OUTCOMES-BASED FUNDING AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines the key aspects of stakeholder engagement that can strengthen the design, implementation and sustainability of outcomes-based funding[1] policies. We seek to help policymakers understand the prevailing starting-point attitudes of institutional stakeholders, primarily college and university administrators, faculty and staff, and the importance of engaging them throughout the policy process. In addition, we recommend specific strategies for effectively engaging these stakeholders based on our work in multiple states and leading research in the field.

Background

Public Agenda's mission is to help diverse leaders and citizens navigate complex and divisive issues and work together to find solutions. In our higher education work, we focus on accelerating progress, improving the quality of decision-making and navigating the human side of change. We do this through attitude research, stakeholder engagement and partnerships. Here, we have drawn on our research and the research of others to describe institutional stakeholder starting-point attitudes on outcomes-based funding and to suggest strategies for effectively engaging these stakeholders, primarily college and university administrators, faculty and staff, in the policy process. These institutional stakeholders are important because they are critical for successful implementation and for sustainability of outcomes-based funding policies.

This paper is based on data collected from more than 60 focus groups, a statewide exploratory faculty, staff and administrator survey, interviews with outcomes-based funding experts and a review of outcomes-based funding policy research. Public Agenda has heard from more than 1,000 college and university faculty and administrators about outcomes-based funding at dozens of campuses in three states. We have heard from part-time, full-time, tenure-track and adjunct faculty from nearly all disciplines. We have conducted in-depth, one-on-one and small-group conversations with many institutional leaders, including department chairs, deans, provosts and presidents. We have visited large, multi-campus universities and small, urban and rural community colleges, four-year regional colleges and state flagship research universities.

[1]*"Performance funding" refers to a broad set of policies linking allocation of resources to accomplishment of certain desired objectives. Historically, postsecondary performance funding models were often add-ons or bonuses to base institutional allocations that institutions earned for meeting various goals or benchmarks. Additionally, many of these earlier models included measures focused more on inputs or processes than student progression and outcomes and were not intended to drive increased student completion. Today's outcomes-based funding models similarly seek to motivate and reward progress toward a set of stated goals, but have a direct link to the state's higher-education attainment needs and place primary emphasis on student completion and on narrowing attainment gaps across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, though they often include measures beyond student progression and completion. Advanced outcomes-based funding models also determine how a significant portion of the state's general budget allocation to institutions is determined.*

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement proceeds from people's starting-point attitudes and works to mend the splits and disconnects among stakeholders enough to make progress on a particular policy issue. Sometimes these disconnects are the result of inadequate information or simple misunderstandings. Other times, disagreements stem from a fundamental clash of values and philosophical perspectives. Sometimes stakeholders essentially agree on the definition of the problem and perhaps even the general approach to a solution, but disagree over the details of implementation. Stakeholder engagement strategies help decision-makers better understand the source of the gaps between stakeholders. This understanding allows for the design and implementation of effective and sustainable policy that best meets the needs and interests of the people it is meant to serve.

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Stakeholder engagement strengthens and accelerates the design and implementation of solutions to complex and controversial issues in at least two important ways:

1. By harnessing stakeholder experience and creativity during initial design and mid-course reassessments; and

2. By ensuring the legitimacy of policy decisions.

Incorporating the knowledge, experience, creativity and passions of stakeholders improves the quality of policy decisions and makes it more likely that policies will anticipate and account for unintended consequences. Diverse engagement informs the micro-decisions, practices and communications that are the lifeblood of implementation. Robust engagement also increases the number and types of people who understand and have had a real voice in setting the policy, which helps to establish its legitimacy. This, in turn, increases the number of people who have ownership in a positive outcome and who are therefore willing to help implement the decision. Robust stakeholder engagement thus improves the likelihood that the policy will be implemented consistent with the original policy goals and minimizes the possibilities of policy subversion and sabotage.

