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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the current climate of performance reporting in higher education for the U.S. and New York State. Since the 1980s, there has been strong continuing interest in making higher education more accountable to the public for the resources it uses and results it achieves. By 1994, almost all institutions in the nation engaged in formal self-assessment measures, although comparable information for different institutions was often difficult to obtain. Federal and state governments began to mandate performance accountability measures that would permit state and national comparisons in four areas of student concern: individual outcomes, key experiences, support services, and costs. By 1996, more than half of the states were involved in the issuance of higher education performance reports. This paper describes the major purposes of performance reporting, effectiveness, best reporting practices, and the most common indicators used. In New York, the Board of Regents and the Education Department called for statewide performance reporting in 1993. In the ensuing years, progress has been made toward this goal, although a coordinated student information system is still forthcoming. Differing opinions, institutional complexity, lack of coordinated data and lack of funds have slowed the process. Contains 75 references and 3 tables. (RDG)

BRIEFING PAPER
for the Regents Committee
on Higher and Professional Education

PERFORMANCE REPORTING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION
IN THE NATION
AND NEW YORK STATE

The University of the State of New York
The New York State Education Department
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Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been nationwide interest in improving undergraduate education and making higher education more accountable to the public. The "assessment" movement of the 1980s permitted colleges and universities to assess themselves according to their own criteria, standards and procedures. It was followed in the 1990s by the "accountability" movement, which focuses on external audiences and requires the use of common, comparable indicators of performance that reflect student concerns and public policy goals. By 1996, more than half the states were developing or had issued a public report on the performance of their higher education systems.

New York has traditionally achieved state policy goals for its diverse system of 251 public and private higher education institutions through Regents oversight and coordination combined with tax support for institutions, students and special purpose programs. In 1993 an independent Regents Commission on Higher Education recommended the addition of public performance reports. It recommended that strategic goals be set for the statewide system as a whole and for each institution. It also recommended that the Regents and institutional trustees issue regular reports on progress being made toward their goals. In 1994, in the spirit of the Commission's recommendations, the State University of New York issued a systemwide performance report. By the spring of 1996, the Senate approved a bill, S. 7231, that would have required the Commissioner of Education to publish an annual "report card" on higher education. Although no legislation was passed, that same spring the Regents made a higher education performance report a key initiative in their strategic plan for the Education Department and in their draft 1996-2004 plan for the higher education system.

This paper provides background information about higher education performance reporting in the U.S. and New York. The first part of the paper describes the status of the rapidly emerging accountability movement, summarizes lessons learned in other states, and provides examples of performance indicators in use. The second part of the paper describes recent interest in performance reporting in New York and the current climate for the Regents performance reporting initiative.

Part One

National Trends

Since the 1980s, there has been growing interest in making higher education more accountable to the public for the resources it uses and the results it achieves. Government leaders have been seeking information about student and institutional performance to help them make tough choices about the uses of public funds. Similarly, students and their families -- facing rising tuition, increased educational debt and uncertain labor markets -- have been seeking information to help them make difficult decisions about where to go to college and what to study.

In this environment, the traditional "input" indicators of college "quality," such as faculty credentials or the number of books in the library, have been replaced by information about "outputs" and "outcomes." Those outside the academy want to know the answers to such questions as: What instructional and support services do students receive? What skills and knowledge do students gain? What percent of students graduate? How long does it take them to graduate? Are graduates satisfied with their educations? What percent of graduates go on to further study or employment? What do graduates earn? Are employers satisfied with the skills and knowledge college graduates bring to their jobs?

Outcomes assessment

Responding to reports of declining national economic competitiveness and educational standards, in 1986 the National Governor's Association called for:

> *"every college and university ... to implement systematic reforms that use multiple measures to assess undergraduate student learning. The information gained from assessment should be used to evaluate institutional and program quality. Information about institutional and program quality should also be made available to the public."*

Higher education's response was the "assessment" or "outcomes assessment" movement. It focused on the measurement of educational achievement in college students and was characterized by institutional choice in matters of measurement, public disclosure, and use of results. Appropriately, institutions used a variety of assessment methods, such as nationally-normed tests, state-developed tests, locally-developed tests, student grades, student portfolios, and student projects or "capstone" experiences. Because the assessment movement was "institution-centered," it did not generate comparable information for different institutions or information that could be aggregated to state and national summaries.

