

PARTNERS OR ADVERSARIES: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF HIGHER-
EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND STATE-LEVEL ACCOUNTABILITY

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Introduction

Higher education scholars often singled out accountability as one of the most important developments in the past 50 years. It is a concept fundamental to public higher education because its purpose has been to achieve public policy responsive to public preferences (Dunn, 2003). Heller (2001) and others identified accountability, access, and affordability as the three key issues in higher education today. In an annual poll of state leaders on the pressing issues facing higher education, accountability was consistently viewed as a top concern. Lingenfelter (2003) noted it was the only topic emphasized by respondents in every survey for the past dozen years. Both its supporters and detractors seemed to agree on at least one point: accountability was here to stay (Burke, 2005; Crow, 2005).

Accountability in higher education has been controversial. If it was too regulatory or inflexible, practitioners viewed it as a top-down bureaucratic mandate. If the goals were set too loosely or were overly broad, policymakers found it difficult to measure progress or results. Lingenfelter (2003) pointed out, "Accountability in education is further complicated because no one actor can be held entirely or even largely responsible for results" (p. 20). This lack of a strategic focus in higher education, however, has become a dilemma too big to ignore for governors, legislators, and, increasingly, the business community (Greenblatt, 2007). As a result, state-level accountability processes have been in various stages of development.

The accountability focus in higher education historically has been directed at the institutional level (Bogue & Hall, 2003). This comparative case study, however, examines state-level accountability processes, especially at a time when higher

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education has faced intense pressure to answer for its performance and account for the use of public funds entrusted to it. The study also examined the different methods of initiating performance indicators in higher education. The methods were broadly classified as (1) mandated and prescribed by policymakers, (2) mandated but not prescribed, or (3) not mandated (Burke & Minassians, 2002). The research focused on the processes used in Tennessee, Minnesota, and South Dakota. The three states differed in how long they have been pursuing accountability efforts, whether their accountability processes were mandated or voluntary, how their institutions were governed, and their higher education demographics. The perceptions of state-level accountability processes were examined from three policymaker viewpoints: that of the state higher education governing or coordinating board, the executive branch, and the legislative branch. It is in these three policy domains where most decisions about a state's public higher education system likely are made (Wiley, 2005).

Accountability in Higher Education

Measures of higher education accountability have evolved over the years as the accountability movement matured. Bogue and Hall (2003) identified the most common quality assurance practices, a roughly chronological order of their introduction and application to higher education public policies, starting with accreditation, followed by college ratings and rankings, licensure, follow-up studies of graduates, academic program reviews, and assessment of college outcomes. Today's performance indicators will vary depending on the values, perspectives, and vested interests of who demands the accountability. A key conclusion of scholars who studied these accountability relationships is the important role state higher education coordinating boards and

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system governing boards can play in delivering the best policy outcomes that blend together the values of both elected officials and non-elected specialists (Dunn, 2003).

Measuring performance, or what Alexander (2000) called value for resources, is done in a variety of ways. Some states take a value-added measurement of departing graduates, or they assess how faculty, space, and equipment are deployed to determine an institution's level of efficiency. Still others attempt to measure a return on investment to arrive at institutional effectiveness and productivity. Finally, a consumer approach to accountability may be used, seeking to measure higher education's impact on meeting individual and state needs. Burke and Minassians' (2002) research indicates that until the late 1980s, state governments and boards of higher education had generally neglected what these researchers consider to be two powerful levers of accountability for public colleges and universities: information and budgets. But with the government reinvention movements of the 1990s, particularly during the Clinton/Gore administration, all that began to change. Public officials realized that organizational change would require more than minor tweaks; it would demand underlying reform of the organizational culture itself (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2005). Managing for results became the new mantra, not controlling through bureaucracy or rules.

Conceptual Framework: Burke's Accountability Triangle

Recognizing the competing demands on higher education for results, Burke (2005) coined the phrase Accountability Triangle to illustrate how higher education seeks to balance state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. He visually depicted this as a triangle, with political (state priorities), professional (academic concerns) and market (market forces) accountability each occupying a corner of the