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Starting-Point Attitudes

The stakeholders, within and outside the institutions, we heard from are nearly unanimous in their concern that most higher education institutions need to be more effective in fostering student success, especially in a changing student population characterized by uneven preparation and significant life challenges. Among all groups of stakeholders, we found general (though certainly not complete)

agreement that, if "done right," outcomes-based funding could be very good for students, institutions and states. There are certainly some concerns, some of which we discuss below, that the policy might not be done right and would then result in unintended and pernicious consequences, but the idea of creating incentives for student success and completion through funding carries a logic that many people can understand, especially in light of the incentives already built into traditional funding approaches. Moreover, many college faculty, staff and administrators are genuinely interested in being part of discussions about metrics that would effectively measure student learning, be difficult to "game" and might truly spur institutions to improve student outcomes. In other words, if policymakers do a good job building on and solidifying the general sense that outcomes-based funding might be beneficial, and if they do not make major mistakes around communications and implementation, then outcomes-based funding is a promising approach. Frankly and effectively facing institutional stakeholder engagement and other challenges associated with successful implementation is therefore critical to realizing the promise of outcomes-based funding.

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The design of effective institutional stakeholder engagement strategies requires an understanding of existing attitudes, including areas of agreement that can be leveraged and areas of disagreement or concern that will require attention. Across the board, college administrators, faculty and staff are genuinely interested in the welfare and success of students. They agree that a higher education credential improves the employability of students and that an accelerated time to completion minimizes tuition costs and student debt. These stakeholders agree that students who have degrees are better off than those who do not and that higher education provides transformative opportunities for people, especially underserved populations. Most institutional stakeholders agree that our national economy requires an educated workforce, and they have a shared sense of the importance of helping disadvantaged students to achieve their higher education goals. To these people, the idea that funding policies should align with such goals and values makes sense.

We also found areas where institutional stakeholders have concerns about outcomes-based funding. For example, even those who are most convinced of its benefits are often concerned that the policy

could have unintended negative consequences for students and states. Some of the unintended effects most cited include lower academic standards, restricted student access among less-selective or open-enrollment institutions, and the elimination of programs that take longer to complete, such as science, technology, engineering and math programs. In the states we visited, many of these stakeholders worry that policymakers are not sufficiently considering the obstacles and the potential for unintended negative consequences of outcomes-based funding in its current form. Understanding such concerns early on and responding to them thoughtfully can make all the difference in being able to engage people in productive ways that keep the policy process moving forward.

We believe that policymakers and institutional leaders have a tremendous opportunity to harness the energy and creativity of campus stakeholders as they consider outcomes-based funding policy design, develop metrics and funding allocation models and implement new programs and practices that improve student outcomes. In hopes that these opportunities will be seized, we recommend that advocates of outcomes-based funding resist the temptation to minimize the anxiety, confusion and legitimate concerns we have heard from educators. Fears about resistance and pushback, tight timeframes and political pressures often conspire to discourage decision-makers from pursuing the kind of engagement (e.g., early, often and broad) that is most likely to lead to long-term success. We therefore urge policymakers and institutional leaders to commit to frequent, consistent and honest communication with institutional stakeholders, engaging them as active partners in the creation and implementation of high-caliber, outcomes-based funding policies, metrics and programs. Such engagement is critical for the long-term success and sustainability. The framework below can help policy leaders develop a sound strategy for this work.

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A Framework for Engagement

Large-scale, complex change such as outcomes-based funding requires institutional stakeholder engagement at all three stages of policy-making—state goal setting, metrics design, and institutional program design and implementation. As part of the goal-setting stage, governors and state legislatures typically establish the state's higher education goals and funding requirements (e.g., student access and student completion). Next, as part of the metrics design stage, higher education commissions and state boards of regents select the specific metrics that will best measure progress toward state goals (e.g., the number of degrees produced or student progression toward degrees) and the allocation methods that distribute state funding across the institutions. Finally, as part of the program-design stage, universities and

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colleges design the institution-level program and practice reforms that will actually meet state goals (e.g., developmental education redesign, structured pathways to degree completion, and intensive advising).

