

IN THIS ISSUE

WICHE hosted a policy forum, *The Changing Nature of Accountability*, on Nov. 13-14, 2001, in Broomfield, CO.

The event drew 90 policymakers from 18 states and the District of Columbia and included state legislators, legislative staff, state higher education executive officers, institutional and system leaders, board members, and faculty members. Participants examined many complex issues, including the evolution of accountability measures in different states; negotiation of accountability structures between legislatures and institutions; ways in which student performance is assessed; and the costs of accountability.

The forum was partially supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation. Collaborating organizations were:

- ▶ Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education
 - ▶ Center for Public Higher Education Trusteeship and Governance at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
- ▶ Council of State Governments-WEST
- ▶ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
 - ▶ National Conference of State Legislatures
- ▶ State Higher Education Executive Officers

Alaska	Idaho	Oregon
Arizona	Montana	South Dakota
California	Nevada	Utah
Colorado	New Mexico	Washington
Hawaii	North Dakota	Wyoming

THE CHANGING NATURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

"Everybody likes accountability. Most people would like more accountability. Yet nobody's quite sure what the word means, and it certainly means very different things to different people at different times."

—David Longanecker, executive director, WICHE

What skills and knowledge have students acquired during their education? What is the "value-added" that students have received from their experiences in higher education in terms of employability as well as intellectual, social, and psychological development? How do classes, departments, institutions, systems, and states compare to each other?

While these basic questions of accountability have remained much the same over the course of several decades, the context in which these questions are being asked has changed considerably in recent years. Accountability is no longer the internal domain of higher education institutions and systems but a very public concern shared by legislators, businesses, parents, students, and others. Increasingly, the quality and effectiveness of higher education are being carefully scrutinized by policymakers and tied to financial stakes. WICHE's policy forum *The Changing Nature of Accountability* examined the evolving issue of accountability, looking at the "different things" that this term means to different people as well as at the pragmatic, real-life ways that state and federal governments are defining it today.

A GOOD ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Identifying the characteristics of a good accountability system and specifying how to get to that point were central topics throughout the forum. According to Paul Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), educational accountability in higher education has traditionally focused on operational indicators, compliance auditing, accreditation, and program and policy reviews. Now, however, new indicators are emerging, including *performance reporting*, focused on items such as transfer and graduation rates, faculty workload and productivity, and follow-up satisfaction of students and employers; *performance budgeting*, which at times has had limited impact because of inappropriate targets and inadequate size; and *state accountability*.

Lingenfelter believes that accountability can improve performance, but only under certain circumstances. Performance reporting can work if it focuses on the most important indicators. Performance

"Too often, we are targeting small pieces of the whole with our incentives when we desire widespread quality. The challenge is to get to a higher level of performance across the board and at every institution."

**Paul Lingenfelter, executive director
State Higher Education Executive Officers**

budgeting can work, but only if the stakes are large enough to make a difference and to support large changes. State systems of accountability run the risk of "formulaic inflexibility": formulas and other measures need to be applied realistically. "By using formulas that reward people for modest gains, we are not enabling people to take risks," says Lingenfelter. "This can create incentives for lower quality." To build effective accountability systems, Lingenfelter suggests we:

- ▶ Focus on improvement rather than failure.
- ▶ Have a select, limited agenda.
- ▶ Place the biggest incentives toward performance that is valued; for example, Great Britain pays for enrollment when a student completes a course rather than for attendance at the tenth session or midsemester.
- ▶ Monitor progress using frequent, credible public indicators.
- ▶ Employ intrinsic (related to internal values) and extrinsic (related to standards) incentives.
- ▶ Use many tools and employ many players.
- ▶ Build capacity and invest in results.
- ▶ Budget for accountability costs.

Jane Nichols, chancellor of the University and Community College System of Nevada, looked at the accountability issue from a systems viewpoint. She pointed out a number of reasons for a system to institute an accountability policy:

- ▶ To bolster public confidence by communicating about higher education.
- ▶ To help systems develop a budgeting strategy that shows the measurable impact of what they contribute to the state.
- ▶ To respond to public and legislative demands for increased accountability.
- ▶ To meet the needs of the state and serve as a change agent to redirect institutional behavior.
- ▶ To address goals of the public, students, parents, and the faculty within the context of a master plan for the institution, system, or state.

"Whatever methods you choose, you've got to make sure from the very beginning that the method is possible in your particular institution or state, because not all are possible. The resources may not be there, the data may not be there, the desire may not be there, and the interest may not be there."