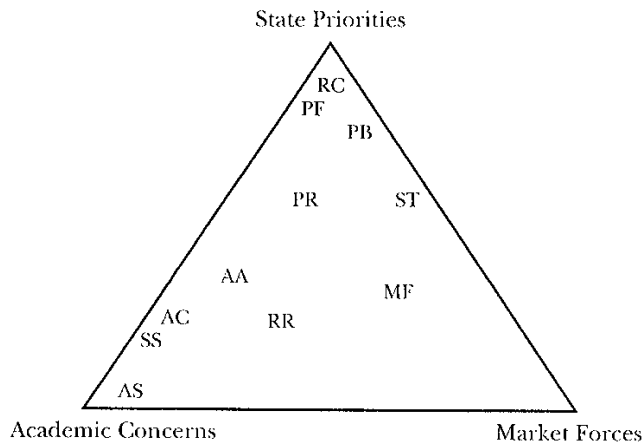
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triangle. The state priorities are the public needs and demands for programs and services that higher education can deliver. These public needs are most often articulated by state-level officials, such as governors or legislatures, but may also be expressed by civic and community leaders. State priorities tend to focus on external accountability or regulation, outputs and outcomes, responsiveness, evaluation, performance, and quantitative evidence. Academic concerns are brought forth by the academic community and focuses on institutional improvement, peer review, inputs and processes, reputation, consultation, prestige, trust, and qualitative evidence. The needs and demands of higher education's customers, represented by students, their families, the business community, and other clients of higher education, are market forces that factor into the Accountability Triangle. Market forces tend to focus on economic interests, consumerism, competition, quality, and pricing.

Burke (2005) suggested that a successful accountability program is responsive to each corner of his Accountability Triangle, but also must carefully balance its response to ensure service to each sector without any one segment being overemphasized. Burke's visualization of this balanced approach is that the "center of the Accountability Triangle seems the ideal spot for an effective accountability program" (p. 23). Burke placed each of the most popular accountability mechanisms as shown in Figure 1, which illustrates that the majority of accountability mechanisms are academic or state focused and do not address market forces (Crow, 2005). Crow pointed out in his review of Burke's book that the lack of market accountability mechanisms makes it difficult for institutions or state systems to have a balanced response to accountability. Burke does suggest that perhaps accreditation may be the most effective way to implement a

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comprehensive and balanced accountability. However, Burke notes there first needs to be consensus on the goals and purposes that higher education should achieve and be accountable for to the state, market, and academy (Crow, 2005).



AA = Academic Audits, AC = Accreditation, AS = Assessment, MF = Market Forces, PB = Performance Budgeting, PF = Performance Funding, PR = Performance Reporting, RC = Report Cards, RR = Reputational Ratings, ST = Standardized Tests, SS = Student-Alumni Surveys.

Figure 1. Placement of accountability processes in Burke's Accountability Triangle.

Note. From *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* (p. 307), by J. C. Burke, 2005, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Three Policy Viewpoints

The concept of accountability calls for a continuum of expectations, where the roles and responsibilities are first articulated and then followed up by measures of performance and regular assessments (Burke, 2005). States, as owner-operators of public institutions, have found the current hodge-podge of institutional efforts inadequate and are looking for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to

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accountability. To achieve this, someone with legal authority—Burke looks specifically to a governor, the legislature, or what he calls an interface agency (such as a state governing board, coordinating board, or planning agency)—has to determine and communicate the outcomes for which a state’s higher education system will be held accountable. Hearn and Holdsworth (2002) found that in many states, increased state regulation of postsecondary education has become the norm. Because of this trend, governors, state legislatures, and higher education executive officers across the country have taken a strong interest in the higher education accountability movement. Since 2005, national organizations representing each of these stakeholders have issued their own reports with specific recommendations, which are briefly detailed in the three sections that follow.

Governors. The National Governors Association (NGA) (2007) recommended that state governments, higher education systems and their governing boards, and the private sector collaborate on a public agenda to ensure that higher education policies, programs, and resources address a state’s economic needs. As part of the compact process, the higher education system and its stakeholders would agree on the system’s mission, long-term goals, and key outputs in exchange for stable budgets and more autonomy. Once all stakeholders agree on their roles and what needs to be achieved, the accountability system becomes the tool to enforce the compact’s objectives from both sides, which the governors view as a type of symbiotic relationship between the states and their postsecondary systems (NGA).

Legislatures. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) convened a blue ribbon commission to recommend steps to achieve higher education reform.

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Among its recommendations, NCSL (2006) called for holding institutions accountable for their performance. Its report outlined several steps that state policymakers could take to make higher education more responsive, such as regular reporting to the legislature on specific outcomes and performance funding. The legislative group also reiterated its preference for a set of clearly understood statewide goals, appropriate measures to gauge progress toward those goals, and a system of incentives and consequences for institutional performance.

Higher education executive officers. The system heads of public higher education in all 50 states have advocated a proactive stance, suggesting that a better system of accountability would provide parents, students, citizens, and policymakers the answers to reasonable questions about cost, available courses, student learning outcomes, and graduation rates (National Commission for Accountability in Higher Education, 2005). Among their recommendations, the system heads suggested a stronger focus on state and national priorities, concentrating accountability efforts on the critical transition from high school to college, and creating statewide data systems across all levels of education to better guide budget and policy decisions.