Prioritizing Institutional Stakeholders

Many stakeholder groups and individual stakeholders hold knowledge and experience that can improve decisions at each of the policy stages, and their understanding and acceptance of policy decisions is vital for successful policy implementation. However, given real-world constraints, it makes sense for decision-makers to prioritize which institutional stakeholders to engage with at each policy stage.

When prioritizing the stakeholder groups for engagement, it is important to consider three criteria: those groups who are most affected by a policy, those who may have useful insights into the policy, and those who are critical to the policy's successful implementation and sustainability. Many institutional stakeholders will meet more than one of these criteria (faculty, for instance), and some will only meet one. For example, at the goal-setting stage, state commissions and boards of regents may have useful insights into the ways that higher education fits into the context of the state's social, economic and workforce development priorities and goals. At the metrics-design stage, financial officers at higher education institutions can contribute to discussions around the different fiscal implications of particular metrics on flagship and regional universities and community colleges. At the stage of program design and implementation, front-line faculty and staff are most aware of the general barriers to and opportunities for student success; and they often have the most creative and practical ideas for effectively seizing opportunities and overcoming barriers in ways that will not result in negative consequences.

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When prioritizing individuals *within* stakeholder groups, we recommend that decision-makers think beyond the "usual suspects"—people who tend to volunteer or who have the loudest voices. Such people should not be excluded, but they can dominate and thereby limit engagement efforts if not balanced by other voices. Rather, we recommend that engagement efforts include special outreach to three groups of people: stakeholder leaders, average stakeholders and thoughtful skeptics. Stakeholder leaders are those individuals who can sway others and who know where the change levers are. Stakeholder groups trust these leaders to represent their perspectives, concerns and ideas. Average stakeholders can help decision-makers better understand the viewpoints of most people. Finally, thoughtful skeptics are those people who struggle openly and honestly with the issues but who are by no means champions of outcomes-based funding. Thoughtful skeptics carefully weigh the pros, cons and trade-offs of outcomes-based funding. Their considered judgment helps to design more effective policy that resonates with the stakeholder group more generally.

We cannot offer a magic answer to the question, "How much engagement is enough?" However, when thinking about the scope of engagement efforts, we can offer policymakers two questions that might provide some guidance:

- Have the engagement efforts hit the point of diminishing returns as far as learning and gaining insights to improve the policy?

- Have the engagement efforts reached the point where most people involved would judge that enough people have been authentically engaged to legitimize the policy outcome?

Strategies for Engaging Institutional Stakeholders

To authentically engage institutional stakeholders, decision-makers can employ a combination of four approaches: listen and consider; communicate and inform; provide opportunities for dialogue and deliberation; and support collaborative learning. We recommend that decision-makers begin their engagement strategy by listening to and assessing stakeholders' starting-point attitudes. Only then can decision-makers design an effective engagement strategy that meets stakeholders where they are. Likewise, throughout the policy process, it is important for decision-makers to listen to stakeholders and learn from their knowledge, experience and evolving judgment. Next, it is important for decision-makers to provide regular, clear and consistent information to stakeholders about the decision-making process and their policy goals. Based on their assessment of stakeholders' starting-point attitudes, these messages ought to acknowledge and address stakeholder perspectives, both positive and negative. Stakeholders are unlikely to support or advance the implementation of institutional change unless they are aware of the change and are convinced that it will benefit their organization. Furthermore, without deliberation, stakeholders will be stuck in their starting-point attitudes without an opportunity to refine their judgment. Finally, engagement strategies ought to help build the capacity of stakeholders to collaboratively and continuously measure progress and quickly respond to program success and failure.

