

Briefing Paper
On Performance Evaluation within an Accountability System
An Addendum to the AB 1417 Performance Reporting Project Report
February 2005

The purpose of this paper is to review common approaches to performance evaluation in accountability systems, in order to recommend a workable approach for California Community colleges, as the system seeks to meet the requirements of district-level accountability required by AB 1417. The recommendations within this paper capture commonly held views about the most appropriate approach to evaluation held by members of the following groups:

- *The RP/CSS Review Panel, charged with developing a performance framework and indicators for discussion and review related to the implementation of AB 1417*
- *Members of a Panel of External Experts, charged with reviewing and recommending changes to the work of the RP/CSS*
- *The Statewide Oversight Committee of CA Community College Leaders, charged with reviewing and recommending changes to the work of the RP/CSS*

Common Approaches to Performance Evaluation

Approaches to performance evaluation in accountability systems have been varied. Some of the most common approaches include: (1) some version of comparing institutions to each other within a system; (2) comparing institutions to a common standard or benchmark; and (3) an improvement approach, which looks at individual institutional performance as it changes over time, as initiatives are undertaken to improve student performance. Additional approaches are usually some combination of the three.

Through **versions of comparing institutions (1)**, aggregate student achievement measures are compared to each other at the institutional level and/or to a statewide “average.” When using averages, many institutions will be above the average, but large numbers will also be below it. Moreover, by definition, the basic underlying assumption to comparing institutions is that some institutions are doing well in serving their students and some are not. By their very nature, such systems dictate that there will be winners and there will be losers, regardless of the actual level of performance that is achieved for each measure. Such systems are adjusted from time to time, by considering exogenous factors, an attempt to “level the playing field” or by creating peer groups for analysis, as another means of leveling the playing field. Because so many of the differences among colleges are due to factors beyond the control of the colleges, such performance evaluation systems rarely achieve sufficient fairness. Performance evaluation systems that rely on comparisons of institutions fail to capture the full environmental complexity in which a college serves its students, e.g., local demographic shifts, state of the local economy, varying political cultural contexts, varying educational levels of students enrolling and seeking services, varying student goals, institutional governance, institutional finances subject to state budget constraints, and the like.

With versions that **compare institutions to a common standard or benchmark (2)**, aggregate student performance in institutions is evaluated relative to an established standard or benchmark, either by specifying scores as standards to be met, or specifying general categories of scores, such as “advanced,” “proficient,” and “below proficient.” Although this approach looks to establish an acceptable level of performance, it too falls short, due to the same varying levels of complexities facing the colleges that are described above. As pointed out by a member of the External Review Panel who has expertise and experience in performance evaluation systems, deciding what the standard should be in such systems is a “daunting task.” Much of this is due to this varying levels of complexity. For example, how can a standard be comparable for a community college that serves primarily an urban area with low socioeconomic and educational levels to those of a suburban community college where socioeconomic levels are high, K-12 resources are high and students are generally supported throughout their education by educated parents?

With the **institutional student improvement approach, sometimes referred to as “value-added” (3)**, individual institutional performance changes are tracked from year to year by looking at the environment

(i.e., the inputs, such as student abilities upon entry and the various other environmental inputs, mentioned above) to develop interventions and *assessment of progress over time*. This approach mitigates the problems of the previously described methods because the institution is compared with itself within the context of the complex environment in which it operates, an environment that continually evolves over time. The value of this approach is that it is student-centered, focusing on where students start and how they progress. This approach includes a review of interventions that are implemented to help students improve their performance. An additional important strength of this approach is that it can account for achievement reflected both by self-defined student goals (that vary across districts), as well as by statewide goals. For example, immigrant students, who first come to colleges with a goal to improve their English speaking, may achieve their goal and leave; the college experience has assisted these students to be successes, in terms of their individually defined goals. These students indeed improve, despite the fact that the improvement does not contribute toward the overall institutional performance objective that has been designated in a statewide system. Nonetheless, through the institutional student improvement approach, the goal achievement of these immigrant students can and should be documented by districts. The value of this performance approach is that institutions pause, look at student performance changes over time, undertake their own self-evaluation to understand those changes within the institution's environmental context, and implement programs and services for student performance improvement. The key here is the issue of ***self-evaluation for continuous improvement***. This approach is used by many states, including Washington, Tennessee, Missouri, Ohio, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Arkansas. (Chapter 5, Performance Funding For Public Higher Education: Fad or Trend? New Directions for Institutional Research Burke and Serban, 1998)

An underlying premise for the following proposal is based upon the fact that there is a strong culture of institutional self-assessment, which has grown from the grass roots level in California, as faculty strive to find new ways to help students learn. This culture of institutional self-assessment has been greatly enhanced by accreditation processes and the state's accountability system, both of which require faculty and managers, not only to find new ways to help students, but also to document, evaluate and alter these new initiatives, as appropriate.

