

National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education

Overview

Background and purposes of the Commission

The National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education has been organized by the national association of State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and financed by the Ford Foundation. Supplemental funding for research has been provided as part of a multi-state accountability project supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

The following questions are proposed as the principal issues to be addressed by the Commission on Accountability in Higher Education:

1. What approaches to accountability (along with other actions) will help American higher education achieve national goals: greater educational attainment along with world-class research and service to the public?
2. What approaches will build and sustain confidence in the systems and institutions that provide higher education in the United States?

In addressing these questions, we propose that the work of the Commission include the following tasks:

- Reflect on the collective experience of American higher education, the states, and the nation in articulating priorities and assessing and improving performance in higher education;
- Articulate significant lessons and observations gleaned from our collective experience in these areas; and
- Recommend principles and practices to help institutions, states, and the nation make continuous progress toward our shared goals for higher education.

The framing of this agenda places a deliberate emphasis on improving performance as a primary purpose of higher education accountability in the United States. This emphasis is not an implicit criticism of past performance; instead, it acknowledges that the world has changed, especially with regard to the need for successful participation in higher education. More widespread attainment in higher education has become an increasingly important national priority.

While many challenging and complex tasks are involved in achieving national goals for higher education, the overarching goals themselves can be stated simply and directly – we seek to have and to sustain the world’s finest system of higher education while achieving high levels of student access and success in that system.

This agenda for the Commission is ambitious, but not beyond reach. It will build on an extensive foundation of work – more than a century of research and experience in assessing academic capacity and achievement, many decades of experience in assessing and evaluating institutional capacity and educational outcomes, and numerous studies and reports assessing current needs and the state of accountability practices in higher education.

This foundation of knowledge and experience is reflected in the testimony submitted to the Commission. The Commission's task is neither to duplicate past work, nor to consider it in comprehensive detail. Instead, the task of the Commission is to distill and articulate a working consensus on practical approaches to accountability that can advance educational progress.

Educational accountability – Defining terms and issues

By its very nature, the term “educational accountability” provokes discussion. Education is a very complex, interactive process involving content, student capacity and motivation, and instructional skill. Accountability implies the assessment of performance, the public communication of information about performance, and the potential for sanctions or rewards.

Combining these words leads quickly to questions about content, power relationships, and legitimacy in educational accountability. At the outset one must ask, who is accountable, for what, and to whom? Then, are the goals and standards appropriate, are the measurements of performance valid and reliable, do those seeking to hold others accountable have legitimate expertise and authority? Such questions appear explicitly and implicitly in testimony submitted to the Commission.

While difficult to resolve conclusively, these questions must be engaged. Improving educational attainment has become a matter of great national urgency. Educators, the public, and our elected representatives need to develop ways of addressing the questions of accountability that help us make progress toward the national goal – greater educational attainment with no compromise on quality.

The two questions proposed as central issues for the Commission get to the ultimate purposes of accountability systems – to improve performance, to assure quality, to sustain confidence – and they transcend the questions of measurement, expertise, legitimacy, and control that often prove so difficult to resolve. Recommendations grounded in these ultimate purposes should provide valuable guidance for those seeking to resolve the difficult questions of practice and implementation.

Prominent features on the landscape

The context for the Commission's work includes the traditions and culture of American higher education, a rich history of state policy actions, broad national developments such as the K-12 standards and assessment movement, initiatives such as the *Measuring Up* studies of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and the near-term reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Many of the most prominent features of this context are discussed very briefly below.

K-12 standards and assessment. During the past two decades, states and K-12 school districts have been deeply engaged in developing or refining learning standards and assessment tools for elementary and secondary education. In 2002, through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (“No Child Left Behind”), the federal government became directly engaged in efforts to be clear about academic standards in K-12 education, to develop standard measures of academic performance, and to be sure that all students achieve higher levels of academic performance.

The urgent national interest in improving educational attainment leads naturally to the suggestion that “reform” in higher education along the lines experienced for K-12 is appropriate and inevitable. The Commission will need to consider implications of the similarities and differences between K-12 and higher education as it develops its recommendations.

P-16 perspectives. Increasingly we have become aware that every period of life, beginning in infancy and early childhood and extending through elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education, plays an

important role in educational attainment. In each period of the lifespan, educational success is profoundly affected by what precedes it. This perspective, increasingly embraced by policymakers and the public, has implications across levels of education for collaborative planning, curriculum development, assessment, instructional strategies, and data collection and reporting systems. Such approaches are needed to prepare students for future challenges and to remedy inadequate earlier preparation.

State accountability systems. The metaphor of the states as “laboratories of democracy” certainly applies to the development of higher education accountability systems. The testimony from 11 states to the Commission illustrates the diversity and substance of many state approaches. As one of the products of this project, SHEEO is in the midst of developing a thorough review and summary of state practices in creating and implementing accountability systems. While generalizations are quite difficult, both the testimony submitted to the Commission and preliminary findings from that review tend to support the following observations.