By 1994, nearly all institutions claimed to engage in formal assessment activities (El-Khawas, 1995). By the end of 1995, approximately two-thirds of the public higher education systems in the U.S. required formal assessment of undergraduate student learning, as shown in Table 1. About half the states had "institution-centered" programs. Seven public systems, in Arizona, Georgia, Florida, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin, required their institutions to use common measures of student learning, and another six states were considering common measures or nationally-normed tests (Ewell, 1996).

Table 1.
Status of Undergraduate Assessment Initiatives in Public Higher Education in the States in 1995

Assessment initiatives for undergraduate learning	**States**	
	#	**%**
Institution-centered: Local development and use	28	56%
Common measures	7	14%
Program review	2	4%
None	10	20%
Unknown	3	6%

SOURCE: NCES survey reported in Ewell, 1996.

In a recent survey, sixty-one percent of state higher education boards indicated that common measures of student learning should be used, and an additional twenty-one percent gave their qualified approval to such measures (Steele and Lutz, 1995). To some, however, assessment has become a "back burner" issue that has been subsumed by more comprehensive state reforms. The following obstacles to assessment's further development were recently identified (Ewell, 1996):

1. *A shift of public concern from improving higher education to increasing its efficiency;*

2. *Policy doubts about the real utility of results of learning assessments in guiding policy or discharging accountability;*
3. *Inadequate funding;*
4. *Institutional resistance, especially among faculties and at research universities;*
5. *Lack of authority on the part of state agencies to undertake assessment;*
6. *Excessive diversity in postsecondary educational settings, with respect to mission differences and students served;*
7. *Lack of appropriate instruments and high costs of developing local assessment instruments;*
8. *Lack of federal and state leadership in developing common indicators and definitions;*
9. *Lack of faculty and community consensus about learning domains to be assessed; and*
10. *A range of program implementation problems, including lack of student motivation to perform on nonrequired tests, lack of faculty and state agency staff training, and questions about data reliability.*

Public accountability

In the 1990s, as federal and state leaders faced tougher choices about where to spend public funds, higher education came under the same scrutiny as other public programs and was increasingly asked to demonstrate performance with common measures that would permit state and national aggregations and comparisons. At the national level, performance measurement was required in several pieces of legislation, shown in Table 2, and its implications for state and federal policy were widely debated (Hauptman and Mingle, 1995). To advance common measures, the National Center for Education Statistics undertook a variety of initiatives, including a nationwide graduation rate survey and a national test of college level skills, which was aborted for lack of funds.

Table 2.
Federal Laws with Performance Indicators for Higher Education

Law	Purposes of Indicators
The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act (1990)	Public disclosure of crime and graduation rates
Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (1990)	Improvement of completion and job placement rates
Program Integrity Triad provisions in the Higher Education Act (1992)	Focus accreditation on student outcomes

Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994)	Systemic improvement

In 1995, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado, then Chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), urged the states to measure institutional performance as they sought to improve higher education.

> *"Because higher education is so important to our future well-being, our investments in colleges and universities must pay high returns for both individuals and society as a whole. It seems clear to me that as state leaders and as parents, we have the responsibility to take steps to insure our institutions of higher learning meet our needs and expectations.*
>
> *Increasingly, ...both the public and state leaders are expressing concerns about the quality and effectiveness of their higher education institutions. The concerns reflect a wide range of issues, including: increasing costs, declining access, large class sizes, lack of course offerings, and reduced productivity and faculty workload.*
>
> *Agreeing on what we mean by quality and measuring this quality at various institutions is essential to how we address issues of cost, access and the effectiveness of teaching and learning...We need to be clear about what we value in higher education so we can act on those values...*
>
> *...we cannot pretend that government at any level can mandate or regulate real quality in higher education, and we must recognize the great diversity in the mission and organization of colleges and universities. Our task is to shape the context -- including the public policies and mechanisms of self-regulation -- in which they operate, so that market forces, incentives, public investments and accountability mechanisms strengthen and enhance quality."*

Accountability to students is considered to be as important as accountability to public officials. The results of recent ECS focus groups, which are consistent with other student interest studies, reveal four areas of student concern (ECS, 1995).

