Central to the public's agenda are the assurances of access and affordability. Accountability in higher education is inseparable from those goals.

If accountability is our end, then the means to that end lie in an ethic of greater transparency. We in colleges must be more open about our business practices and in our governance. We must be more open about our admissions and financial-aid policies and practices. We must be more open about budget and finance, providing the information that allows fuller understanding of cost and pricing. Such candor comes more easily to some of us, feels more threatening to others, but ultimately holds the key to a fundamental social trust -- and to American higher education's long-term success.

The right to know, a former dean of Harvard University, Henry Rosovsky, has observed, is deeply ingrained in our national tradition, particularly with regard to public figures and public entities. Colleges, whether public or private, are viewed as public property; that view reflects the centrality of our institutions today. It carries with it the burden -- and the responsibility -- to be accountable.

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