

**Testimony of The Education Trust to the National Commission on Accountability
in Higher Education**
April 2004

Since its establishment in 1991, The Education Trust has worked to improve the academic success of America's young people - especially low-income students and students of color - from kindergarten through college. Our work with communities and states across the country has convinced us that accountability - both for students and for the adults and institutions that serve them - is a critical piece of any effective, enduring effort to improve student achievement, especially among those who have been poorly served.

Accountability systems are tough to get right. But a decade of experience in K-12, together with parallel experience in the private sector, has taught us a lot about the characteristics of accountability systems that make a positive difference.

Those accountability systems most successful in bringing about real change:

- Focus primarily on results, rather than inputs or processes;
- Use just a few measures, rather than every imaginable indicator;
- Send messages that signal which priorities are most important; and
- Include ambitious goals that compel institutions to look beyond their own borders for solutions, such as developing more powerful strategies for working with the K-12 systems that provide them with their students and that address the needs of the communities – including businesses – that receive their graduates.

A strong accountability system helps institutional leaders to focus their efforts and resources on the top priorities and helps those leaders withstand pressure from elsewhere to use available resources on things that are less important to our national future.

We want to focus here not on all the many roles of higher education, but on the one we consider most fundamental to the nation's future: effective undergraduate education. Our goal here is not to suggest the specific details of an accountability system, but to lay out some of the central messages it needs to deliver.

Message 1: We're not done yet on access.

More students are going to college. In 2002, 65 percent of high school students enroll in college right after graduation, up from 50 percent 30 years ago. That's good news.

But the bad news is that there continue to be significant gaps in college-going between different groups. While 65 percent of white high school graduates entered college immediately in 2001, only 56 percent of African-American graduates and 53 percent of Latinos did so. And lest we conclude that the

students who don't enroll are simply the ones not ready for higher education, consider this: college-going rates among low-income students performing *in the top quartile* on national assessments are about the same as college-going rates among high-income students performing *in the bottom quartile*.

We recognize that colleges and universities don't control all of the levers around access, such as state/federal financial aid policies. And that has led many to say that access is far too complicated to be part of any accountability effort.

But universities control budgets and, in some cases, endowments of millions of dollars. We need to signal that it is not okay for institutions of higher education to use the dollars that are within their control simply to bid on students with the highest SAT scores at the expense of need-based aid. (At the "most competitive" institutions, Pell Grant recipients make up only 10% of the student body, compared with about 30 percent within higher education as a whole. Even among "highly competitive" institutions, Pell Grant recipients make up about 16% of the student body.)

Harvard University has recently garnered headlines for its effort to make its education more affordable for students from low-income families. While few other schools have the abundant resources of Harvard, it is still past time for all of higher education to closely examine how current spending priorities affect access.

We need accountability systems that measure whether institutions are serving their "fair share" of low-income and minority students, set ambitious goals, and provide real incentives for improvement.

We also need to signal that it is not okay for institutions simply to ignore the ways in which traditional practices in local schools and districts create barriers to access. In an era when surveys show that over 90 percent of current high school students already *expect* to go on to college, higher education clearly needs to expand its outreach efforts must beyond just individual students and help entire schools and systems address disparities in college preparation and matriculation.

Message 2: We need to translate access into success.

Though higher education as a whole has made important progress on access, it has made far less progress in translating access into success. Many entering students, including those who attend four-year colleges, don't graduate. And a significant number of those who do graduate haven't mastered the knowledge and skills we normally associate with a college degree.

In fact, postsecondary completion statistics have remained stagnant over the last few decades. A study of graduation of rates for the high school class of 1992 found that 66.5 percent of students who earned at least 10 four-year college credits got a bachelor's degree within eight years. That 66.5 percent graduation

rate has barely changed over the last three decades. For the class of 1982, it was 65.6 percent. For the class of 1972, it was 66.1 percent.

Overall, only 63 percent of students who begin a four-year college will get a bachelor's degree within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Survey. Graduation rates are even worse for minority students and students from low-income families. There is a gap of approximately 20 percent points between White students (66.8 percent) and African-American students (45.7 percent) and Latino students (47.3 percent). There are also significant differences between students in terms of family income. Nearly 77 percent of students from high-income families graduate; for students from low-income families, only 53.7 percent, a nearly 24 percentage point difference.

To put that in perspective, consider that in fall 1995, over 1.1 million students enrolled as first-time freshmen in a four-year college or university. That means that more than 400,000 were accepted into baccalaureate-granting institutions intending to get a four-year degree, but still had not graduated six years later. When we take into account the growth in college enrollment since then – first-time freshman enrollment in four-year schools now tops 1.4 million annually – and consider the additional students who begin their college career in community colleges with the intention of eventually transferring and earning a bachelor's degree, we can say this: if current trends continue, over *half a million students* will enroll in college for the first time in Fall 2004, try to earn a degree, and not succeed.