Methods

A qualitative case study was used to compare and contrast the experiences of three selected states engaged in higher education accountability processes. Creswell (1998) promoted the flexibility of the case study design as one in which the researcher may set reasonable limitations, or boundaries, in order to study a process, activity, event, program, or multiple individuals. This method was particularly well suited to a study of policymakers' perceptions of state-level accountability processes because the

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case study “focuses on holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). A comparative case study that looks at distinct and disparate cases—in this study, three states with different accountability experiences—is commonly used to enhance the external validity or generalizability of findings (Merriam). In fact, Merriam suggested that the “greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be” (p. 40).

Selected States

Merriam (1998) considered purposeful selection appropriate when “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). In order to learn the most about state policymakers’ perceptions of higher education accountability processes, the three states in this study—Tennessee, Minnesota, and South Dakota—were chosen for specific reasons. These three states differed in how long they have been pursuing accountability efforts, whether their accountability processes were mandated or voluntary, how their institutions were governed, and their higher education demographics. The researchers worked in the state of South Dakota. The lead researcher has had direct involvement in accountability work in South Dakota as an employee of the Board of Regents. A concern was that this “insider” view could lead to preconceptions about state-level accountability processes or result in subjective evaluations of South Dakota’s experience with accountability, as compared to the other case study states. Conversely, however, her knowledge of South Dakota’s process and the interactions she has had with other state higher education executives at national conferences and seminars were a plus. This kind of background was most helpful in

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narrowing the study's focus, gaining access to pertinent research materials, and identifying who best to interview as the critical policy players in each state.

Tennessee, a Southern state with a population of more than 6 million people, was considered to have a mature higher education accountability system, with a long-standing performance-based funding program dating back to 1979. "The program addressed public policy concerns regarding the need to strengthen Tennessee's public higher education system and make institutions more competitive in the region as well as from a national perspective" (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, n.d., ¶ 2). The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) was created in 1967 by the Tennessee General Assembly to coordinate and support postsecondary institutions, and was required by law to create a master plan for public higher education in Tennessee. THEC is the coordinating board for 51 public colleges, universities, and technology centers in Tennessee, which serve about 220,000 students.

Minnesota, a Midwest state with a population of nearly 5.2 million people, was in the early stages of implementing a higher education accountability initiative. In 2005, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education was charged by the legislature and the governor to develop a statewide accountability system for higher education. The current Office of Higher Education (OHE) was created by the legislature in 2003 as a cabinet-level state agency to administer financial aid and other programs and to serve as a clearinghouse for data, research, and analysis on higher education trends. It has a collaborative relationship with the 11 public four-year institutions and 30 public two-year community and technical colleges in Minnesota; as of 2007, the agency also licensed and registered 57 private non-profit and 80 for-profit institutions. Combined enrollment in

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public and private institutions in Minnesota was 341,240 as of fall 2007, with about 72% of the students attending public higher education institutions (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2007).

South Dakota is a Great Plains state with a population of about 782,000 people. Without any mandate from the legislature or executive branch, this state has been voluntarily engaged in higher education accountability processes since the mid 1990s, primarily through policies adopted by the South Dakota Board of Regents. The Board of Regents is the constitutional governing board for six public universities, serving nearly 34,000 students. A single Board of Regents for all state institutions of higher education in South Dakota dated back to 1890; the present form of constitutional governance first became effective in 1897.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

Data collected for this study conformed to what Merriam (1998) identified as important components of a basic qualitative study in education—interviews and document analysis.

Interviews. Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. With input from the higher education executive officer in each state, a top-level administrator employed by the higher education governing or coordinating board, a governor's policy or fiscal adviser, and a legislator or legislative appointee in each state were asked to participate in this study. Each was in a specific position to know about the state's higher education accountability policies and practices. The interview protocol is in Appendix A.

Documents. Supporting material included accountability documents and reports produced in the three states under study. Web sites maintained by the higher education

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agencies, governing boards, or coordinating boards in the three states also served as a source of information to supplement and clarify data gathered from the interview transcripts. Scholarly research articles and national-level reports, studies, and data were used to support the findings and analysis. When needed for verification or further analysis, the following archival materials and public documents were accessed: records from the governing or coordinating boards' archives, state codified laws, and selected newspaper articles.

Data Analysis

Interview data were organized first by the interview protocol. The researchers determined the need for clarification and follow-up interviews based on this first level of analysis. The second level of analysis, a vertical analysis, was a description of each case. Each case included thick, rich narrative descriptions of state-level accountability processes from the perspectives of higher education administrators, the executive branch, and the legislative branch. The third level of analysis was a horizontal analysis across all data. The researcher identified commonalities and differences that emerged when comparing policymakers' perceptions of higher education accountability processes in the three states. A fourth level of analysis was a vertical and horizontal scan across all data utilizing Burke's Accountability Triangle as a conceptual framework. Merriam (1998) described the findings of a qualitative study as a mix of description and analysis using concepts from a theoretical framework applied to the study. Using Burke's Accountability Triangle model, accountability processes in the three states were analyzed to describe how they have evolved, how these states answered for higher education performance and accounted for the use of public funds, and what perceptions

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state-level public officials—representatives of higher education governing or coordinating boards, the executive branch, and the legislative branch—held of these accountability processes.