First, virtually all states have substantial experience from a statewide perspective in collecting and publishing higher education accountability information to inform policymakers and the general public. The rare exceptions tend to be smaller states (with few institutions) where such information is published and provided primarily from an institutional perspective.

Second, although the exact pattern varies among states, governors, legislators, board members, and state higher education executives, and in a few cases business leaders, tend to be significantly involved in the states with extensive accountability experience.

Third, state practices have been evolving and changing. The pattern suggests continuing experimentation and refinement, rather than settled practice.

Fourth, and finally, to the extent that a trend can be ascertained, states continue to collect and track large volumes of data, but they are increasingly focusing attention on a few, highly important statewide objectives. This trend is consistent with the perspective of the *Measuring Up* publications described below.

Measuring Up. Beginning with *Measuring Up 2000*, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education has published biennial reports assigning to the states letter grades A to F on five important dimensions of educational attainment and policy: Preparation, Participation, Completion, Affordability, and Benefits. In addition to these five categories, the National Center has given all the states an “Incomplete” on Student Learning, observing that no means now exists for a comparable assessment of this fundamentally important educational outcome among the states.

The *Measuring Up* reports underscore several critical points: 1) Successful participation in postsecondary education has become a virtual requirement for employment able to support a middle-class lifestyle in the United States; 2) The United States no longer leads the world, and current trends suggest we will increasingly lose ground to other nations in postsecondary educational attainment; 3) The states bear a fundamental responsibility for the policies and investments needed to achieve higher levels of educational attainment; and 4) The data and analytical tools now available from national and state sources identify substantial differences among the states in higher education performance.

Many states are using or adapting the dimensions of performance and the indicators used by *Measuring Up* as they assess needs and establish goals for higher education.

Accreditation. Higher education in the United States has a well-developed system of voluntary accreditation to identify and certify the institutions that meet professionally established standards for

providing collegiate instruction and awarding degrees. That system acquired substantial public policy significance when the federal government began to rely on accreditation for determining which institutions qualify for federal student assistance programs.

In the first phase of its development, the accreditation process generally sought to assure that institutions had the resources (facilities, libraries, finances, and faculty) to provide a quality higher education. In addition to such measures, accreditation agencies have increasingly focused attention on institutional processes to achieve and assess higher levels of student learning.

Statements from CHEA (The Council for Higher Education Accreditation) and from Steven Crow, Executive Director of The Higher Learning Commission, identify important issues in the role of accreditation in higher education accountability and its relationship to accountability practices of state and federal governments.

Professional Credentials and Assessment. An important feature of American higher education is the large number of professions and disciplines with separate accreditation standards and/or examinations through which students must demonstrate mastery of essential knowledge and skills in order to certify their qualifications to join a profession. These assessments and accrediting bodies shape educational programs and hold large numbers of students and institutions accountable to professional standards.

AAC&U Greater Expectations. The Greater Expectations initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is a notable example of higher education's continuing efforts to define and ensure the achievement of the general knowledge and skills that constitute the desired outcomes of a postsecondary education. In many respects, this effort seeks to achieve a common perspective on general education that parallels the knowledge and skills for professions as described above. It also proposes assessments involving capstone projects at the culmination of the undergraduate experience. Carol Geary Schneider, President of AAC&U, describes this effort in the testimony submitted to the Commission.

The National Forum on College-Level Learning. The decentralization of American higher education and the enormous diversity of learning objectives across students and institutions help explain why there is now no nationally comparable basis for assessing student learning among the states. Requiring uniform assessments of student learning also has been controversial in higher education because differences in student preparation among institutions may have a greater effect on learning outcomes than differences in instructional quality.

Nevertheless, the knowledge and skills of the workforce and of a state's college graduates are important indicators of a state's economic prospects and a very legitimate public policy concern. In order to address this question, the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, is working with five states to develop mechanisms for assessing the knowledge and skills of a representative sample of college graduates. The project uses a collection of assessment instruments to incorporate different goals and dimensions of student learning. The testimony of Dr. Margaret A. Miller included in the agenda materials provides more information on the project.

Performance Reporting/Funding. Most states began collecting and reporting information on student enrollments, degrees awarded, finance, and other aspects of institutional performance during the rapid enrollment expansion of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, the state of Tennessee began linking performance improvement on specific outcomes with additional budgetary support. Since then, a number of other states have experimented with various approaches to link budgeting to performance, and these initiatives have been studied in depth by Dr. Joseph Burke and his colleagues at the Rockefeller Institute. His testimony and testimony from the states of Tennessee, Florida, and South Carolina, in particular, address various aspects of performance reporting and funding.

