Coming Soon to a College Near You: Accountability

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A "new accountability era" is descending upon the heretofore resistant domain of higher education, according to a Feb. 9, 2006 *New York Times* story headlined, "Panel Explores Standard Tests for Colleges." The story describes the deliberations of a Bush-appointed commission considering imposition of standardized tests on college students. Ten days earlier, the *Boston Globe* reported that Massachusetts community colleges have a dismal three-year graduation rate of 16 percent. Last year, the Education Trust launched a website (www.collegeresults.org) devoted to reporting graduation rates at all U.S. colleges, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender and income.

An unstoppable movement is underway to impose more rigorous accountability on colleges and universities. This is not to suggest that higher education has been an accountability-free zone. There's already the annual accountability report on higher education called *Measuring Up* and "report cards" issued by publications such as *U.S. News and World Report.* But two features distinguish the new accountability movement: first, the focus will be more on educational outcomes (as measured by such indicators as standardized tests and persistence in graduation rates) and second, there will be significant consequences based on performance.

Astute observers have long predicted that this accountability movement, which has pervaded the world of K-12 education in the past decade-and-a-half would arrive at the doorstep of postsecondary education. For most policymakers in the K-12 world, strengthened accountability has become a precondition for funding increases. A similar political logic is now creeping into higher education funding debates. Any higher education institution seeking increased funding will have to accommodate the demands of the new accountability.

It is inevitable and unavoidable that the rigorous accountability of the kind applied to K-12 schools will now be applied to higher education. If the K-12 field's overemphasis on testing is to be avoided, leaders will need to embrace the new accountability movement and help shape it. Those who resist it will suffer its imposition upon them.

What are some of the implications of this accountability movement for postsecondary education?

Clarify mission. Higher education in general and specific institutions will be challenged to clarify their vision, mission and strategies for educating young people. These stated plans will need to be more than the lofty marketing pronouncements of college catalogs. Rather, they will be *binding* descriptions of institutional intent against which educators will be held accountable. The problem in K-12, prior to the recent systemic reforms, was that schools were multi-purpose institutions with such "mission creep" that they sought to accomplish "everything" necessary for a child's well-being, but were accountable for nothing. If community colleges are multi-purpose institutions but their national graduation rate is just 25 percent, then what's their mission? For what are they willing to be held accountable?

This will be a major shift from the current "black box" culture of many postsecondary institutions where what goes on within the institution is a mystery to the public, and performance results are seldom discussed.

Set standards and clarify expectations. Once the mission is clear, standards can be developed in an inclusive process to reflect each institution's aspirations for what its students should know and be able to do as a result of the education they will be receiving. These standards will more clearly define their respective institutions, help to guide the work of the faculty, shape the development of performance indicators and assessment mechanisms and send signals to students about what is expected. The key question of the new accountability movement is: *What specifically should students know and be able to do as a result of their education?*

As for student expectations, parents and educators have done a good job encouraging most youngsters to consider college. Nearly nine in 10 eighth-graders (including eight in 10 African-American and Latino eighth-graders) intend to attend some form of postsecondary education, according to Stanford University's Bridge Project. After all, future jobs will require postsecondary education and the economic value of a college degree is increasing. However, schools and colleges have not done a good job at setting expectations for what kind of educational preparation students will need to be successful in college. Policymakers need to develop social

marketing messages and programs to improve college preparation, but they also should require closer collaboration, data sharing and curricular alignment between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions.

Colleges will also have to do a better job establishing standards and expectations, and unabashedly aligning them with the entry-level requirements in the world of work. This does not mean that college is only about career preparation. Indeed, more and more employers are demanding general skills and knowledge rather than vocationally specific training. Yet if our economy requires students better educated in math and science, then school and college leaders need to figure out how to bolster curriculum and instruction in these areas so the economy will thrive and students will be prepared for the remunerative jobs of the future.

Usher in transparency. The accountability era will require unprecedented transparency in higher education. The ratings exercises of *U.S. News and World Report* and similar publications relate to inputs and processes. The new coin of the realm is "outcomes." Once performance indicators are set and assessments conducted, the public will demand to know the results. This will be a major shift from the current "black box" culture of many postsecondary institutions where what goes on within the institution is a mystery to the public, and performance results are seldom discussed. Strong leadership and a new infrastructure will be required to usher in practices that support full transparency.

Close equity and achievement gaps. The coming of more rigorous accountability has already begun to yield disturbing data on indicators like students' need for remediation upon entering college (53 percent of college students need remediation, according to Washington, D.C.-based Achieve Inc.) and the widely varying levels of college completion (just 60 percent of whites and 41 percent of African-Americans who enroll at four-year colleges actually earn degrees within six years, according to The Education Trust). If there is a significant difference between males and females in college entrance rates, then both secondary school and college leaders must address this issue. Likewise, on remediation. The college completion rates overall and the gaps between groups will require urgent action by college officials.

Build instructional capacity. One logical consequence of increased accountability is that postsecondary institutions, like elementary and secondary schools, will ultimately need to respond to disappointing educational performance data by conducting a deep analysis of the quality of their curricula and instruction, then taking deliberate action to improve both. This will require unaccustomed systemic action rather than leaving curriculum and instruction up to each faculty member or fragmented departments to determine. Data on student performance drives the new accountability. Educators need to have incentives, training and support to gather, analyze and act on student learning data in order to improve instruction.

The only way to meet standards and the growing student and societal expectations for improved postsecondary performance is to systematically build the capacity of educators to excel at their "core business" of teaching. This kind of shift in focus to teaching will represent a major change in priorities for some institutions.

It took elementary and secondary reformers too long to realize that accountability alone was insufficient to improve performance. As my Harvard Graduate School of Education colleague Richard Elmore has said about accountability, "For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation."

K-12 reformers failed to perceive the importance of capacity-building as an essential ingredient in the early stages of standards-based reform. Now, more than a decade-and-a-half from the inception of K-12 systemic reform, that movement is sharply focused on creating the structure and support necessary to improve curriculum and instruction. Postsecondary institutions would do well to learn from this experience.

The new accountability will have significant consequences for postsecondary institutions, probably in direct proportion to the amount of public funding they rely upon. Institutions will certainly feel financial consequences in relation to performance. But in instances of underperformance, they are likely to see other constraints on their freedom to operate as well.

Leadership will make all the difference in responding to the new accountability movement. Accountability can be a threatening external intrusion that, poorly managed, subverts educational values, diverts institutional energy and depletes morale. Properly managed, accountability becomes a rare opportunity to clarify institutional mission, to focus strategies and to improve performance, morale and recognition. In addition, such success ultimately translate to public confidence and a prosperous "bottom line."

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