Verification. In qualitative research, triangulation is a preferred strategy for triple checking the validity and reliability of research or the evaluation of findings (Golafshani, 2003). In this study, three methods were utilized. Each state case study was shared with the appropriate interview subjects for a thorough review and confirmation that their comments and insights were accurately interpreted. Secondly, two individuals who worked for national organizations and were subject-matter experts in higher education accountability were asked to review the data analysis and findings for accuracy. Finally, written documents, including reports, studies, and scholarly research articles, were used to recheck and verify information gathered from the interviews.

Case Summaries

Evolution to Current Accountability Processes in Tennessee

“The history of public accountability in Tennessee is unique in that policymakers have been able to sustain a full complement of assessment and accountability initiatives for over three decades” (Noland, 2006, p. 60). It began with the concept of performance funding, which started as a pilot in 1974 and then developed and evolved as the needs of the state and its institutions, students and their parents, businesses, and other stakeholders changed (Noland, Johnson, & Skolits, 2004).

In many respects, the history of higher education accountability in Tennessee seemed closely linked to the state’s funding challenges. In describing the creation of Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) in the 1960s, a higher education

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administrator said the agency's coordination function addressed the pressing need to find a more equitable way to distribute dollars, programs, and capital construction projects. Performance funding was in part a response to concerns that Tennessee's old enrollment-driven funding model could no longer adequately fund institutions as enrollments began to decline in the 1980s (Baxter, Brant, & Forster, 2007). Public finances today continue to occupy state policymakers' thoughts. Referring to the regressive nature of the state's tax system, a legislative appointee interviewed for this study suggested "unless we fix that, we can talk all day long about what we wish would happen, but it's going to be awfully hard to achieve."

Tennessee's accountability approach represented a mix of methods that Burke and Minassians (2002) would describe as mandated-prescribed and mandated-not prescribed. There was no state law that prescribed the performance funding model. It was not mandated that institutions must participate, although THEC was directed statutorily to develop a funding formula for higher education, and performance funds have come to be a highly visible component.

Tennessee's performance funding indicators, which were broadened over the years, focused on what legislators had become most concerned about: undergraduate education (Baxter et al., 2007). The higher education institutions played a considerable role in refining those indicators and how they were used. Performance funding has involved up to 5.45% of the institutional operating budget recommendation in Tennessee; in 2008 dollars that amounted to about \$50 million. Under the performance funding process, if an institution earned perfect scores in all five categories, it could gain an additional 5.45% of its institutional appropriation. Institutions were given flexibility to

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allocate the dollars they earned wherever they saw fit. Some directed the performance dollars back to the units which generated the highest scores, while others simply invested the money back into their general fund. More recent features adopted have encouraged the institutions to focus on their outcomes rather than the process, and to judge their performance against a set of 12 peer institutions identified for each campus.

The master plan—formally known as the Statewide Master Plan for Tennessee Higher Education—served as the blueprint or roadmap for accountability. Some form of master plan statement has been issued since the 1970s (Bogue, 1981). But for the first time in 2007, the goals of the master plan were directly tied to institutional performance measures so that performance funding could serve as the plan's assessment mechanism. This statewide master plan was viewed by THEC officials as the public agenda for higher education, involving the higher education systems, legislative leadership, and the governor's office.

Policymakers' Perspectives of Accountability in Tennessee

Referring to the Tennessee accountability framework as something of a paradox, Boland (2006) pointed out that, although the state's performance funding program was lauded nationally, overall state funding increases have not followed from its demonstrated results. Similar concerns were shared by some of those interviewed for this study. There was a sense the higher education enterprise had strongly embraced accountability for the most part, but ownership in the process might be missing within other policy circles, particularly the legislature.

Higher education administrators referred to the master plan for Tennessee higher education as creating a public agenda by which institutions, legislative leaders, and the

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executive branch could develop a common vision and align their strategies. But while praising the flexibility and transparency of the process that has developed, one administrator shared the view that it was somewhat ad hoc, and that others in the policymaking environment have, at times, called it a patchwork system of “putting things together.”

Representatives of the legislative and executive branches tended to agree with that view, and in even stronger language. A legislative respondent said,

As far as it relates to public funds, I think the accountability over those dollars is well structured and the mechanisms do a very good job. Where it breaks down, I think, is that the buy-in through those accountability mechanisms is internal to higher education. . . . I do not think there is a clear understanding, expectation, and certainly not a consensus of policymakers outside of higher education as to exactly what role we want higher education to be fulfilling.