Institutional Diversity and Autonomy. The diversity of American colleges and universities generally is acknowledged as a great strength of higher education in the United States. Both the nation and individual students benefit from competition and a wide variety of choices within and among sectors – public, private non-profit, and private for-profit.

Diversity would be less likely without institutional autonomy. The freedoms to learn, to teach, to question, and to speak and write are fundamental to democracy and to the quality of higher education. Such rights are and must continue to be deeply embedded in the governance and culture of American higher education, as vigorously articulated in the testimony of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Still, we wrestle with the meaning, limits, and implications of “autonomy” when all of higher education serves important public purposes and virtually all sectors benefit to some degree from direct and/or indirect public subsidies.

In public and private, non-profit colleges and universities, direct institutional governance generally has been entrusted to citizen boards of trustees. As expressed in the testimony of the Association of Governing Boards, well functioning, institutional governing boards represent the public interest in the performance of their stewardship responsibilities. Governing boards are an important mechanism of public accountability, and their very diversity and independence work to preserve vital freedoms in higher education.

Much of the testimony submitted to the Commission, and the experiences we all share, demonstrate the difficulties of thinking about accountability in the context of institutional diversity and autonomy. Yet responsibility, accountability, and freedom are not mutually exclusive. A working consensus on priorities and the common good can become the basis for developing mechanisms that help achieve national goals while sustaining essential diversity and freedoms.

Report of the Business-Higher Education Forum. *Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education*, the recently released report of the Business-Higher Education Forum, is an important new statement addressing the fundamental issues of accountability and assessing student learning. The full report has been sent to all members of the Commission, and testimony prepared by Jane Wellman summarizes its content.

This report provides a useful analysis of our situation as well as a series of thoughtful principles to guide the development of accountability systems. It is an important addition to the work under-girding the deliberations of the Commission.

Higher Education Act Reauthorization. The federal government, the states, and institutions of higher education all are part of the audience of the Commission. While the timing of Congressional action remains uncertain, the Congress is currently considering the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. The materials prepared for this Commission meeting have been provided to Congressional staff and the Department of Education as part of a larger dialogue on these issues. The SHEEO staff will keep Congressional staff and the Department of Education apprised of the work of the Commission as their work continues on the Higher Education Act.

Framing the Report of the Commission

The testimony received by the Commission and this background discussion are intended as a launching pad for Commission members to discuss their concerns and perspectives on accountability in higher education. In listening to the Commission’s questions and discussion, the staff will be looking for guidance concerning the themes and content of a report that will reflect the Commission’s views.

The following questions are proposed as a point of departure for that conversation.

1. What are the appropriate functions for different actors involved in higher education accountability: the federal government, the states, accrediting agencies, institutional leaders, and departments within institutions?
2. What is the appropriate focus and scope of accountability activities for each of these actors?
3. What principles and practices are most likely to serve the ultimate purposes of improving performance and building confidence for each of these actors, considering, among other topics: common vs. diverse objectives, clarity of goals, consistency of assessments, budgetary incentives and sanctions, et al.
4. In what respects should public and private institutions be treated similarly in the application of accountability mechanisms? In what respects should they be treated differently?

Suggested Commission Process

Subject to the advice and direction of the Commission, the following process is proposed for the work of the Commission.

Phase 1 May 10, 2004, meeting of the Commission

Receive testimony and provide reactions and guidance to the staff, including topics to be addressed in a draft report and issues requiring further research and information provided to the Commission.

Phase 2 June and July, 2004

During this period of time the SHEEO staff, assisted by its Panel of Advisors, will work on a first draft of the Commission report. While this work proceeds, we will be open to further feedback and reflections from Commissioners and others through informal conversations and written suggestions that may be shared with the entire Commission if desired. A draft report will be shared with Commission and with others interested in this work, and it will be discussed at the SHEEO Annual Meeting in July and the SHEEO Professional Development Conference in August.

Phase 3 Preliminary Report sent to Commission in September, second meeting in October or November

After receiving and incorporating comments on the draft report, a preliminary report will be drafted and sent to members of the Commission in September. We will schedule a full day meeting of the Commission in October or November (in Washington, DC, unless otherwise requested) to discuss the report and develop a consensus on its content. A final report will be prepared reflecting the Commission's discussion of the preliminary report and distributed to the members for their approval. If necessary, a third meeting of the Commission or a conference call will be held to discuss the final report.

Phase 4 Dissemination of report

When completed and approved by the Commission, the report will be widely disseminated to state, federal, and institutional leaders and to the media. SHEEO will work to assist the states and others in understanding and implementing the recommendations of the Commission.

Prepared by:

Paul Lingenfelter, Executive Director
State Higher Education Executive Officers