

**A profile of Accountability in Virginia Higher Education: The Reports of  
Institutional Effectiveness and Core Competency Assessments  
Prepared by the staff of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia  
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SCHEV initiated and led in the creation of a new accountability tool, the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness (ROIE). In 1999, SCHEV presented the concept of measures of institutional effectiveness to the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. Later, it appeared as recommendation number 63 in the report of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. In 2000, the Governor and the General Assembly agreed that this SCHEV initiative was a good idea and mandated by law the creation the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness (ROIE) through the 2000-2002 Appropriation Act (Item 162 #11c).

First published on July 2, 2001, the ROIE were developed to provide evidence of institutional effectiveness — the extent to which institutions accomplish their missions and students achieve their educational goals. In highlighting the institutions' accomplishments and demonstrating progress towards improvement, the reports give students, parents, policy makers, faculty and staff, employers, and the general public access to important information about each of Virginia's public four-year colleges and universities, Richard Bland College, and the Virginia Community College System.

### **Developing the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness**

The first ROIE were the culmination of two years of research, discussions, and institutional meetings to develop the systemwide metrics. It is important to note that during this time, SCHEV was in the process of analyzing SCHEV reports to be either eliminated or streamlined into a more logical or less burdensome format, as well as working with other agencies to determine if other higher education requirements could be consolidated. These efforts would play a role in the selection of the systemwide measures and later requirements in the 2002-2004 Appropriation Act that the Department of Planning and Budget (DPB) use ROIE in place of previous institutional submissions of performance indicators.

Additionally, the first two recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission provide the detail for the short-lived effort that was known as the IPAs or Institutional Performance Agreements which were intended to tie planning and budgeting together in such a way to as to provide a stable and predictable environment for budgeting. A pilot project with a small group of institutions was begun, but the effort later failed due to a lack of funding and sufficient legislative support. The metrics included in each IPA were very similar to those in ROIE and those previously required by DPB.

To SCHEV's credit, ROIE was never intended to be tied to funding, but instead was designed to provide an objective look at institutional performance on a group of measures related to effectiveness.

### *Structure*

Each institutional report is organized into five sections: institutional mission, college profile measures, system-wide measures, institution-specific measures, and the core competencies. There are somewhat fewer systemwide measures for the two-year institutions as some are simply not appropriate for two-year institutions.

**Institutional mission** describes the institution's core values and priorities. The mission statement sets a vision for the institution and defines how it will get there. For example, a large urban university might describe its mission in terms of partnering with business and industry, pursuing a national research agenda, and meeting the needs of a highly diverse, non-traditional student body. A small liberal arts college with a more homogeneous student body might focus on undergraduate education, a broadly based curriculum, and the residential experience. The mission of two-year community colleges includes preparing students for transfer to a four-year college or university, providing technology training for initial entry into the workforce, and upgrading workers' skills. The mission statement of each of the colleges provides the overall context in which the measures of effectiveness can best be understood.

**Institutional profile provides** in-depth views of enrollment and projections of future enrollment. Also included are five years of general fund appropriations per in-state student FTE and the complete degree inventory for each institution. These measures provide a context to understand the basic inputs and outputs of the institution. Size, student demographics, the type and number of programs available, the number of degrees awarded each year, and projections of future enrollment growth all provide valuable information about not only the nature of the institution, but also the features that make it unique among its peers.

**System-wide measures** include 14 performance measures focused on operational efficiency and factors associated with academic quality: freshman to sophomore retention rate, number of transfer students enrolled from two-year colleges, class size (below 20 and over 50), percentage of lower-division courses taught by full-time faculty, six-year graduation rate, average time-to-degree, percentage of living alumni who donate annually, classroom and laboratory space utilization, percentage of state Education & General funding spent on instruction and academic support, percentage of state management standards met, percentage of professionally accredited programs, debt service-to-expenditure ratio, research and public service expenditures per full time faculty, and total student credit hours taught per full time equivalent faculty. This section of the report contains both current and historical information, and, where appropriate and available, information on the performance of peer institutions. It is of note that ample space is provided in each measure for the institution to provide meaningful context to these measures to explain why one year's data might be anomalous or factors influencing how their data compares to their peer group's data.