This respondent wished for a more external process that would generate useful information for policymakers, and stronger connections to economic development, noting that “it’s not about what higher ed can do to improve the higher education system, it’s what higher education can do to improve the state of Tennessee.” This person felt the current situation was not higher education’s fault, but more a case of the state of Tennessee not placing enough value on planning. Both this respondent and a representative of the executive branch noted that, as an undereducated state, Tennessee should place much more emphasis on degree production and educational attainment. “Because we’re an undereducated state, many of the citizen representatives

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are not pushed by their constituencies to delve into education issues, and they don't," the legislative appointee said.

Performance funding has been viewed very positively within the executive branch, according to an individual who worked in that sector. The gubernatorial administration was more interested in the quantitative-type measures than soft measures of student happiness, this person said, adding that the state's accountability processes could benefit from being packaged into a more cohesive, integrated system. Table 1 provides a summary of key findings from the Tennessee case study.

Table 1

Summary of Tennessee Case Study Key Findings

Indicator	Finding
Primary Accountability Processes	Performance Funding, Master Planning
Method of Initiating Performance	Mandated-Not Prescribed and Mandated-Prescribed
Institutions Participating	Public
Policymakers' Perceptions	Ad Hoc System
	Positive View of Performance Funding
	Lack of Buy-in Outside Higher Education

Evolution to Current Accountability Processes in Minnesota

In Minnesota, the two public higher education systems and their governing boards historically concentrated on their own higher education accountability practices. That now has been extended to statewide goals and indicators as part of *Minnesota*

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Measures, an annual report on higher education performance first issued in 2007. Much of the accountability work under way in Minnesota, both at the systems' and state level, tended to conform with what Burke and Minassians (2002) called the mandated-not prescribed method; that is, legislation mandated some type of program but allowed state agencies, in cooperation with campus leaders, to propose the indicators.

In 2005, Governor Pawlenty and the Minnesota Legislature charged the cabinet-level Office of Higher Education (OHE) with developing a statewide accountability system to measure the higher education sector's effectiveness in meeting state goals. After the law's passage, 80-some stakeholders—including educators, policymakers, employers, and other state leaders—engaged in a process to identify broad goals and indicators of success. The five goals and 23 indicators they came up with served as Minnesota's public agenda for higher education (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2008). At present, *Minnesota Measures* has been characterized as a framework for information sharing and alignment of accountability efforts by all sectors of higher education, public and private. No specific targets tied to *Minnesota Measures* data reporting had been set.

Accountability efforts at the two system levels have been ongoing for some time. At the University of Minnesota, an accountability report was prepared annually to summarize the major strategic initiatives under way. The MnSCU system has had several accountability efforts under way. In recent years, the chancellor and the Board of Trustees became highly focused on targeted and specific system goals that could be measured and accomplished in a time certain. That interest then extended to bonuses that would be paid for reaching performance-based targets.

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A major initiative about to be launched shortly after the interviews for this study were conducted was MnSCU's new dashboard system of accountability. Many of MnSCU's trustees were business and corporate leaders. They wanted some type of visual report or scorecard, similar to a company's quarterly report, to tell them where institutions fell on a scale of high, medium, low, and how the schools were doing on key indicators at any point in time. MnSCU officials also pointed to the quality improvement process within regional accreditation as another important part of their accountability work. More than half of the system's campuses were involved in the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Process. Through consensus building, the campuses had determined what they would be held accountable for and the specific measures used to gauge that accountability. One MnSCU official looked at accreditation as the "fundamental baseline of assuring quality within our system."

Policymakers' Perspectives of Accountability in Minnesota

Policymakers interviewed for this study often mentioned the importance of information sharing and the positive aspects of creating partnerships among all sectors of higher education to move Minnesota forward. One subject said accountability occurred when data were made public and made available in an understandable and clear way. A higher education administrator talked about the evolution of accountability from mere grading of students, to measuring and assessing outcomes. This official indicated that a sharper, more magnified environment of accountability existed today in that institutions also were being asked to account for resources and the value added during an educational experience. A legislative respondent talked about accountability as responsiveness, particularly to a state's workforce and economic needs.

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From the interviews conducted, it was evident that while everyone seemed aware of efforts ongoing at various levels of higher education, legislators were thinking about the new *Minnesota Measures* initiative when accountability was mentioned. One legislative respondent said *Minnesota Measures* was significant because of the amount of stakeholder involvement that went into developing a consensus around the five statewide goals.

Creation of the cabinet-level higher education agency also was generally viewed as a positive move for the state. A legislative respondent said,

Part of the reason why we created the Office of Higher Education and made the director a cabinet-level position is because we really wanted to make sure we had somebody at the governor's side saying, 'Don't forget about higher ed.' I think that often can happen in a state where there's a kind of estrangement between the governor, the legislature, and the higher ed institutions. And it's really important that we pull those together.

Staff members in that office said the cabinet status had changed how they interacted with the public systems and private colleges, stepping up the role they played and the visibility of their work. Their relationships with the legislative branch also were better now, with one OHE official describing those interactions as purposeful and intentional.