**Jane Nichols, chancellor
University and Community College System
of Nevada**

"Students are increasingly looking at college not as a community to be joined but as a commodity to be purchased. They are combining courses from a variety of providers, like someone going through an apple orchard and picking fruit off of different trees."

**Russ Edgerton, director
Pew Forum on Undergraduate Education**

From a system perspective, the ideal assessment tools are those that are clearly understood by the public, have the confidence of the legislature, have the full support of the board, are linked to the goals of institutions and presidents, and are applauded and supported by faculty and staff.

Russ Edgerton, director of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Education, approached accountability from an outcomes perspective, noting that the norm in education for decades has been for a single college to be in charge of the undergraduate experience and have a clear program of study leading to a degree. That arrangement is no longer adequate for the world we live in. The traditional system that has served well for a century and relied on the individual provider now has to shift to a system that is more centered on the learner "moving through a complex labyrinth of institutions on the way to a degree."

The weight placed on breadth and depth requirements also needs to change to reflect new accountability expectations. "Both inside and outside the academy, there is more emphasis these days not on what students know but on what they can do with what they know," says Edgerton. Determining whether a student has acquired a key ability depends not only on what subjects he or she has taken but what curriculum was used, what pedagogical strategies were employed, and what assessments utilized. It is crucial for institutions both to gather outcome information and to use it in ways that markedly improve the quality of student learning.

MEASURING THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

In recent years, attention has shifted from institutional accountability that is measured by the number of faculty and library books or the entering grade point average of students to student outcomes. Margaret Miller, professor in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, observed that measures of quality have historically focused on the *reputations* of individuals and institutions and the *resources* that support those reputations. "Since quality assurance has become of greater concern to those outside the academy, a third 'r' has been added – *results*," says Miller. "The focus is now on the learning that results from the kinds of activities we engage in."

"If an institution is not planning well, it must now deal with two costs plus bad decisions due to a lack of information. The cost of making bad decisions is high."

**Dennis Jones, president
National Center for Higher Education
Management Systems (NCHEMS)**

On the national level, there have been many efforts to measure results. The Pew Charitable Trusts has supported projects including the Quality of Undergraduate Education Project and a writing assessment project. Rand is now working to establish goals for undergraduate learning and how to assess them. The American Association of Colleges and Universities is working on a general education curriculum and developing an assessment component to measure the general intellectual skills of students. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative are trying to standardize the language around assessment and develop concepts to make it easier to have conversations about quality assurance and student learning. The Collegiate Results Survey, a self-reporting instrument developed by the University of Pennsylvania's National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, poses a set of scenarios and asks college-educated people how comfortable they are performing in specific settings related to actual post-college experiences.

One of the most significant efforts in accountability has been *Measuring Up 2000*, an effort by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education to grade all the states on their higher education systems. The report cards assessed five criteria over the past 20 years: student preparation for college, enrollment, affordability, completion of academic and vocational programs, and economic and civic benefits derived from education.

Margaret Miller is now directing a new effort, the National Forum on College-Level Learning, funded by Pew and focusing on two major themes:

- ▶ **Collective performance:** how the system of higher education in each state is performing and increasing the skills of its students.
- ▶ **Educational capital:** how the skills and abilities of college-educated people in the state contribute to the larger social good.

While the National Forum on College-Level Learning is also looking at questions of individual and institutional performance to help frame the issues, Miller believes that it is most productive to begin with questions about

state systems and educational capital. These larger questions help to inform educational and economic development policies and identify possible interventions.

THE COSTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the most difficult dilemmas associated with accountability is cost. Putting a price tag on designing, implementing, and reporting performance has always been a moving target. Requests from policymakers, individuals, researchers, and others often have little relationship to each other, and responses are labor- and data-intensive. Since few institutions, systems, or state agencies have dedicated personnel for accountability issues, existing staff absorb this workload. If information systems are not adequate to produce answers to the myriad questions asked in the name of accountability, human, fiscal, and physical resources are usually reallocated to strengthen those information systems.

Dennis Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), believes that accountability is the flip side of planning and may not be as costly as we think. The information needed for accountability is generally the same as that needed for planning. For example, who is being served? How are we serving them? The costs of accountability are inversely related to the clarity of objectives. The less clear the objectives, the higher the costs. The more clear, the lower the costs. If accountability outcomes and measures are not clear, a lot of data may be produced but it may not be informative.