**Institution-specific** measures vary by institution and represent unique aspects of the mission that the college or university may choose to highlight in each version of the report. These measures are selected by the institution to help tell its their story.

Institution-specific measures also provide a richer context for understanding performance on the system-wide measures. For example, some doctoral research institutions have chosen to report national rankings for faculty research awards and honors. Comprehensive and liberal arts colleges with a primary focus on undergraduate education have reported results of student outcomes assessment or special opportunities for study abroad, service learning, or internship experiences. Several institutions have chosen to report on student access to technology. Taken as a package, these measures often tell a fascinating story about what the institutional values are during the particular reporting cycle.

### *Competency Assessments*

The Commonwealth of Virginia is a pioneer when it comes to efforts to collaboratively define competencies associated with student learning, to initiate efforts to systemically evaluate these competencies, and to assess how Virginia's system of higher education, as a whole, is performing (as measured by student learning). The benefit of this type of assessment is three-fold: 1) to the learner (rendering a benchmark noting their mastery of the competency); 2) to the institution (assessing how its academic programs and courses educate individuals to perform these skills); and 3) to society (promoting a more competent, educated populace and skilled workforce). The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) monitors institutional effectiveness efforts measured by six postsecondary competency-based assessments. These assessments — Writing, Technological Literacy, Quantitative Reasoning, Scientific Reasoning, Critical Thinking, and Oral Communications — are a product of the 1999 Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. The first round of results of the initial two competencies (Writing and Technological Literacy) that were measured at Virginia's two-year and four-year public institutions were reported to the Council and included in the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness (ROIE) 2002. The results of studies on the remaining competencies will be reported in subsequent ROIEs (issued biennially) and institutional progress reports assessing the goals of the Systemwide Strategic Plan. Competency assessment approaches -- methods, sample sizes, and evaluation instruments -- vary widely among institutions. SCHEV works collaboratively with institutions to provide feedback for improvements in implementation, measurement, and reporting criteria. SCHEV also facilitates efforts, where appropriate, to increase the rigor associated with competency assessments. These issues inform collaborative, statewide policies on articulation, transfer, academic integrity, and mutual respect among the Commonwealth's institutions for one another's academic programs and courses.

It is important to note that the key to the Core Competencies is that they do not attempt to certify individual graduates. That is the role of the degree awarded. Instead, the role of the Core Competencies is a validation of the intent of institution's program of education leading to the degree. SCHEV does not wish to imply a certification parallel to, or in place of, the institution's awarding of a degree.

## *Outcomes*

While not always directly credited to the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness, a number of unforeseen and positive outcomes have come of ROIE.

### *The 2001 Gubernatorial Election and The Condition of Research*

In analyzing the first edition of ROIE, one of the interesting findings was that research expenditures per full-time faculty lagged far behind that of peers. This finding was evidence that the Commonwealth's policy focus on undergraduate education in the 1990s had caused its premiere research institutions to lose tremendous ground in national rankings as well as simply the amount of research produced. This was noted not only as impact on higher education, but on the economy of the state as well, thus it became fodder for debate during the 2001 gubernatorial elections. Both Attorney General Mark Early and then-candidate Mark Warner incorporated significantly increased spending on research as part (almost the only part) of their higher education platforms. Throughout that fall campaign, Virginia's research institutions felt new life and attention stirring in contrast to the previous decade where research was all but discouraged.

In May 2002, SCHEV released *The Condition of Research*, a report which has been described as "one of the finest pieces of policy analysis to come out of Virginia state government in recent years" (Bacon's Rebellion, January 2004). This report, the first of a series of "Condition of" reports, sharpened the discussion by addressing Virginia's poor standing in funded research and identifying the key drivers of research excellence.