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Listen and Consider

We encourage policymakers to enlist the support of on-the-ground institutional stakeholders to consider, discuss and participate in the design and implementation of outcomes-based funding policy. Decision-makers can solicit input from stakeholders in a variety of ways. At the most basic level, decision-makers can ask stakeholders to provide feedback on outcomes-based funding through email or websites. They can administer simple exploratory surveys to confidentially gather the

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perspectives of far-flung faculty and staff. Focus groups give decision-makers insights into the values, concerns, opinions and ideas held by individual stakeholder types. Decision-makers can also invite key stakeholder group representatives to join workshops and task forces, which provide an immediate opportunity to hear input.

For example, in Washington, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges formed a task force with broad representation from across the system to develop its student achievement metrics. This task force developed student outcomes measures that addressed possible disincentives for colleges to serve underprepared students. In Indiana, the state commissioner of higher education worked with institutional presidents. And in Ohio, the Board of Regents' vice chancellor of finance worked with the chief financial officers at each institution to revise and refine metrics and funding formulas to address institutional concerns about possible negative consequences.

Again, we recommend extending this engagement beyond senior institutional administrators to front-line faculty and staff representatives who are most aware of the barriers to student success and the opportunities for reform. State university systems have a huge resource in the capable, intelligent people who teach at their colleges and universities, including statisticians and business theorists who are experts in the design of metrics that reward desired behaviors.

We also recommend that policymakers take the time to meaningfully follow up with institutional actors. This includes acknowledging the specific input that stakeholders have given and providing explanations for decisions that policymakers have made. Without thoughtful and meaningful follow-up, stakeholders are left feeling that their input has been disregarded and that their time has been wasted. Instead, acknowledge their concerns and work with stakeholders to address unintended negative consequences, as well as any obstacles to success and the substantial resources required to switch focus from increased enrollment to accelerated completion. People can live with decisions they do not like, but they cannot abide feeling manipulated or ignored.

Communicate and Inform

Advocates for outcomes-based funding should clearly articulate the policy's goals and tie the creation of metrics explicitly to these goals. Messages ought to be designed to reach stakeholders from their starting-point attitudes and from shared values and goals. Complement clear and transparent communication with honest recognition of what is difficult, complicated or unknown. Insufficient communication is likely to increase institutional stakeholder fears, feed the rumor mill, escalate tensions and slow the pace of problem solving and implementation. During uncertain times and complex change, advocates must make a concerted effort to communicate with institutional stake-holders at all levels.

To address this issue, policymakers in Washington and Indiana employed communications strategies including campus site visits, news releases, video promotions and television messages to inform institutional stakeholders about the details and goals of their outcomes-based funding policies. Washington's task force of institutional representatives developed student progression metrics tied back directly to the shared goals of educators and policymakers. Ohio also made its case for outcomes-based funding, but only focused its efforts on institutional presidents and boards of trustees.

We recommend communicating beyond senior administrators to faculty and middle-level administrators. Communications that start at the system level and feed through institutional

presidents to vice presidents to department chairs and finally to faculty are bound to become degraded and confused—especially if individuals along the communication chain do not fully support the message. Unless a majority of stakeholders are familiar with the underlying goals and strategies of outcomes-based funding, the systemic change required to improve student outcomes is unlikely.

Insufficient channels and practices of communication are particularly problematic. Information posted on websites can only be discovered if institutional stakeholders are aware of and can find the web page. Long, technical and text-heavy reports and web pages are not likely to be read by busy faculty and staff. Emails with cryptic subject lines are not likely to be opened from cluttered inboxes. Poorly designed meetings without tangible outcomes and naïve assumptions about how communication works (such as "But we sent the email; they should have read it") can leave stakeholders frustrated and angry.

We advise using multiple channels to disseminate information and to publicize opportunities for input. Policymakers should:

- Publicly share a plan for institutional engagement activities that will take place as metrics are developed and implementation planned.

