

# ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTING WITH SO MUCH EFFORT; WHY SO LITTLE EFFECT

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## Introduction

Performance reporting has become the preferred approach to accountability for higher education. Reporting higher education results has swept the country. *Measuring Up* grades the 50 states on their results. Forty-six states now have reports, as do many two- and four-year systems; and public colleges and universities often report their own results (Burke & Minassians 2003a). Despite all this reporting, doubts remain about higher education's accountability and performance. Continuing calls for more accountability suggests that governors, legislators, and business leaders are not impressed with the current reports. And Pat Callan, the President of the Policy Center that issued *Measuring Up*, describes the "national picture of higher education"—as "one of unevenness and even mediocrity" (The National Center 2002, p. 16).

*Measuring Up*'s mediocre grades in many states and the continuing calls for more accountability raise an intriguing question. How can so much reporting at the state, system, and institution levels have so little effect on performance and the perception of accountability? The answer is surprisingly simple. First, the performance reports at each of these levels often represent separate and segregated policies. They lack a limited list of common indicators that provide the "missing link" allowing policy makers to measure *down* as well as *up* the performance chain. Lacking such shared measures, *Measuring Up* identifies state results in higher education without revealing the sources of successes and shortcomings. A second problem is that accountability programs rarely reach down to the internal units most responsible for higher education results, the academic departments. A third liability stems from the failure of government, business, and education leaders to forge a public agenda stating clearly what their state needs most from its colleges and universities (Burke & Minassians 2003b; Burke 2004).

## Measuring Up

*Measuring Up* represented a unique achievement. For the first time, it permitted state policy makers to compare the results of higher education in the 50 states on the critical categories of *preparation, participation, affordability, completion, and benefits*. Its authors recognized correctly that most accountability efforts focused on individual colleges and universities. That emphasis slighted the importance of the collective contribution of colleges and universities to human capital development in every state. By concentrating on statewide results, the planner of *Measuring Up* hoped to spur state policies that would spur higher education as a whole to address public priorities.

## **A Persisting Problem**

States now have common indicators to grade their relative performance, but they cannot trace the source of their triumphs or troubles. Although a few of the State Reports, such as those from the Oklahoma Board of Regents and the West Virginia Policy Commission, adopted *Measuring Up's* indicators, our study of those used in 29 state reports shows that they share relatively few measures with *Measuring Up* (Burke and Minassians 2002). Small wonder that those 29 states with reports in 2000 scored no better on *Measuring Up* than those without them. What good for policymaking are segregated accountability programs that say results in one state, system, or college or university is better or worse than others, without identifying the causes of their successes or shortcomings? Such reports encourage non-productive reactions: arrogance for states, systems, or institutions that rate best, and envy from those that rank worst.

## **State Accountability Reports**

If *Measuring Up* stresses statewide performance and slights the connection to system and institutional results, the state performance reports often emphasize system and institutional results without linking them to statewide policy goals. For example, they compile data on degree awards by level, field, age, race, and gender without tying them to the overall goal of adult degree attainment and to critical fields of state needs. The performance reports also present many indicators on enrollment trends without linking them to statewide access to higher education. No less than 17 of 29 state reports in our study have an indicator on financial aid and 18 on tuition and fees, but only two of them include a measure on tuition and fees as a percent of family income (Burke and Minassians 2002b).

Performance reports in most states also suffer from forbidding formats and deadening details, which discourage rather than encourage readers. Most of them are dry documents, crammed with performance indicators and dense tables, and accompanied by little narrative and even less analysis. Their format, contents, and length seem certain—if not calculated—to repel rather than recruit readers. Most of the performance reports could compete with college catalogues as the documents least likely to be read. Like the catalogues, one might scan the reports for desired bits of data, but no one would read them to gain a concise and coherent picture of the performance of higher education at the state, system, or campus levels.

Most of the reports lacked the concise conclusions and clear recommendations that busy state policymakers want and need. At the same time, their aggregate statistics at the institutional level omitted the detailed information desired by prospective students considering college admission or by businesses or civic groups seeking specific services or research support. The performance reports are usually too detailed for state policymakers and too general for potential clients. All too often, they appear a grab bag of available indicators with no sense of state priorities or a public agenda. There are exceptions. The North Dakota report tracks the success of the University System in responding to priorities set by a Roundtable of state, civic, and education leaders. The Mississippi Leadership

Summit on Higher Education, facilitated by the Institutions of Higher Learning Board and the Association of Governing Boards, offers a model process for producing a public agenda. Illinois and Kentucky also match clear goals with focused reports. Unfortunately, these reports represent exceptions not the rule in performance reporting.