Recommended Approach for California

The California community college performance evaluation system, developed to meet the requirements of AB 1417, will contribute to the already rich array of self-assessments and external evaluations that assist colleges to measure their effectiveness, develop new programs and services to help students succeed, and improve teaching, learning and the prudent use of resources. In interpreting the meaning of the performance indicator data, it is crucial to recognize that districts and their colleges operate within diverse environments and cultures, and it is these attributes that shape opportunities, challenges, advantages and disadvantages to promote and have students achieve.

The new performance system will be of paramount value to community college constituencies, particularly to students, if the system emphasizes the use of the data by the districts to examine themselves. While there may be a temptation to rank institutions based on the performance indicator data, doing so is likely to divert attention away from improvement. As pointed out by External Panel of Experts member, Trudy Bers, "Institutions that are ranked lower will feel challenged to explain themselves and institutions ranked higher will succumb to self satisfaction, while consideration of the diversity of institutions and their environments is lost."

External Panel of Experts member, Peter Ewell makes a further point, by suggesting that not only is ranking inappropriate, it may encourage districts to serve constituencies that will improve performance, rather than meeting real educational needs in the local community: ""You are certainly right to reject rankings--and in fact (reject) any approach that will try to distinguish levels of institutional performance based on fine cut criteria and in areas where student clientele is the major factor. In fact, since student characteristics are the major driver in almost all of these measures, you can make the further point that adopting rankings would induce institutions *not* to serve their public missions by seeking a different clientele. "

And finally, External Panel of Experts member Joseph Burke suggests that the institutional student improvement model, is the best evaluation to follow: "I strongly endorse the institutional improvement approach as the one that best fits student development and district needs, which vary tremendously among California community college districts. The improvement approach puts the accent where it belongs on the student and the district and not on institutional comparisons, which are misleading."

National experience with ranking systems has been controversial, evidence that rankings have led to institutional improvement is sparse and consensus about the value of rankings does not exist. As such, introducing rankings into the new AB 1417 System is unlikely to have benefits and is very likely to create controversy and misunderstandings that will divert attention away from the important goal of improvement.

California has a broad culture of institutional self-assessment that already exists in its districts, driven by internal mechanisms that have been developed, as well as external review requirements. Among the *many* systems currently in place are:

- College and district level institutional effectiveness reporting structures
- Program review processes that involve internal reviews as well as external reviews by local business advisory groups, by professional peer groups and external accrediting agencies
- Faculty-initiated inquiry and training, dedicated to instructional improvement in the classroom (known as flex activities and workshops)
- District and college level comprehensive self-assessment through the external institutional accreditation process as well as through the external program accreditation processes mentioned above
- Accountability to the U.S. Dept. of Education related to Vocational Technical Education Act and the Integrated Postsecondary Education System requirements
- Matriculation and Student Equity review processes
- The new learning assessment reporting requirements instituted by the regional accrediting board for junior and community colleges in all western states (ACCJC), and finally,
- The Partnership for Excellence project initiated in the late 1990s (soon to be replaced by the AB 1417 system)

These systems currently in place in all community college districts of California demonstrate a strong culture of self-assessment. Likewise, a great deal of systemwide evaluation is conducted by the State Chancellor's Office. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the RP/CSS Review Panel (with the endorsement of members of the External Panel of Experts and the CA Community College Oversight Committee) that the state of California utilize the existing district and state level infrastructure for performance evaluation within the AB 1417 System. Specific to this are the following recommendations for evaluation, once initial implementation of AB 1417 takes place and measures are generated:

1. Once generated, District Core and State Level Core measures should be sent to the districts for review to prepare an evaluation of the data within the local context. This evaluation should be discussed broadly across the district and with the Board of Trustees, culminating in a report that is sent to the State Chancellor's Office that includes:
 - A brief review of any change in district core measures over time (*minimum* of three years)
 - A brief discussion of why district core measures are important in the local context
 - A brief description of limitations and/or advantages beyond local district control that impact district core measures
 - A brief description of specific action plans for improvement, as appropriate
2. The State Chancellor's Office should provide an overview/summary report to the Board of Governors, Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst Office of the District Core, State Level Core and themes gleaned from the district reports.

Upon Gaining Experience with the AB 1417 System:

After a few years of implementation, the districts and the State Chancellor's Office will have a better understanding of the performance measures and how well performance evaluation is functioning to help students succeed. This review should include an evaluation of the effectiveness of the actual measures themselves in terms of whether they provide districts with good information for institutional student improvement.

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