

Accountability and Postsecondary Education in Kentucky
Written Testimony for the
National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education uses five questions to guide postsecondary reform:

- Are more Kentuckians ready for postsecondary education?
- Are more students enrolling?
- Are more students advancing through the system?
- Are we preparing Kentuckians for life and work?
- Are Kentucky's communities and economy benefiting?

These questions function as a public agenda, succinctly expressing the Council's commitment to expand Kentuckians' access to postsecondary education and to ensure that the postsecondary education system improves lives and strengthens communities.

The Council's primary accountability initiative, the Key Indicators of Progress toward Postsecondary Reform, is framed by the public agenda. Currently there are 19 indicators, divided among the five questions. Each indicator provides a specific, measurable objective for postsecondary reform. Some indicators (such as the percentage of Kentuckians with a baccalaureate degree or higher) are far-reaching, systemwide measures. Others (such as retention and graduation rates) are measured at system and institution levels. In all cases, the indicators emphasize the public agenda and progress toward broad reform goals, rather than comparisons of individual institutions' performance. Where possible, key indicator goals are aligned with national standards.

The key indicators prompt systemwide change in the following ways:

Question 1: Are more Kentuckians ready for postsecondary education? Too many Kentuckians are not prepared to take full advantage of postsecondary education. Too few high school students are ready for postsecondary education when they graduate and too many do not graduate. Indicators under question 1 foster accountability within the postsecondary system for the percentage of Kentucky adults functioning at low levels of literacy and with less than a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, the Council establishes performance goals to encourage more students to take courses in high school that prepare them for advanced education, and improved performance on college entrance exams. Affordability measures – critical components of college access – are also included under question 1.

Question 2: Are more students enrolling? Too few Kentuckians continue education beyond high school. Increased postsecondary enrollment is an important component of Kentucky's reform effort and accountability projects. The Council encourages not only increased overall enrollment, but also improved enrollment levels among adult education recipients, minorities, and residents of disadvantaged Kentucky counties.

Question 3: Are more students advancing through the system? Too many students leave college without earning a credential or acquiring a marketable skill. Indicators under question 3 measure progression via retention and graduation rates. To foster cooperation among institutions, the Council uses a systemwide retention definition: first-time students are considered retained if they enroll anywhere in the state for a second year of study.

Question 4: Are we preparing Kentuckians for life and work? Too little is known about what students know and are able to do as a result of their college experience. Indicators under question 4 measure the prevalence of effective educational practice in Kentucky postsecondary institutions (as indicated by the National Survey of Student Engagement) and degree production in fields related to the knowledge-based economy and other state needs. The Council anticipates that Kentucky's participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning's pilot study will yield further information for question 4.

Question 5: Are Kentucky's communities and economy benefiting? Kentucky needs better jobs and a workforce with the knowledge and skills to fill them. Indicators under question 5 include measures of research and development and public service expenditures.

Key indicator goals are established through a collaborative process involving the Council, institutions, and state and national reform partners. Systemwide goals are used as a framework for establishing institutional goals. The Council's long-term enrollment goal, for instance, is to enroll 240,000 undergraduates by 2015. Once the Council staff determines the systemwide enrollment increases necessary to sustain annual progress toward the goal, institutions are asked to designate the proportion of the systemwide increase they are willing to contribute. The Council reviews and officially approves all key indicator goals and regularly reviews goals as new baseline data warrants.

The system and individual institutions are held accountable for progress toward key indicator goals through regular progress reports to the Council; results are also posted on the Council website and included in the Council's annual accountability report to the legislature. Many of the available results suggest the Council's accountability efforts are effective:

- Kentucky's average ACT composite score rose in 2003, following several years of steady or declining scores. The average ACT score for Kentucky's 2003 high school graduates was 20.2, up from 20.0 in 2002. The gap between Kentucky's average score and the national average narrowed in 2003; the national average composite score remained unchanged at 20.8. Kentucky's scores improved even as an increased percentage of high school graduates took the ACT, defying the conventional expectation that scores will decline as participation broadens to include less-prepared students.
- Undergraduate enrollment increases continue to exceed expectations, prompting the Council to revise the timeline for achieving its long-term enrollment goal from 2020 to 2015.

- Graduate and first-professional enrollment increased by more than 3,000 students between 1998 (the year reform was initiated) and 2003.
- The percentage of GED completers enrolling in postsecondary education within two years has risen dramatically, to almost 22 percent in 2003.
- Kentucky has made progress in retaining more students—a key measure for continuing the momentum of reform. As Kentucky continues to provide access to all students, the Council and the institutions have been working harder to retain them. The systemwide retention rate rose from 67.7 percent in 1998 to 68.3 percent in 2003.
- The six-year graduation rate for Kentucky’s public universities in 2002 remained below the national average at 43.5 percent, but was well above its 1998 level, 36.7 percent.
- Total federal research and development expenditures for the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville rose from \$82 million in 1999 to \$139 million in 2002.
- Kentucky was one of only two states to show improvement since 2000 in all five categories measured by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education’s *Measuring Up 2002*.