Jones identified three types of capacity to compile the information that states need for accountability:

- ▶ The ability to track students term to term and across institutions.
- ▶ The ability to get information from clients (students, graduates, and employers) through surveys plus the ability to get information from students and graduates after five years.
- ▶ The capacity to link a higher education database to other databases from state agencies (linking graduate student information with unemployment records, for instance, could help to determine whether graduates are working or living in the state).

"In order for incentive funding to work, targets need to be reasonable but still aggressive. And measures need to be limited, specific, and relate directly to the desired outcome."

**Tad Perry, executive director
South Dakota Board of Regents**

“Rather than being drawn kicking and screaming into accountability, higher education should view this as a great opportunity to demonstrate its capability.”

**Marcus Gaspard, executive director
Washington Higher Education
Coordinating Board**

The real costs of accountability measures are often noneconomic. The costs to the institution can be high when problems and weaknesses are revealed. There is also the cost of the pain of change.

Hans Brisch, chancellor of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, said that the costs of accountability in his state have been offset by the support gained from key constituents. “Changes have caused turmoil among institutions,” he said, “though legislators and the public heavily support performance measures.” In his experience, partnerships with the legislature, businesses, and K-12 were essential in moving the entire state forward to promote student success.

OBSTACLES & ACHIEVEMENTS

It is clear that accountability is not a simple problem to be solved but a complex process that is rapidly evolving. Many questions remain about who pays for accountability, who is responsible for gathering information, what kind of information needs to be compiled, who receives the information, and in what form it is to be presented. Legislatures, institutions, and systems have grappled with these complex issues and, with varying degrees of success, come up with distinct approaches shaped by demographics, differing governance structures, legislative agendas, institutional and system initiatives, and economic conditions.

Throughout the country accountability efforts in higher education are characterized by promising advancements and a number of daunting obstacles, including:

▶ **Term limits.** “If we’re launching a major initiative that is longer than the terms of our senators, we’re in trouble,” commented Nevada’s Jane Nichols. “We have to create some method that holds immediate results for legislators so that they can buy into the results and see the advantages.” If legislators are to support institutions of higher education, they need to be able to see within

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their terms the positive results that come from accountability measures.

▶ **Absence of consensus on what accountability is.** Institutions, systems, legislators, and boards often disagree on what constitutes viable accountability efforts. Montana Sen. Emily Stonington asserted that “legislators are interested in outcomes, not necessarily measures of student learning. The ‘proof’ that students are learning is whether or not they succeed in the workplace. Areas of importance to legislators are often different than they are for educators; legislators are interested in workforce preparation and the development of the skills of learners.” It may take the kind of collaborative approach demonstrated in North Dakota – which involved legislators, college administrators, board members, and business representatives – to forge an accountability approach that is acceptable to all parties.

▶ **Lack of focus on key questions.** The sheer magnitude of information gathering can be daunting for individual institutions and systems alike. Philip Dubois, president of the University of Wyoming, said that trying to report levels of activity across the many functions of an institution can be “a little bit like putting a stethoscope on a beehive. It helps to make certain that something is going on but without really measuring much of anything.” His solution has been to ask major constituent groups – the legislature, governor, and members of the public – if his institution’s academic plan is what they want and then to work with administrators to chart progress on the agenda. As SHEEO Executive Director Paul Lingenfelter indicated, it is far more productive to receive answers to a few carefully considered questions than to pose many questions that may only yield superficial or unusable information.

Nevertheless, accountability measures are producing a number of positive results for higher education. States such as Washington, Oregon, and North Dakota that have gone through the difficult process of negotiating accountability across institutions, boards, and legislatures have forged a more respectful working relationship among the groups. Institutions have in many cases realized greater fiscal and administrative autonomy in exchange for achievement of performance measures. In the process of demonstrating learning outcomes and employment-related skills, institutions are gaining greater public interest and support. At a time of shrinking budgets in many states, the ability of higher education to demonstrate its effectiveness in training skilled and employable individuals is essential to continued funding and support.

This issue of Exchanges was prepared by Linda Fredericks, policy forum coordinator at WICHE. The Western Policy Exchanges series is published by WICHE. For more information, call (303) 541-0224 or visit WICHE’s home page at www.wiche.edu.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY:

EXPERIENCES & OUTCOMES

Eighteen states and the District of Columbia were represented at the November policy forum on accountability hosted by WICHE, and each had its own particular set of issues to deal with and challenges to overcome. Here, we detail the experiences of four states that are working to implement and improve accountability measures: North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington.

NORTH DAKOTA

The North Dakota legislature charged an interim committee – which was known as “The Roundtable” – with the task of studying how to best manage the state system of higher education. The Roundtable was formed because legislative funders and institutional leaders were at odds: the private sector had no involvement in higher education and an extensive report on higher education in the state was largely ignored by lawmakers because they had no buy-in.