- **Individual outcomes.** The bottom line for students is the return they are likely to obtain from investing in a college education. What are the chances of getting a degree? How long will it take? What is the credential worth in the marketplace? Are additional credentials or licenses required? What are the chances of getting a job? What kinds of jobs are associated with particular majors or degrees? What salaries can be expected, right after graduation and in the long term? How will a college make skill enhancements available to its graduates so they can keep pace in the future job environment?

- **Key experiences.** Students are also concerned about the college experience itself. Is there out-of-class contact with faculty? Is there active classroom learning that involves doing rather than just listening? Are there opportunities for internships? Are there chances to acquire practical skills, such as computer skills?

- **Support services.** All students, and particularly students who commute, attend part-time and have family obligations, are concerned about basic administrative and support services. Is there support for overcoming skill deficiencies? Is there adequate academic advisement? Are career counseling, personal counseling, and child care available? Are services delivered during hours when nontraditional students can use them? Are there understandable and efficient "customer-oriented" administrative services, including admissions, registration, financial aid administration, bursar and fee-payment, and access to academic records? Or, is student time regarded as a "free good" that can be wasted?

- **Costs.** Cost concerns are important for almost all students. Besides the monetary costs of tuition and fees and books and so on, students are concerned about the "opportunity costs" associated with college attendance, recognizing that their own investment of time, money and energy is substantial and should not be squandered.

Performance Reporting in the States

In 1995, about one-third of the states had issued or were planning to issue a higher education performance report, mostly for public institutions (Ewell, 1996). By August 1996, more than half of the states were involved and about two-fifths were linking or planning to link performance to funding in some way, ranging from the simple publication of a performance report to meeting performance goals, as shown in Table 3. Some of the state reports have been mandated by legislatures, while others were initiated by coordinating or governing boards. The reports have a variety of formats. Some reports have only system-level information, some have only institution-level detail, and some have both. In some states, reports are issued by a central board. In other states, each public institution is responsible for issuing its own report in accordance with state guidelines for form and content. Only six states release institution-level performance information for more than several dozen institutions. They are Florida (37), Illinois (62), North Carolina (188, a statistical abstract only), Tennessee (59), Texas (97). and Virginia (40) .

Table 3. States with Higher Education Performance Reports Issued or Planned as of 1996 (N = 32)				
State	Institutions Included #	Types	Link to funding?	Lowest level of detail for public release
AL	16	Public	Yes	Institutions
AR	32	Public	Yes	Institutions
AZ	3	Public		Universities
CA	287	Public & independent		Systems
CO	28	Public	Yes	1995: Types of Institutions By 1997: Institutions
CT	24	Public	Yes	Institutions
FL	37	Public	2-yr colleges	Institutions
GA	34	Public	Yes	Institutions
HI	11	Public		Institutions
ID	6	Public	Yes	Institutions
IL	62	Public		Institutions
IN	16	Public		1984-89: Institutions; 1989-1996: System; 1997: New Emphasis on Institutions
KS	6	Public	Yes	Institutions
KY	22	Public	Yes	Institutions
LA	20	Public	Yes	Institutions
MD	13	Public		Institutions
MI	28	Community Colleges		Institutions
MN	30	Public	Yes	Institutions
MO	25	Public	Yes	Institutions
NJ	45	Public & independent		Independent: System; Public: Institutions
NM	23	Public		Institutions
NY	250	All degree-granting		1994: Institutional Type (SUNY Only) 1998: Institutions (All degree-granting)
NC	118	Public & independent		Institutions: Statistical Abstract Only
OH	24	Public	Yes	Institutions
SC	33	Public	Yes	Institutions
RI	3	Public	Yes	Institutions
TN	59	Public and independent	Yes	Institutions
TX	97	Public	Yes	Institutions
UT	9	Public		Institutions
VA	40	Public	Yes	Institutions
WV	16	Public	Yes	Institutions
WI	26	Public	Yes	Institutions

SOURCES: McGuinness, 1994; Ruppert, 1994; Layzell and Caruthers, 1995; Ewell, 1996; Schmidt, 1996; McKeown, 1996; NYSED,

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State	Institutions Included #	Types	Link to funding?	Lowest level of detail for public release
AL	16	Public	Yes	Institutions

1996, Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (September 2, 1996).

