

TESTIMONY

THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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With voluntary institutional accreditation, colleges and universities created their own system of accountability well before most states began to implement their own oversight of the institutions of higher education serving their citizens. Once significant federal dollars began to flow to colleges and universities, they discovered they were accountable to three types of regulation: federal, state, and the voluntary system they had created. For most of the last half of the twentieth century this “triad” system seemed to work. Although never delicately calibrated, it appeared to provide sufficient assurance of educational quality to warrant public trust.

Today that trust has eroded and the expectations of accountability have changed. We are going through the most significant change in higher education that we have experienced in a century. Higher education is expected

- to educate more people of diverse interests as well as diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds;
- to train a workforce to maintain U.S. ascendance in a global economy;
- to be open to the transforming potential of the digital age; and
- to flourish in a highly competitive marketplace.

It is asked to do all of this with less public money and with federal student aid programs that leave most students with debt. This context makes the discussions of accountability increasingly complex because the variables are multiple and are often ambiguous if not contradictory. The word “accountability” is attached to several competing imperatives.

We have to understand that our expectations for accountability are not those of twenty or thirty years ago. They are shaped by a different understanding of the role of the academy in contemporary society and by a rapidly shifting financial environment. Equity and access remain major public policy goals, but now they are matched with calls for relevance, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and greater productivity. Is accountability primarily aimed at providing better information about institutional or student performance, or is it aimed at changing performance? Is it meant to support better decision-making within institutions and by their governing boards, or will it be used to create ratings or rankings meant to inform the marketplace? Is accountability about using a single set of measures for all colleges and universities, or is it about fulfillment of institutional mission? Is accountability focused primarily on achieved student learning or on the efficiency with which students move through the institution?

The National Commission must realize that demands for accountability at this point seem so intricately interwoven with various political and economic agendas that often there appears to be more risk than gain in participating in the discussions. Every institution has the right to know how accountability information will be used by the agencies requiring it. Some national legislators have argued that the goal of better accountability is simply to provide the consumer—students and parents—with dependable comparable data on which informed decisions can be made. In short, for an effective open higher education marketplace, consumers of higher education need better consumer information about institutional performance. But then all the cries about institutional costs and inadequately prepared students graduating from colleges, suggest that other agendas must be in play as well. Accrediting agencies must also be clearer about their goals in accountability. We argue that institutions best equipped to strengthen their teaching-learning environments are those whose decisions are based on sound data about performance. As we ask for more data related to educational and organizational performance, however, institutions need to know how we intend to interpret and use that data. What are the benchmarks of performance that will be acceptable to each part of the triad? If they differ, how might that affect the institution? At the very least, the National Commission should help the triad create clear language about and connections between the educational, political, and economic goals of accountability in higher education in the United States.

The greatest contribution the National Commission can make would be to recommend a legislative moratorium on higher education accountability for two years so a national task force, charged with creating a policy framework for accountability, could bring some order and consistency to defining accountability in higher education. We can take a lesson from the Europeans as they strive to create European higher education from disparate, highly independent national higher education systems: their ministers determined the key outcomes from a public policy perspective, set a time frame, and then called on institutions and quality assurance agencies to create the map. Of course, if that map is not in place at the appointed time the politicians will handle to job. Right now European quality assurance agencies and universities are meeting almost monthly so they can achieve these goals but on their own terms. It is time for those of us concerned about the welfare of higher education in the United States to attack the matter of accountability with the same focus and urgency.

CREATING THE NATIONAL TASK FORCE. I propose that each part of the “triad” must remain a key participant in this effort if the capacity and diversity of U.S. higher education—the envy of the rest of the world—is to continue. The U.S. system of decentralized quality assurance has the proven capacity to respond to significant public policy initiatives while nurturing rather than stifling valuable innovation in higher education. However, a task force made of DOE staff, SHEEOs, and accreditors will probably fall short of the goal of achieving a national consensus on accountability in higher education.