An OHE official said the agency had stressed a collaborative approach with the public systems and the private institutions, by instilling a sense that accountability was "coming from them; that it's not being done to them, it's being done with them." This official believed the relationship, while bumpy at first, had improved.

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What remained unknown was where the statewide accountability effort, *Minnesota Measures*, was headed for sure. There was unease about the next step, which might call for setting of performance targets. And whether that led to statewide performance funding tied to the targets was a major question. Table 2 provides a summary of key findings from the Minnesota case study.

Table 2

Summary of Minnesota Case Study Key Findings

Indicator	Finding
Primary Accountability Processes	Performance Reporting
Method of Initiating Performance	Mandated-Not Prescribed
Institutions Participating	Public, Private
Policymakers' Perceptions	Collaborative Approach
	Stakeholder Involvement
	Elevated Status of Higher Education

Evolution to Current Accountability Processes in South Dakota

Accountability processes in South Dakota's public higher education system differed from many other states in that these efforts were entirely voluntary. Burke and Minassians (2002) would characterize this approach as not mandated, since South Dakota's system board started the initiative. The efforts under way today were

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implemented over several years, largely as a result of policy actions taken by the Board of Regents and often with informal support from legislative leaders.

The accountability focus in South Dakota generally was traced back to the mid-1990s, when a new executive director of the Board of Regents began his tenure. A previous executive director had begun to lay the groundwork for the regents to become more engaged in the policymaking process. This was characterized as the regents taking a more aggressive role to manage the system and become more effective (Fowle, 2005). The board's message to the legislature and the governor was that the six public universities would be run more like a coordinated system rather than each institution looking out for itself, as had been the approach up until then.

The Board of Regents already had launched a modest attempt at accountability, through the annual distribution of a *Fact Book* containing data and information about the institutions and the students they served. The *Fact Book* quantified various input variables, but there were no data provided on what was actually happening to students as a result of their moving through the higher education system. To begin to deal more directly with the accountability issue, the regents sought to build a common set of understandings and a common agenda with policymakers.

One of the ways this was accomplished was through a series of sustained discussions with policymakers—including the governor and top legislative leaders—called roundtables. These roundtables began in 1995 and continued to the present. “Roundtables are used as a strategy for change in South Dakota as a means of developing consensus on priorities and on the actions necessary to address those priorities” (Martinez, 2002). Martinez pointed to several changes in higher education

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policy that were products of these roundtable discussions, including a new budgeting formula, investments in targeted areas of institutional interest, and initiatives focused on student quality and faculty pay.

To address a serious budget shortfall in 1995, the governor had cut most state government agencies by 10%. The regents' office, which had escaped the first round of cuts, anticipated the budget ax would fall the following year. However, Governor Janklow approached the board with a promise: if the public higher education system would voluntarily cut its own budget and seek new efficiencies, he would let the regents spend that money on other priorities. So a plan called "Reinvestments through Efficiencies" was born, and was often considered the first serious attempt at performance-based accountability in South Dakota. As part of this planning, the regents' office sat down with legislative leaders and identified seven policy goals for public higher education. The savings from efficiencies could be reinvested into any area addressed by the seven policy goals. This process continued today, even though some of the goals were since modified.

Looking back, the reinvestment strategy may have been modest in terms of actual dollars involved, but it spoke to something more. One observer noted,

That exercise did more to create confidence in the Board of Regents and the ability to execute goals and to provide some measure of accountability; that we were in fact making progress toward the common agenda that had been set.

A few years later, the Board of Regents moved into the realm of performance funding. The regents decided to pursue the idea of building into their budget process a proportion of dollars spent on performance funding to reward institutions that met

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certain goals. The initial plan was the state would put up half the money and the institutions would put up the other half for performance funding. But in the beginning, no state money was forthcoming. For several years, the universities simply allocated performance funds and could earn back their own money if they performed, or some other institution could earn it away from them. This self funding continued until 2004, when the legislature agreed to annually appropriate \$250,000 to be matched by a like amount generated within the system.

Policymakers' Perspectives of Accountability in South Dakota

South Dakota's initiatives, along with other accountability measures such as the proficiency testing of all public university students at the end of their sophomore year, have evolved from early beginnings. The efforts described in the section above indicated a progression from input processes to outcome measures. It began with simple descriptive information contained in a *Fact Book*. Then there was the reinvestment of monies gained from system efficiencies targeted at agreed-to state policy goals. Finally, there was a limited form of performance funding—first through internal reallocation, but later with the state sharing in the financial support. This sense that there was an evolution in South Dakota's accountability process came through clearly in the perceptions of state policymakers interviewed for this study.