Ultimately, this series of events has resulted in not only greater proposed funding for research, but perhaps more importantly, an affirmation by the governor and the General Assembly of its importance to Virginia.

### *Transfer and Articulation*

As SCHEV developed the 2002 *Systemwide Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Virginia*, the strengthening of transfer and articulation policies emerged as a key strategy in dealing with budget shortfalls, demands for greater efficiency and accountability in higher education, and pressures to provide access to at least 61,000 additional students by the end of the decade. This sentiment was also expressed in SCHEV's 2003 report entitled *The Condition of Transfer in the Commonwealth* which was triggered by findings in the 2002 edition of ROIE regarding the low-rates of transfer and the lack of growth in transfer to public four-year institutions. Although there are numerous inter-institutional and regional articulation agreements in the Commonwealth, a secondary or community college student cannot be certain that lower-division college coursework will transfer efficiently to a specific institution unless s/he follows an articulation agreement for that institution. To that end, SCHEV will provide leadership and coordination for these activities:

- Develop principles guiding statewide transfer and articulation in Virginia

- Develop a range of options for institutions to articulate coursework, e.g. common course numbering, course-by-course articulation and transfer agreements, or reciprocal acceptance of competency
- Develop a Virginia Transfer website to guide students' course-taking behavior at multiple institutions
- Conduct focused studies and reports on specific aspects of transfer.

It is anticipated that these efforts will shorten students' time to degree and reduce the cost of state subsidies incurred currently by duplicative coursework taken at secondary schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions.

### *Retention, Graduation, and Education for a Lifetime*

Analysis of ROIE 2002 not only highlighted issues of transfer, but issues of retention and graduation rates as well. If one compares to institutional measures of student retention to the those of the institutional peer groups, the retention rates of first-time students into the fall of the second year, one will find the large majority of Virginia's 15 public four-year institutions to have retention rates that compare quite favorably to the peers. However, when one looks at graduation rates, it is apparent that a number of institutions fall away from "favorable" peer comparisons. For obvious reasons, first-year retention is a key predictor of student success in terms of graduation, so one is left wondering what is causing the graduation rates at certain institutions to be significantly lower than they could be. In 2004 SCHEV will be addressing this question with the forthcoming *Condition of Retention and Graduation* report.

This issue has also become one of interest to Governor Warner who has included concerns about improving graduation rates and degree attainment in his plan "Education for a Lifetime," a component of which calls for an increase of 10,000 in the number of degrees awarded in the Commonwealth by 2010-11. This increase of more than 20% is to be accomplished by greater enrollments and improved retention and graduation.

*Criticisms/Meta-analysis of the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness and their Future*  
As good as the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness are, they are not perfect. The single biggest weakness is that they do not actually measure institutional effectiveness as defined by the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools or under any other rubric. The systemwide measures are a collection of indicators, some of which are tied directly to effectiveness, that describe performance, funding, or relationships of funding to performance (traditionally well-funded institutions tend to perform well), or institutional selectivity (more highly selective institutions tend to perform at a much higher level on these measures). This is not a fault of the measures, or the intent, rather it reflects the lack of a real model of effectiveness. There is currently no widely accepted model that describes all the inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes of an institution of higher education that truly allows one to measure effectiveness. Institutions simply vary so greatly from each other as to make such a model difficult to construct.

Another failing of the systemwide measures is that they are predominantly measures of the undergraduate enterprise in higher education. Little is measured about graduate and professional education in these reports. ROIE, in its current form, represents the policy-biases of the 1990s.

The future of ROIE and the accompanying Core Competencies is one of refinement and redesign where appropriate. SCHEV listens to feedback from the institutions, the legislature, the administration, and the public about how to improve its work. We hope to develop a meaningful model of effectiveness, one that measures all aspects of an institution's enterprises and does what ROIE does now: advance the objective study of what is happening in public higher education in Virginia in a way that is non-punitive and non-threatening to the institutions, thus allowing meaningful and continuing dialog.