Task forces studied six “cornerstone” areas with the goal of formulating expectations for institutions in the areas of economic development connection, educational excellence, a flexible and responsible system, an accessible system, funding and rewards, and sustaining the wishes of the group. Two areas were off limits: closing institutions and the budgets of individual institutions.

There were a number of important outcomes of The Roundtable process in North Dakota. They included:

- ▶ The state budget allocation for higher education was increased by 8 percent.
- ▶ Flexibility was added to the system by allowing tuition to stay at each institution in exchange for performance and fiscal measures. Institutions were also allowed to carry over appropriations from one legislative biennium to the next and spend some funding without interim approval by lawmakers.
- ▶ Higher education was recognized in state statutes for the first time.

- ▶ The strategic plans of all institutions are now tied to The Roundtable report, and the State Board for Higher Education makes regular visits to the institutions to discuss progress.

- ▶ Increases have been noted in important areas like K-12 teacher preparation and in the higher number of doctoral degrees granted.

- ▶ The amount of matching funds available for research has doubled.

The Roundtable process also enabled a clarification of different stakeholder roles, especially for board members and legislators. According to Sen. David Nething, chair of The Roundtable, “Legislators stopped being board members. Board members stopped being college presidents. College presidents, with their staffs and faculties, ran institutions with the private sector to support them.”

OREGON

Every campus in the Oregon University System uses 10 common indicators that are based on goals related to access, student success, graduation rates, and employability. While each university sets its own targets for achieving these goals, the members of the system rank each other’s goals and provide feedback to each other about the goals and the progress being made towards achieving them.

This process results in a set of scores that are used to allocate funds to the different universities in the system. The ultimate goal is to create a sense of cooperation – rather than competition for resources – among the institutions. Incentive awards are also given to campuses

that meet or exceed improvement targets for each indicator.

To demonstrate progress towards these goals, the system publishes a report card that visually presents improvements and shortfalls in terms of stated goals. The system is in the process of developing a Web site that contains accountability information and a context for the information. The information can be accessed through customized queries, allowing students, parents, legislators, or others to receive the specific information that they need.

The Oregon system has found great value in linking academic assessment and economic development. "The public better accepts the idea of higher education when presented with measurable contributions to social and economic progress," says Diane Vines, vice chancellor of the Oregon University System. Consequently, the state reports the amount and results of contracted and sponsored research done in the state's colleges and universities, as well as data about patent licensing and companies formed as a result of student and faculty research. System administrators also hold town meetings around the state to gauge the tenor of public opinion.

SOUTH DAKOTA

The South Dakota Board of Regents has used incentive funding to shift the focus away from an enrollment-based to a performance-based approach. Five percent of the system's budget is now based upon performance related to specific goals. These are:

- ▶ Access for state citizens.
- ▶ Increasing numbers of students in academic programs important to the state's economy.
- ▶ Fostering interinstitutional collaboration in program delivery.
- ▶ Improving academic quality.
- ▶ Increasing nonpublic support for institutions.

Each goal became an independent incentive fund valued at 1 percent of the budget; annual targets were set within each institution for each

policy goal. The targets took into consideration institutional history, current activities, and demographics. The results: most institutions have given special focus to activities that will assist them in meeting goals and consequently have met targets.

WASHINGTON

Efforts to negotiate accountability between the legislature and higher education in Washington began badly. The House Appropriations Committee had asked institutions to develop measurements and targets. After institutions responded, legislative researchers discovered that the campuses had in fact already met most of the targets they had proposed. Not only did higher education lose credibility in the eyes of state policymakers, but legislators reacted by withholding funding – approximately \$10.6 million – until institutions were able to demonstrate meeting new targets.

Marcus Gaspard, executive director of the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board and a former legislator, played a major role in mending the relationship between legislators and institutions. He stated that institutional administrators learned several powerful lessons from this difficult experience. "Administrators realized that in fact legislators do know something about higher education, have a legitimate need to know as taxpayer representatives, and have the staff to assist in research."

Furthermore, legislators want more than the status quo; they want to see a plan for continuous improvement. Gaspard said that legislators, too, learned something about higher education: that it is more productive to offer incentives than to impose punitive measures. While the legislature does not currently have the means to give incentives, it is not withholding money from higher education.

For more information on WICHE's work on accountability, contact Cheryl Blanco, director of the Policy Analysis & Research unit, at cblanco@wiche.edu.