South Dakota's process was generally viewed as more informal than formal. All three sectors of the policymaking environment in South Dakota identified information sharing and a focus on communication as the state's key strategies. They tended to believe that being responsive was one of the things that South Dakota public higher education did particularly well. One legislative respondent explained it this way, "The

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things I think are important as a policymaker are always addressed, they are always explained, and you never have to ask. It's a very transparent system that we have."

Opportunities for public input were readily identified within the regents' roundtable process, along with other outreach efforts by the board, including a biennial series of town meetings hosted by local legislators where regents and their staff conducted open forums in communities across the state. When asked to describe accountability processes in South Dakota, a legislator and an executive branch official both mentioned first the roundtable discussions. All of those interviewed in South Dakota for this study said making people comfortable with the job that higher education was doing was part of the accountability process. Table 3 provides a summary of key findings from the South Dakota case study.

Table 3

Summary of South Dakota Case Study Key Findings

Indicator	Finding
Primary Accountability Processes	Performance Reporting, Performance Funding
Method of Initiating Performance	Not Mandated
Institutions Participating	Public
Policymakers' Perceptions	Evolution of Processes
	Responsiveness
	Roundtables as an Outreach Effort

Discussion and Implications

The three states chosen for this study differed in the nature and duration of their accountability efforts, their higher education governance structures, and the demographics of the people they served. However, these states all shared many similarities when it came to their policymakers' view of what higher education accountability was all about.

Long-term process. All of the policymakers interviewed considered accountability a process that was here for the long term, and a public policy issue that would become more important in the years ahead. Most believed that a higher education institution's or system's accountability would come to be based more upon performance than it has been historically. A legislative branch respondent from Minnesota thought that more emphasis would be placed in the coming years on how to measure student learning. "That's an area where we don't have a lot of measurement tools," this subject said. A couple of the respondents also shared concerns that higher education institutions must become more responsive to the demands for accountability, or risk having a burdensome governmental system imposed on them, perhaps even from the federal level.

Transparency important. Most of the states' leaders preferred accountability mechanisms that delivered information and data in a clear, concise, and understandable way to decision makers and the general public. Several said transparency was the new buzzword for this trend in information sharing. Most of the interview subjects also stated their preference for a common-sense approach. To confirm that accountability was not a new concept, one individual, in preparing for the researcher's visit, found a definition

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from 1973 that met the common-sense standard: “Accountability is the responsibility to demonstrate that specific and carefully defined outcomes result from higher education and that these outcomes are worth what they cost.”

Non-regulatory view. Most of the individuals interviewed also did not consider their state’s accountability process to be very regulatory or bureaucratic, although they acknowledged that individual institutions might consider it more so than policymakers at the state level. There was no real consensus of opinion, however, on the degree to which their state accountability systems were formal or informal. Only a legislative respondent in Tennessee and a Minnesota higher education administrator referred to their systems as formal. Several others thought their state’s processes were more loosely structured, which might enable higher education to respond to a situation or react more quickly to changing circumstances.

Value of relationships. One finding of interest was that many of those interviewed felt the accountability process was somewhat dependent on personalities and relationships. “It may depend on the [legislative] leadership and how attuned they are to higher education,” a Tennessee higher education official said. “You know, it comes down to personalities quite often.” A Minnesota official had similar thoughts. “It’s a lot of care and feeding, but it makes a huge difference in how the agency is treated and how much work we get done. Relationships are the key, absolutely,” that individual said. In South Dakota, the accountability processes were quite dependent on informal relationships with key policymakers, a higher education official said. Deciding what policy goals were most important, and what indicators to report on, could change

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depending on who was in leadership roles and “so we’ve tried to adjust to the personalities,” that subject said.

Accountable to legislatures, governors, and governing boards. There was considerable agreement among leaders in all of the states about whom higher education served and must be accountable to. Most respondents mentioned a wide array of constituencies, including students, parents, communities, businesses, taxpayers, governors, legislatures, and system governing boards. One respondent in Minnesota also suggested higher education was accountable to the future of the state. But nearly everyone agreed that in terms of their public higher education institutions and systems, the first line of accountability was, above all, to the legislature, the governor, and the system governing boards.

Partners instead of adversaries. Finally, a majority of the interview subjects believed the accountability relationship between the state and public higher education was one of being partners, not adversaries. In all three states, officials alluded to some adversarial situations in the past, but most believed their state and higher education had established a greater degree of trust. One particular observation by a South Dakota higher education official was worthy of note. This individual said the state and its higher education system had gone from being adversaries to partners. “And I would conclude that we’re still in a partnership role,” the respondent said. “But it’s not a marriage. You’re dating, and you’ve got to keep behaving in a way that’s going to get you that next date.”

Applying Burke’s Accountability Triangle. In the states that were studied, representatives of higher education administration, the executive branch, and the legislative branch were asked to discuss their state’s experience in balancing the

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various demands on higher education from the perspective of state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. Their responses then were classified broadly in order to convey the policymakers' general view of accountability.