Purposes of performance reporting. There are nine common purposes for higher education performance reporting in the states (Ruppert, 1995; Epper, 1994). They include:

1. *increasing legislative and public support for higher education;*
2. *helping to allocate public funds (through incentive- or performance-based funding);*
3. *monitoring the general condition of higher education;*
4. *identifying potential sources of problems or areas for improvement;*
5. *improving the effectiveness and efficiency of colleges and universities;*
6. *focusing college and university efforts on state policy goals;*
7. *assessing progress on state priorities and goals;*
8. *improving undergraduate education; and*
9. *improving consumer information and market mechanisms.*

Effectiveness. Has performance reporting been effective? The consensus is that there have been both positive results and lingering uncertainties (Ruppert, 1995). The persistence of performance reporting in the states that adopted it early and its steady adoption in more states each year suggest that policy makers see it as a valuable tool. But there is no compelling evidence that performance reporting by itself achieves state purposes. Rather, performance reporting seems to be a useful tool when it is combined with statewide goal setting, planning, and other quality assurance mechanisms such as "quality audits" and peer reviews (Gaither, Neal, et. al, 1994; Gaither, 1995, Ruppert, 1995). Performance indicators have successfully focused institutional efforts on state policy goals when a small portion of state funding has been tied to performance (Gauthier, 1996; Sugarman, 1996; Schmidt, 1996). The flip side of the coin is that when performance indicators have been used without clear purposes and consequences, they have been viewed by institutions as "inappropriate harassment" (Zikmund, 1996).

"Best practices." Much of the practitioner literature on state level performance reporting includes sections on "lessons learned" from experience (Ewell, 1994; Jones and Ewell, 1994; Ruppert, 1995; Sanders et.al, 1996; Stein, 1996; Burke, 1996; Ewell, 1996). The essence of those lessons is listed below.

1. *Integrate performance reporting with other state level policy tools, such as planning or budgeting, and make sure everyone knows in advance what its purposes are.*
2. *Use indicators as a way to improve higher education, not threaten it.*
3. *Select indicators as "signals" of progress toward important state policy goals.*
4. *Involve the higher education community, its students and its stakeholders (government and employers) in the development of indicator systems.*

5. *Be sensitive to differences in institutional missions and clienteles. Consider using "core" performance indicators for all institutions, supplementary indicators for different types of institutions, and "input" or "context" indicators to show how institutions differ.*
6. *Use a limited set of indicators. The public tends to focus on a few key indicators no matter how many are used.*
7. *Focus on effective communication to the public. Explain what each indicator means and why it is important. Also explain data limitations.*
8. *Use "benchmarks" to make indicators meaningful. Benchmarks can be past performance or the performance of appropriate others.*
9. *Minimize technical complexity and cost. Use indicators and benchmarks that are valid, reliable and statistically robust under conditions of imperfect data. Use available statistics to the extent possible. Involve statistical experts early on.*

Best practice guidelines have sometimes been difficult to follow. For example, although indicators should be selected because they are valid, reliable and robust statistics that are policy related, the reality is that indicators are often selected because they can be computed with available data, and, therefore, a few indicators in use are of questionable validity (Gaither, Nedwick and Neal, 1994).

