

Statement on Accountability in Higher Education
for the
National Commission on Accountability on Higher Education
prepared by
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with a statement on criteria that we believe should be followed in constructing a good state-level performance and accountability system for higher education, and thank you for your service on the Commission and commitment to helping all of our states be sensible in such efforts.

The success of any state-level performance and accountability system rises and falls on whether or not it improves performance to the levels sought by a state.

Performance and Accountability Today

The State Higher Education Executive Officer's website indicates that 46 states have some type of performance or accountability system for higher education. While there is much variance between the states, these systems fall within three broad categories: performance reporting, performance budgeting, and performance funding.

Performance reporting involves periodic reports that quantify statewide and usually institutional results on a range of indicators.

Performance budgeting includes some type of performance reporting but takes it one step further. Policymakers *may* take into account the results of the indicators as one factor in determining funding allocations to institutions.

Performance funding ties state funding directly and tightly to specific performance by an institution on one or more indicators.

While many of the states call their approach an accountability system, it would be more accurate to refer to them as performance reports.

In addition to higher education performance reporting, performance budgeting, and accountability frameworks established by states or systems are those connected with accreditation, national rankings of programs and institutions, reports by national and regional organizations, and by institutions themselves.

Accountability: Different Meanings to Different People

As we set about to build a good accountability system for higher education, we should distinguish between “performance” and “accountability.”

In this testimony, performance is the degree to which desired results are achieved. Accountability is the degree to which responsibility for performance is clear and for which consequences follow. Consequences could be financial or non-financial rewards, incentives, or penalties.

As indicated below, an effective accountability system brings about improvements in performance.

Elements of an Effective Accountability System

Among recent pieces on higher education accountability, we have found several papers or articles to be especially helpful (Burke, 2003; Ewell, 2003; Lingenfelter, 2003; Longanecker, 2003; Wellman, 2002). We have drawn freely on the ideas and views expressed in them, as well as on our own state’s experience with elements of performance systems to draw the following conclusions about the characteristics of a good higher education performance and accountability system:

1. It should be built around the smallest possible number of clear, significant, and measurable goals. These should be the most critical measures to indicate whether or not an institution, system, or the state’s higher education effort is going in the right direction.
2. Its performance indicators should focus on results, not on process and procedure, to allow flexibility in the achievement of results. This is especially important in states that have such a wide range of different types of institutions. What works well at one institution might not work well at another. Institutions need flexibility to allow the creativity that is likely to be necessary to reach state goals.
3. It must publicly report progress, and the lack of progress toward goals and their associated targets.
4. It should have as much “buy-in” from as many relevant organizations and people as possible, without compromising the goals.
5. The accountability part of the system should focus on rewarding better performance. Systems that simply punish low performance are likely to be counterproductive if they only take away – rather than enhance – the resources needed for improvement.

6. Its structure should ensure the following:
 - a. Be simple and easy to understand. Otherwise, it will not be used effectively, by the institutions or by future policy makers.
 - b. Provide information on performance and on accountability.
 - c. Provide a snapshot of performance at any given time as well as the trend in performance over time
 - d. Provide an easy-to-comprehend evaluation of performance, both over time and at the point of a snapshot.
 - e. Show how similar institutions compare to one another and to peer institutions on performance indicators.
 - f. Provide high-level summary data and information (e.g., for a state or system) as well as easy access to more detailed information at the institutional level that leads to or explains the high-level data and information.
 - g. A system may be best able to meet the foregoing criteria if it is electronic and web-based rather than paper-based.

A Good Starting Point – *Closing the Gaps by 2015*

How might we bring together the foregoing prescriptions to construct an effective and efficient state-level performance and accountability system?

The Texas higher education plan already offers a performance system that can be adapted to include a small number of additional performance indicators (such as a set of efficiency indicators) and to establish an accountability system.

The four goals in *Closing the Gaps by 2015* represent a state determination of the four most critical results sought from higher education: student participation, student success, institutional excellence, and research). These goals are expressed as results, as do the targets associated with each goal. Both the goals and the targets establish the timeframe in which they are to be achieved. In general, intermediate targets are established for 2005 and 2010, on the road to the goals of closing the four gaps by 2015.

Each institution has established its own targets expressed in terms of the contribution it aims to make to each statewide target. This provides a clear picture of the contributions that each institution expects to make by 2005 and 2015.

Progress toward *Closing the Gaps* targets is tracked closely and reported publicly at least annually. The underlying data system permits “drilling down”

under the targets -- for the state and for each institution--to look at various data elements that provide context for progress or lack of progress toward the targets. This capacity also facilitates decisionmaking and policymaking to adjust the efforts being made to reach targets and goals.

The fact that *Closing the Gaps* has only four goals and a relatively small number of targets makes it easy to show how the state and each institution is progressing relative to the timeframe, which makes it easy to determine whether progress is adequate or inadequate to meet the timeframe.

Recommendations for Texas

From a review of the best thinking on higher education and accountability and from consideration of our own experience, the conclusion we reach for Texas is the following: To develop a statewide performance and accountability system that will have the greatest likelihood to improve performance and achieve state goals, *Closing the Gaps'* four goals (participation, success, excellence, and research), and its already-created performance system should be used for the core, and the performance and accountability shaped to meet the standards listed above in this testimony.

References:

Burke, Joseph C. (2003). "Trends in Higher Education Performance," in *Spectrum: The Journal of State Government*, Spring, pp. 23-24

Ewell, Peter. "An Accountability System for 'Doubling the Numbers'," paper presented at "**Double the Numbers Conference**" hosted by Jobs for the Future, Washington, D.C., October 2003.

Lingenfelter, Paul E. (2003). "Educational Accountability," in *Change*, March/April, pp. 19-23.

Longanecker, David. "Financing Tied to Postsecondary Outcomes: Examples from States," paper presented at "**Double the Numbers Conference**" hosted by Jobs for the Future, Washington, D.C., October 2003.

Wellman, Jane. (2002). "Statewide Higher Education Accountability: Issues, Options, and Strategies for Success," in Higher Expectations, National Governor's Association, pp. 7-16.