In Tennessee, a higher education administrator shared the story of setting up a new merit-based scholarship funded by the state lottery. As part of the policy discussions about this scholarship, legislators seemed to become more focused on academic concerns such as graduation rates, the state's priorities that called for more students to be enrolled in college, and the market forces that demanded a highly educated workforce. That experience with the scholarship gave this administrator some hope that Tennessee higher education was moving toward the center of the Accountability Triangle. The executive branch respondent in Tennessee believed that market forces and state priorities were of equal weight in that state's accountability efforts, with academic concerns the least important of the three. The legislative official's view was that Tennessee had not yet effectively connected the corners of the Accountability Triangle, and so the process of constructing it was still under way.

In Minnesota, both higher education and executive branch representatives felt that market forces were in play to a much greater degree than in other states. While acknowledging an awareness of all three competing demands on higher education, the legislative official did not identify where exactly Minnesota's accountability processes fell on the triangle. This respondent believed there was an inherent tension or interplay among state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. For example, if the marketplace demanded that higher education quickly respond to create a new program to supply skilled workers, it might conflict with academic concerns to maintain other

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programs. This person indicated that market forces were becoming a critical issue for the state, but was not convinced that public higher education had been nimble enough in its response to marketplace demands.

South Dakota's policymakers seemed to believe their state was fairly close to the center of the Accountability Triangle. The higher education official thought higher education was doing a pretty good job in responding to state priorities and market forces and a fair job at addressing academic concerns. Both the executive and legislative branch respondents placed South Dakota accountability efforts near the center of the triangle.

Table 4 provides a summary of how policymakers placed their state's accountability processes on Burke's Accountability Triangle.

Table 4

Policymakers' Placement of Accountability Processes in Selected States on Burke's Accountability Triangle

Policy Sector	Tennessee	Minnesota	South Dakota
Higher Education	Moving to Balanced Market		Political/Market
Executive Branch	Market/Political	Market	Balanced at Center
Legislative Branch	Triangle Incomplete Undecided		Balanced at Center

Conclusions

This comparative case study was delimited in several respects. It was restricted to three states and to selected subjects who were questioned using a semi-standardized interview protocol. This study's focus also was delimited to state-level public higher education systems. This study could be expanded to include an analysis of more states and a more extensive exploration of state governments' experiences in developing accountability relationships with higher education. Surveys and focus groups could be utilized to probe for more detailed information on policymakers' perceptions of accountability.

Policymakers strongly endorse the concept of accountability, if the state officials interviewed for this study are any indication. There is little doubt in this researcher's mind that accountability will remain an important public policy issue for years to come. Therefore, it seems counterproductive to argue over what accountability should not be about. Rather, it benefits everyone involved if we regard accountability as higher education's manner of responding to the public interest, while meeting the most pressing needs of a state and its citizens. When we keep that goal uppermost in mind, public higher education is well served by positioning itself to be open, responsive, and approachable.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

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A Comparative Case Study of the Accountability Relationship Between Higher Education and State Governments in Three States

An Interview Protocol

Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine state-level policymakers' perceptions of the higher education accountability process in three selected states and the mechanisms those states use to answer for higher education performance and the use of public funds. The research will focus on the perspectives of three key players in the public policy environment: administrators of state higher education governing or coordinating boards, the governor's office, and the legislature.

The researcher has received permission from the state higher education executive officers in the three states to conduct a case study of higher education accountability processes in their respective states. To accomplish this study, the researcher will visit and interview representatives of the three public policy domains in each state. This interview protocol is developed as a description of and guide to the interviews necessary to complete the research.

The Interviews

In each state, the researcher will interview at least three individuals. Those individuals will include the state higher education executive officer; a representative of the executive branch, such as a governor's higher education policy or budget official; and a representative of the legislative branch, such as a legislator who serves on an education standing committee or a legislative policy aide.

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A semi-structured interview approach will be used to ensure that comparable information is gathered from each state, while also allowing the questioning to follow from what the participant is saying (Seidman, 2006). Each interview will last between one and two hours. The following protocol will be followed for each interview:

1. What is accountability in public higher education? How do you define it?
2. What type of accountability mechanisms currently exist in your state's public higher education system?
 - Which of the mechanisms, if any, are designed to answer for higher education's performance?
 - Which of the mechanisms, if any, are designed to account for the use of public funds?
3. To what extent do you think your state has a formal system of higher education accountability? How long has it been around and has it changed?
4. Do you consider higher education accountability processes in your state to be regulatory and proscriptive, loosely structured, or something else?
5. Who is public higher education accountable to in your state?
6. Have accountability processes resulted in your state and its higher education system becoming partners, adversaries, or something in between?
7. What has been your state's experience in balancing the various demands on public higher education, such as state priorities, academic concerns, or market forces?
8. Where do you see the higher education accountability movement going in the future?