Indicators in use. Literally hundreds of different performance indicators are in use in higher education and the mass media in the U.S. and western Europe for audiences that include government officials, institutional trustees and officers, faculty, and prospective students and their parents. In a recent study of ten states using performance indicators for their public systems, the following were found to be the most common (Ruppert, 1995):

1. *Regular admissions standards and comparisons of entering students to those standards;*
2. *Remediation activities and indicators of remedial effectiveness;*
3. *Enrollment, retention and graduation data by gender, ethnicity and program;*
4. *Total student credit hours produced by institution and discipline;*
5. *Transfer rates to and from two-year and four-year colleges;*
6. *Total degrees awarded by institution and program and time to degree;*
7. *Pass rates on professional licensure exams;*
8. *Placement data on graduates;*
9. *Results of follow-up satisfaction studies of alumni, students, parents, and employers;*
10. *Faculty workload and productivity data;*
11. *Number and percentage of accredited and eligible programs; and*
12. *External or sponsored research funds.*

Performance indicators tend to cluster around broad state policy goals. Five common clusters and sample indicators are shown below (Ruppert, 1995).

Educational Quality and Effectiveness

This category emphasizes inputs, process and outputs related to undergraduate teaching and learning. Example indicators are ACT and SAT scores of entering freshmen, number of freshmen meeting state admissions standards, number of students in remediation, effectiveness of remedial instruction, availability of academic programs, amount of financial commitment to instruction, student-faculty ratios, class size, percent of students taking at least one course with fewer than 15 students, student assessment results, student performance on nationally-normed exams, type of faculty teaching lower-division courses, time to degree completion, course demand analysis, graduation rates, performance of graduates on licensure exams, job placement rates, graduate and employer satisfaction, number of degrees awarded by discipline, and number of degrees granted.

Access-Diversity-Equity

This category is related to higher education's ability to accommodate changing demographics and the changing needs of the student population. Examples of indicators are persistence and graduation rates by ethnicity, availability of financial aid, faculty diversity, college participation rates, progress in affirmative action, and student demographics.

Efficiency and Productivity

This category refers to how well and at what cost a campus, system or state addresses its particular goals or priorities. Examples include program costs, time to degree and number of credits by institution and degree, classroom and laboratory utilization, charges to students, state appropriations per capita and per resident student, total contact hours of instruction by faculty rank, facilities maintenance, average faculty salary, and student-faculty ratios.

Contribution to State Needs

This category refers to state policy makers' increasing concerns about workforce development and economic competitiveness issues. Examples include relation of programs to employer needs, number of graduates in critical employment fields, economic impact on the state, continuing education patterns, and employer ratings of "responsiveness."

Connection and Contribution to Other Education Sectors

This area reflects the desire to see the educational system as a whole. Examples of indicators in use are effectiveness of remedial education, feedback on performance to high schools, and research and service in support of K-12.

A recent article classified more than two hundred indicators of institutional inputs, processes and outputs into twenty-two topic areas (Bottrill and Borden, 1994). That article appears as Attachment 1 and has check marks next to indicators that could be computed with data currently available to the New York State Education Department.

Information resources and needs

In 1995, thirty-nine states had databases with student-level records for one or more of their public higher education systems (Russell, 1995). For the purposes of performance reporting, student-level records with social security numbers are preferable to institution-level records because they are more flexible and because they enable higher education systems to report back to high schools on student progress, to track transfers from one institution to another, and to track graduates into the labor market with minimal administrative burden (Stein, 1996).

A persistent problem for all the states engaged in performance reporting has been the scarcity of good national benchmarks. The states' solution has generally been to use the best benchmarks available and to note their limitations.

Part Two
The New York Context

Education Law gives the Board of Regents responsibility for state-level planning, quality assurance and public accountability in New York's large and diverse system of public and private higher education. For those purposes, the Regents and the Education Department review institutions and their educational programs, issue statewide plans for higher education, and make extensive statistical information available to the public. The Regents and Department have issued detailed performance reports for state and federal categorical programs under their jurisdiction, but they have not used performance reports for general institutional accountability and improvement.

New agenda

Over the past several years, there has been growing interest in public performance reporting for higher education in New York. In 1993, the Regents Commission on Higher Education called for the development of statewide strategic goals and performance indicators and regular reporting on progress toward the goals. The Commission also called upon every institution to set its own strategic goals and publicly report on its progress. In 1994, the State University of New York, in the spirit of the Commission's recommendations, issued a systemwide performance report (Burke, 1996). In the same year, the "New York State Government Performance and Results Act," which would have required extensive performance reporting by all state agencies, including the State University and City University, was introduced in the Assembly. By the spring of 1996, the State Senate had approved S. 7231, a bill that would have required the Commissioner to issue a "report card" on higher education institutions every year, starting in 1998 (Attachment 2). The same bill was introduced in the Assembly but was not reported out of committee. Even without a legislative mandate, the Regents 1996 strategic plan announced that the Regents would set goals for higher education by 1997 and issue a performance report by 1998.