Accountability systems need to signal to institutions that this is unacceptable. These dismal graduation rates contribute to widening the gap between haves and have-nots in this country – a lack of economic mobility that jeopardizes the nation's future. Consider that only 7 percent of young people from low-income families are likely to be college graduates by age 26 while 60 percent of young people from high-income families will have graduated.

Colleges themselves frequently resist any sort of accountability based on graduation rates. Some criticize the nature of the statistics themselves. They argue that student *mobility* – people transferring between or earning credits from different institutions – makes institutional graduation rates unreliable, because it complicates the task of assigning responsibility for student success to a single institution.

While all of this may be true to some extent, the answer is not to shy away from accountability. The latest longitudinal data suggest that student mobility has increased little over the last 30 years. In the end, a sizable majority of students – almost two-thirds – who will ever get a four-year degree start at a given four-year institution, and either succeed there or fail there – nowhere else.



And while student factors certainly matter when it comes to success in higher education, institutions themselves have an important role to play in determining whether or not students succeed. In an analysis of federal graduation rate data to be released later this year, The Education Trust found that some institutions do a much better job than others in terms of student success, *even after taking into account the characteristics of the students they enroll.*

By comparing colleges and universities to “peer” institutions – those of similar size, mission, selectivity, financing, and incoming student profile – we found large variations in student graduation rates. The fact is what institutions do on campus matters a lot in student success, and accountability should focus on setting real goals to improve outcomes.

Of course, how much students learn in college matters just as much as whether they graduate. And there are important efforts underway to explore ways to reliably measure how much college contribute to growth students’ knowledge and skills. But reliable measures of college completion exist now. It would be a mistake to delay reporting those results, setting higher goals, and holding institutions accountable for raising completion rates and closing gaps between groups.

Message 3: We need to produce enough teachers “good enough” to do the job.

One of the most important things that institutions of higher education can do to assure their own long-term success in both access and success is to better meet the demand for high-quality K-12 teachers. Helping to recruit and train more effective teachers will go a long way to ending the cycle of finger pointing that currently exists between colleges and K-12 systems.

In the last reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act, Congress asked states to start building accountability systems to hold institutions that prepare teachers accountable for producing teachers who can at least pass the low-level licensure exams required by most states.

That was a significant step forward. But in too many cases, colleges and universities simply responded by using those same low-level exams to screen students at entrance into a teacher education program, doing little to ensure that programs themselves become better at providing their graduates with a solid foundation to be effective in the classroom. Many state accountability systems didn’t even bother to address critical teacher shortages – the other part of the equation.

We can and must do better. Accountability must include real goals for the preparation of teachers in shortage areas. This must include measurable goals for increasing science and math teachers, under-represented minorities, teachers with bilingual skills, and teachers who want to teach in high poverty schools.

Accountability for teacher preparation must challenge institutions to be proactive and innovative in raising the quantity and quality of those who prepare to become teachers.

Some systems have already taken this step. The Texas A&M University system has set goals for its 10 universities to increase the number of teachers they graduate, particularly minority teachers and teachers in high need areas such as science, and to ensure that their teacher candidates pass licensure exams at rates higher than those required by the state. Important to the early success of this initiative has been institutional commitment at the highest levels: the Board of Regents and each campus president jointly establish campus-specific goals and evaluate progress regularly and publicly.

Higher education also needs to more seriously evaluate the quality of teachers produced. Helping aspiring teachers to pass the licensure exams is necessary but not nearly sufficient. In the age of accountability in K-12, we need teachers who are truly effective in moving student achievement to higher levels. New tools in value-added research allow us to know which teachers are most successful when it comes to growing student learning. Higher education needs to extend the existing research in this area to deepen our understanding of effective teaching and then integrate these findings into teacher preparation.

Only a handful of states and institutions – including a statewide project in Ohio, and the participants in the Carnegie Corporation’s Teachers for a New Era project - have committed to measuring their teacher preparation programs by the effectiveness of the teachers they produce.

And the role of higher education’s teacher-education programs should extend beyond graduation into the world of professional development, helping teachers constantly grow and renew their skills.

The Bottom Line

There has been some real progress in holding universities and colleges accountable for their outcomes. Work by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, including its annual *Measuring Up* report, has begun to focus attention on higher education outcomes at the state level. As K-12 leaders learned a decade ago, it is not enough simply to focus on aggregate results. Now is the time to combine those efforts with specific goals for individual institutions.

We must hold higher education accountable for their efforts to enroll minority and low-income students, accountable for their graduation rates, and accountable for the teachers they produce.