- Provide regular updates to the broader community about the work of outcomes-based funding via a website and within existing meeting structures.

- Distribute to institutions a "frequently asked questions" document on outcomes-based funding. Design the document with the likely questions and concerns of institutional actors in mind, while encouraging them to add their own questions, thoughts and ideas through an online forum. Such resources can be a quick and accessible way to alleviate anxiety brought about by miscommunication.

- Share resources such as national examples and research on outcomes-based funding as a way to fuel constructive dialogue. Keep in mind that stakeholders are particularly receptive to research from academic sources that are already widely trusted (e.g., the Community College Research Center).

- Convene well-designed open forums. Consider bringing in respected researchers and role equivalents from other states to share information and serve as dialogue partners. Researchers can speak to the problems of enrollment-based funding, including the costs to students and taxpayers of the current low completion rates. Faculty and staff from other states can speak to the kinds of reforms they have embraced to protect quality while improving completion rates.

Outcomes-based funding can only be successful if a critical mass of institutional stakeholders are aware of the policy and solidly understand and accept its structure and goals. Without this knowledge and agreement, stakeholders who have day-to-day interactions with students will be less effective in advancing the goals of the policy. Moving beyond the implicit argument that financial inducements stimulate changes in institutional

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behavior and student outcomes, outcomes-based funding advocates need to constantly connect the policy's goals and strategies with the reasons why meeting those goals matters for students, for their families and for citizens, as well as illustrate the ways in which colleges are falling short. Communicating and providing information can help bring this about, particularly if coupled with the other forms of engagement.

Provide Opportunities for Dialogue and Deliberation

We recommend both large- and small-group opportunities for institutional stakeholders to discuss outcomes-based funding. Frame issues for deliberation and design processes with care, providing institutional stakeholders with authentic opportunities to deliberate about the pros, cons and unknowns of various approaches to metrics and their implementation. Without structured and authentic opportunities for deliberation, stakeholders, who tend to participate in echo-chamber conversations, cannot hear and work through the various counter-arguments. While policymakers may be wary of "opening a can of worms" by engaging institutional groups (particularly faculty and academic staff) in a deep way, unwillingness to do so will certainly lead to an unnecessarily painful process and may well result in stalled efforts or failure.

Without opportunities for deliberation, institutional stakeholders are less likely to hear competing arguments, to weigh trade-offs and to understand the political and economic realities that are driving outcomes-based funding policies around the country. Front-line stakeholders are most aware of the barriers to student success and often have the most effective ideas for overcoming those barriers in ways that will not result in negative consequences. Colleges must "catalyze the concerted action of the faculty, which in turn requires that faculty understand and accept performance funding" (Dougherty and Reddy, 2013).

Even amid deep concerns about the effects that outcomes-based funding may have on institutions, once people are given a real chance to consider and work through the issues, their conversations are characterized by high levels of thoughtfulness and a general eagerness to find solutions that benefit students. The most constructive moments of such conversations occur when faculty are talking and thinking aloud about opportunities presented by outcomes-based funding. In these moments, people are remarkably positive, creative and full of interesting ideas. Many acknowledge that even in the absence of definitive evidence of its ultimate value, outcomes-based funding may create the conditions for new kinds of conversation, collaboration and alignment of student success efforts that faculty value and desire.

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Support Collaborative Learning

Those institutions that are most successful at creating a culture of inquiry and evidence will be those that excel at generating a long-term commitment to outcomes-based funding predicated on widespread confidence that resources and priorities are effectively aligned. This notion is more than simply communicating effectively and extends significantly beyond the mere issue of "buy-in." It is a

matter of building the capacity of institutions to become collaborative learning environments capable of driving and sustaining evidence-informed change on behalf of improved outcomes for students.