Community reactions

The Regents and Education Department sought public comment on their performance reporting initiative by widely circulating their 1996 strategic plan and their March 1996 draft of a 1996-2004 statewide plan for higher education. In addition, Department staff have been meeting with leaders from higher education and government to solicit comments.

Community reactions to performance reports for each of New York's 251 institutions have been mixed. Support, contingent on implementation details, has come from the Governor's office, the Division of the Budget, the State Senate, SUNY's central offices, other state agencies, and some in the K-12 education community. Reasons for support include interest in:

- giving students information to guide their college investment decisions;
- giving policy makers information to guide the allocation of public funds;
- identifying areas that need improvement so that steps can be taken to keep New York competitive;
- having a fair and level playing field of performance information for all sectors that compete for state and federal tax support; and
- building statewide capacity to assess the performance of all providers of postsecondary education and training for the purpose of improving job training and economic development.

The independent sector and the higher education leadership in the Assembly do not at the present time support the publication of institution-level performance reports. Some independent sector leaders have expressed the view that Regents program approval, in combination with accreditation, trustee oversight, alumni feedback and donor support, already provide sufficient public accountability. Overall, concerns with institutional reports are that they could:

- be misleading;
- threaten state funds to institutions serving underprepared and disadvantaged students;
- increase administrative burden on institutions while adding no value;
- intrude on the academic decisions of faculty; and
- weaken the market position of weak institutions, making it more difficult for them to attract students and improve their programs.

Both supporters and detractors of performance reporting offered suggestions about how to implement it. In general terms, they included the following.

- A systemwide report with sector-level information would be preferable to institution-level reports.

- It would be prudent to phase in institutional reports to test their feasibility and utility. Suggested starting points have been public institutions (because they rely more than other institutions on public funds) and two-year colleges (because, as a group, they are more homogeneous than other types of institutions with respect to mission and clientele).

- It would be prudent to use performance reports in the Department's oversight of institutions and their programs before disclosing performance information to the public. This would give institutions a chance to improve.

- The success of performance reporting will hinge on how well institutional differences are taken into account and communicated to the public. It would not be appropriate to issue reports that rank all institutions without reference to differences in their missions and students served.

Information resources

Information resources are obviously essential for performance reporting. A wealth of information exists in New York, but it is not necessarily coordinated or in a form that would permit the construction of many performance indicators commonly used in other states. The State University and City University each have sectorwide information systems that enable them to track the progress of individual students within their own systems, among other things, but their systems are not linked to one another. Neither the independent sector nor the proprietary college sector -- which together have about forty percent of the state's enrollment -- has a coordinated student information system. The net result is that, compared to other states, New York lacks the capacity to track the flow of students within its higher education system.

One of the recommendations in the 1993 report of the Regents Commission on Higher Education was to create a statewide system of student records that would permit the Regents to have better information about the flow and achievements of students. Although Department staff drafted proposals for such a system, lack of funding and concerns about privacy and centralized records has prevented progress from being made.

The State Education Department does have extensive institution-level information for every degree-granting institution in its Higher Education Data System, known as HEDS. HEDS data comes from surveys of institutions that are required by the National Center for Education Statistics and, in a few instances, by the State Education Department. If new data elements were needed for performance reporting and HEDS were the vehicle for obtaining them, then new HEDS surveys would have to be submitted by institutions or existing surveys would have to be augmented.

There may be other information resources that could be brought to bear on performance reporting without increasing institutional reporting burden. For example, the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation and the U.S. Department of Education have extensive student-level information about recipients of state and federal student aid. This group represents as much as four-fifths of the total New York State enrollment, according to the Corporation. Other resources may be available from private sources.

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