Colleges and universities must share in the creation and implementation of accountability programs. Although voluntary accrediting agencies ostensibly represent the institutional voice in the triad, the fact is that over the past two decades, the federal government has regulated institutional accreditation such that many institutions perceive accreditation to be one more type of mandated external regulation. Many regional accrediting agencies, in the past five years, have revised their standards and evaluation processes to reconnect their quality assurance activities to the needs of their member institutions. But when legislators and others discuss accountability and accreditation, they often expect accreditors to enforce an accountability system created outside of the academy and voluntary accreditation. Although public colleges and universities have become familiar, although not always comfortable, with providing a significant amount of performance data, private colleges worry about the precedents established when governmental bodies interject themselves in ways that might not honor the distinctive missions and purposes of the institutions. The major concern of all colleges and universities is accountability systems that (1) ignore distinctive institutional missions, (2) claim to measure learning but use misguided proxies for it, and (3) are easily translated into unintended rating or ranking systems

These discussions of accountability must engage the faculty as well. Some faculties believe that accountability demands bring into question their professional integrity. Some see accountability as an ill-disguised attempt to diminish institutional autonomy and academic freedom. My experience, however, leads me to conclude that we have greatly underestimated faculty acceptance of accountability and, consequently, have not tapped their creativity in defining and implementing meaningful systems for it.

Colleges and universities and their faculties are ready to tackle the challenge of creating credible systems of accountability. They are anxious to find dependable data that will allow them to benchmark their performance as a business as well as the performance of their students. For example, several subgroups of institutions have created performance indicators for voluntary institutional use. However, nothing yet has prodded subgroups to engage across sectors in yjr conversations necessary to forge national consensus. I am convinced institutional resistance is primarily a response to accountability programs for which colleges and universities have had little effective input, even those proposed by their accrediting agencies and other types of

educational institutions. The National Task Force should provide a highly visible forum with institutional and faculty representatives constituting a majority of the participants.

SOME SPECIAL TOPICS TO BE CONSIDERED BY THE TASK FORCE. It is obvious that the agenda for the task force will include discussion of the educational, economic, and political goals of accountability. Undoubtedly it will require the task force to propose a policy framework for accountability. I suggest two other items that should be on the agenda.

Transparency of processes related to accountability. This comment could be aimed at all members of the triad as well as at colleges and universities. I would like to focus on its potential impact on accrediting agencies such as The Higher Learning Commission. Some could argue that colleges and universities have been accountable for years through their accrediting agencies. The accreditation stamp of approval once appeared to provide sufficient assurance to the public that effective education is taking place. Now the public wants to know more about how accreditation works and why its reliance on peer review should be trusted. If there is doubt about the leg of the triad purportedly most knowledgeable about academic quality, the triad is weakened. This is more than just a cry for better public relations and readily understood explanations of accreditation. It is about finding ways to include more public voices within the accreditation activities—from setting standards to evaluating institutions and programs to making accreditation decisions. It is also about public disclosure of important findings considered to be useful to the communities of interest beyond the campus. Institutions, at least those in the North Central region, are willing for the accreditation process to be more transparent. However, they rightly expect strengthened programs of peer reviewer training and evaluation to ensure that accreditation decisions reflect consistent understanding and application of accreditation standards. Despite the private nature of accreditation, if it is meant to serve the public good, it must find appropriate ways to be accountable for the quality of its work. We can drop the cloak of confidentiality while creating a “zone of privacy” essential for certain aspects of effective quality assurance.

Communication and coordination. The 1992 reauthorization of The Higher Education resulted in improved communication among the Department of Education, state higher education agencies, and accrediting agencies. However, we have no regular forum for participants in the triad to talk through our shared interests and activities related to accountability. Most institutions would welcome a coordinated, dependable system of data gathering and reporting.

Commitment to engagement and service. At the federal level, the 1980s marked a major shift in understanding the purpose of public investment in student learning. In spite of the Pell Grant program, the largest bulk of students receiving federal financial aid incur debt to get that aid. Convinced by data that show the increased earning capacity of degree-holders, public many federal policy makers have decided that college attendance is really private investment for private good. Simultaneously, state scholarship programs intended to serve the public good by increasing the number of degree holders, are being cut dramatically. Critics of higher education bemoan the corporate mindset of college leaders and administrators while other commentators fear the loss of public sector education to the forces of privatization.

A shift in business practices is not a shift in basic values. The Higher Learning Commission just completed a major revision of its accreditation standards through a process that engaged hundreds of people in a highly participative, iterative process. Not only do our new standards place significant emphasis on student learning, they also speak directly to the capacity of the college or university to serve its constituents, both on and off-campus. Many times I heard institutional leaders comment that these standards would help the institution to engage in significant discussions about how the institution serves its communities of interest and how it prepares students to live in a rapidly changing world. I learned from this experience just how important engagement and service continue to be to most of our colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities continue to believe that they exist to serve the common good. We need to conduct our discussions about accountability in the context of supporting and strengthening that commitment.