Capacity-building and institutional engagement efforts are critical for the success of outcomes-based funding. Engagement does not mean just internal communications processes; it means active engagement in organizational learning—answering questions like, "How do we go about responding?" "How do we think about this collectively?" "How do we address our concerns in a constructive way?" (Dougherty, 2014)

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Higher education institutions have been structured and had incentives created around enrollment for a long time. Successful implementation of outcomes-based funding will require that colleges and universities are able to perform the difficult work of analyzing their performance in new ways, identifying weaknesses, crafting solutions and evaluating improvements. In order to authentically advance the goals of outcomes-based funding, institutions will need to develop new institutional research practices to track student outcomes, new advising models and orientation programs to support student achievement, new developmental education programs to better assist less-prepared students, and new systems for tracking student progress to alert faculty and staff when students are in trouble. We recommend that, while informed by research, these new programs and processes be designed by institutional stakeholders, specifically faculty and student support staff, who best know their students, the barriers and motivations to their success, and their institutional context.

Particularly neglected in the current landscape are efforts to support the capacity of institutions to access, translate and use data around student outcomes in order to both understand their current strategies and where and how they should reallocate resources to improve outcomes. What kind of data need to be generated in order to understand whether or not progress is being made on key outcomes? Who needs to be able to understand and engage in collective inquiry about the meaning of the data generated? Do the skills exist within various units to develop a culture of evidence, inquiry and commitment? These are the kinds of questions that need to be asked and answered, and returned to again and again, for institutions to successfully implement outcomes-based funding and ward against unintended negative consequences. The ability and opportunity to generate, analyze, translate and use data and information about student outcomes are critical to the implementation of high-caliber metrics, and the people and processes involved in this require cultivation and support.

According to Dougherty (2013), states are understandably leery of encroaching on institutional prerogatives, so they have not thought through the change processes and resources required to help institutions implement necessary reforms. Researchers have found that policymakers have not fully anticipated or made plans to address the considerable unreimbursed costs to colleges to comply with outcomes-based funding demands. One state legislator argued:

"It's just like any other business — we don't think that we need to give them money to, for example, come up with a plan to do what they ought to already be doing. And so we know they're spending their time trying to develop some kind of a model of how they want all this education process at their institutions to work, so we're just assuming that they're refocusing their mission statements and their goals and objectives so that they can come in compliance with this." (Dougherty et al, 2013; 23)

When it comes to capacity building, Tennessee—with its long history of consultation between the states and institutions—is a great example of how to do this work well. For example, prior to the implementation of its 2010 outcomes-based funding program, Tennessee's Higher Education Commission proposed a planning year. As part of that program, the state conducted a policy audit to better understand the existing barriers to retention and completion and to identify priorities for reform. In 2010, the commission supported "College Completion Academies," two-day conferences at which the commission communicated its goals for outcomes-based funding policy to institutional representatives. Attendees learned about the best practices for improving degree production and retention rates from experts on student success strategies such as remedial instruction and advising.

The state of Washington is also a leader when it comes to supporting the institutional capacity needed for institutions to engage stakeholders in the development and implementation of the new programs and practices that will improve student outcomes. Prior to full implementation of outcomes-based funding, Washington designated a "learning year" and provided approximately $50,000 to each college. During the learning year, colleges were able to better understand outcomes-based funding policy, practice using the new data, and begin developing the reforms necessary to improve student success in an environment with lower financial stakes. The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges provides colleges with technical assistance and student success data to help them track their gains in student success and to identify areas of weakness and opportunities for improvement. The state has used research to help colleges to understand the key barriers to student success and the student achievements that provide the momentum for completion.

Conclusions

Policymakers, institutional leadership, faculty and staff all share the goal of student success. Done well, the design and implementation of outcomes-based funding is an excellent opportunity for these stakeholders to develop the partnerships necessary to advance student outcomes. We hope that policymakers will take the time and effort required to foster and nurture such partnerships. In the end, such engagement will foster ownership in policies and create a context for successful implementation and sustainability.

Author Bios

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