### **A Pyramid of Performance Indicators**

One remedy for the reporting problem is to recognize that statewide results for higher education flow from a chain of performance that runs from campuses and through systems. Policy makers should tailor indicators to interests and responsibilities of each of these levels, while connecting the performance of each to a limited set of common measures. This recommendation would result in a pyramid of indicators. At the top would come a restricted number of core measures that report performance on the most critical contributions of higher education to states and their citizens. Such a report should interest state policy makers and civic leaders. A second somewhat longer list of indicators would record results for college and university systems, which addressed the concerns of coordinating and system boards and officials. Finally, individual institutions would have longer reports with added indicators of relevance to campus leaders.

Performance reports should show statewide results, but they must also allow policy makers to drill down to system or institutional performance, which ultimately are responsible for the collective results. The performance report of the Ohio Board of Regents on its web site allows the viewer to move from statewide to institutional results on a number of common indicators with a click of the mouse (2003).

### **Suggested Core Indicators**

The common indicators should show trends over time and where appropriate, should include data on race, ethnicity. What follows are 12 tentative core indicators developed during our study of performance reporting (Burke and Minassians 2002b). They track most of the indicators of *Measuring Up*, but also allow for reporting on measures at the state, system, and institutional level.

#### **Funding**

State operating appropriations for public higher education per FTE student;

#### **Affordability**

Tuition and fees for two- and four-year public campuses, minus financial aid, as a percent of state median family income;

#### **College/School Collaboration**

Pass rates on teacher certification exams;

Percent of baccalaureate freshmen with a college preparatory curriculum in high school;

**Participation**

Higher Education—or system or institutional—participation rates of 18-24 year olds;

25-44 year olds enrolled part-time in post-secondary education or systems or institutions;

Transfer rates between two- and four-year institutions;

**Completion**

Completion rates for two- year (3 yrs) and four-year institutions (6 yrs);

**Benefits**

**State:** % of population holding degrees, combined with

**System and College or University:** % of degrees granted annually in the state (all degree levels);

**State, System, College and University:** annual number of degrees awarded in critical fields, Examples: nursing, teacher education, science and technology);

Dollar volume of externally sponsored research, statewide, by systems, and individual institutions;

**Student Learning**

Alumni survey on the knowledge and skills developed during the college years, statewide and by system and institution.

**A Final Link in the Performance Chain**

Results from surveys of directors of institutional research of public colleges in California, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin reveal what may be the fatal flaw in accountability reporting. They suggest that state reporting programs become increasingly invisible on campus below the vice presidents. The respondents claimed that 45 percent of the academic deans on their campuses had little or no familiarity with performance reporting in their State. Even more disturbing, 70 percent of the Directors said the same for department chairs (Burke and Minassians 2002b). Academic departments that are largely responsible for higher education performance on many of the reporting indicators are largely unfamiliar with the accountability program. Developing a limited list of departmental indicators for internal not external reporting could add the final link in the performance chain.

**Conclusion**

Though performance reporting has swept the country, doubts remain about the results of higher education and its accountability to public priorities. Our studies suggest three missing links in the performance chain. First, accountability reporting lacks a limited list of common indicators that could link state, system, and institutional results and allow policy makers to measure performance down to the institutional as well as up to the state level.

Second, accountability reporting rarely reaches academic departments, which are largely responsible for the desired results from higher education. Third, few coalitions of government, business, and education leaders have collectively developed public agenda of what their states needs most from higher education.

The Ford Foundation continues to support the efforts of the Higher Education Program of the Rockefeller Institute to address these problems. A past grant led to the development of the tentative list common indicators that could link performance reports at the state, system, and institution levels. A new grant will allow consultation with leaders of higher education and state government organizations to refine and revise these tentative indicators. Currently, we are surveying presidents and vice presidents of the comprehensive colleges and universities of CUNY and SUNY on their reaction to these indicators. This grant will also support an effort to identify a limited list of generic measures that could serve as departmental indicators in internal systems of performance reporting. A survey of academic deans and departments of two- and four-year campuses in CUNY and SUNY solicits their reactions to the appropriateness of a list of traditional indicators.

Now that performance reporting has become the preferred approach to accountability in so many states, neither state nor campus policy makers can afford to let so much effort produce so little effect. Performance reporting of higher education results is here to stay, for accountability in a democracy is always public. State Higher Education Agencies have a vital stake in making performance reporting work, for their state boards and officers have the awesome responsibility of linking higher education results to state priority needs.

### References

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