

# Quality, Accountability and Action

By Linda Baer

The times are changing for higher education in dramatic ways, at warp speed. What will institutions need to do to move boldly in this changing environment? It could be argued that leaders will need to create the capacity and environment to move while preserving the values and core missions that make their institutions strong. Leadership will confront determinations about what made institutions strong in the past versus what will make them strong in the future. Strength in terms of articulating the value their institutions provide students, communities, and society as well as strength in terms of sustainability in a dynamic environment. Leadership must identify future trends and needs, lead change agendas, invest in what makes a difference, and remain authentic and courageous.<sup>1</sup>

To begin, what has changed?

The Society for College and University Planning regularly posts *Trends to Watch in Higher Education*, an environmental scan of the forces at play related to demographics, economics, environment, global changes, technology, learning and politics. Today's changes are more powerful than ever, including intense competition among traditional institutions, expansion of for-profit institutions, technological advances, globalization of colleges and universities, and demands for accountability and return on investment.

Here are four key changes—Demographics, Expectations, Economics, and Technology (DEET)—of which leaders and facilitators of change must be aware.<sup>2</sup>

## Demographics

People of all backgrounds continue to seek educational opportunities to improve their lives, making the population of students attending college more diverse than ever. “The profile of today’s college-going population looks much different than it did decades ago, when the average student was a fresh-faced 18-year-old moving directly from high school to campus. Students today are older, more experienced in work, and more socioeconomically and racially diverse than their peers of decades past.”<sup>3</sup>

Over fifty years, educational opportunity has increased in American higher education. Thirty-one percent of those 25 and older hold a bachelor’s degree – two and a half times the rate in 1970.<sup>4</sup> Yet there have been stagnant or falling completion rates over the past decades.<sup>5</sup>

The profile of students is changing. Currently, American higher education enrolls 17.6 million undergraduates. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that just fifteen percent attend four-year colleges and live on campus. Forty-three percent attend two-year institutions; 37 percent of undergraduates are enrolled part-time and 32 percent work full-time. Of those students enrolled in four-year institutions, just 36 percent actually graduate in four years.

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<sup>1</sup> Baer, Linda and Ann Hill Duin, Deborah Bushway. Change Agent Leadership. Planning for Higher Education.V.xxNx. April-June, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pp

<sup>3</sup> Merisotis, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Frey and Parker, 2012

<sup>5</sup> Bound, et al, 2007

The most significant shift is probably the massive growth in the adult student population in post-secondary education. Thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in are over the age of 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another 23 percent by 2019.<sup>6</sup>

Far more people seek educational opportunities, and in general they are less prepared than earlier generations. Students are far more diverse including adult learners, veterans, and students of diverse ethnic backgrounds. While enrollments have grown during the past decades, the persistence and completion rates have changed little during the past 30 years. Dismal completion record is not acceptable; stakeholders demand greater student success.

### **Expectations**

At one time in higher education, the outcome of the student was assumed to be nearly exclusively derived from his or her talent, effort and persistence. Today, students are no longer expected to succeed or fail based only on their own merits. Institutions must invest in student and academic support systems to improve student success. Expectations of accountability, transparency, and integrity of outcomes are now the norm. The change is away from an emphasis on open access to colleges and universities and toward unconditional expectations of student success. The expectation includes institutional demonstration of a strong understanding and application of appropriate metrics, leading to actions that empower student success.

However, no strong consensus exists between social scientists, institutional effectiveness experts and public policy entrepreneurs regarding appropriate ways to measure and evaluate post-secondary education. Many in the higher education rankings business favor metrics that do not focus on teaching and learning. In a CHEA presentation in early 2015 based on a publication on World University Rankings 2014-2015 methodology, an international publisher presented the following five areas as performance indicators:

- Teaching: the learning environment (worth 30% of the overall ranking score)
- Research: volume, income and reputation (worth 30%)
- Citations: research influence (worth 30%)
- Industry income: innovation (worth 2.5%)
- International outlook: staff, students and research (worth 7.5%)<sup>7</sup>

Not a single factor applied to learning outcomes, such as retention and persistence; completion, graduation, placement, pass rates for licensure exams, cumulative GPA, graduate satisfaction rates, employer satisfaction rates, comprehensive portfolio review, or satisfactory completion of externships. (Times Higher Education 2015.)

### **Economics**

The fundamentals around how students pay for education amid rising costs have changed. This has resulted in a shift from grants to loans and from state support for a majority of the cost to student tuition. The current economic times coupled with current higher education business models do not support student access, affordability, or success in a sustainable manner. Moreover, current models are incapable of supporting or sustaining institutions in the long term.

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<sup>6</sup> Hess, 2011

<sup>7</sup> World University Rankings 2014-2015

## Technology

The need to support academic technology continues to rise. *The Horizon Report for Higher Education 2014*<sup>8</sup> lists six key trends to attend to as part of developing future-sustainable strategies:

- Growing ubiquity of social media
- Integration of on-line, hybrid, and collaborative learning
- Rise of data-driven learning and assessment
- Shift from students as consumers to students as creators
- Agile approaches to change
- Evolution of online learning

While technological communities resonate with these trends, within our institutions, academic technology is expected to play a major role in support of access, affordability, student success and institutional sustainability. Robust data warehouses empowered by data mining and analytical tools are critical within this rapidly changing environment. If performance metrics are to be identified, targeted, measured and most importantly, analyzed to improve the higher education learning environment, then major attention must be devoted to institutional data, research and analysis.

Norris et al. emphasize in *Transforming in an Age of Disruptive Change*: “We are starting to face multiple combinations of challenges. In previous decades, these challenges occurred singly and independently. If the multiple-challenge trend continues, then higher education could face a new ‘perfect storm’; declining authority, unfavorable economics, new competition, and reduced career opportunities for new graduates.”<sup>9</sup> (Norris, 2013.)

Indeed, the “perfect storm” has come. Most institutions believed that these circumstances would pass and that they could return to “normal.” Yet there is no normal or going back. The “new normal” compels institutional leaders to change the way they approach students, learning and sustaining our institutions. It requires that leaders become agents for change and transformation.

To do so, most institutions have undergone some form of strategic planning or strategic positioning; however, the majority of these efforts have not resulted in transformative change (See Dolence & Norris, 1997<sup>10</sup>, Kanter, 2001<sup>11</sup>, Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence 1998<sup>12</sup>, Norris et al., 2013.<sup>13</sup>) Institutions continue to reorganize, restructure, reallocate, and retrench activities in response to ongoing shortfalls and changing learning demands. Such changes are incremental in nature and occur at the margins of the organization. Once again, they do not support or sustain student access, affordability, or success in large enough numbers, and they do not result in supporting and sustaining our institutions.

## Accountability

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<sup>8</sup> On the Horizon 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Norris et al 2013

<sup>10</sup> Dolence & Norris, 1997

<sup>11</sup> Kanter, 2001

<sup>12</sup> Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence 1998

<sup>13</sup> Norris et al 2013

Accountability is defined as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions.”<sup>14</sup>

Accountability imposes six demands on officials or their agents for government or public service organizations including colleges and universities.

1. Demonstrate that they have used their power and authority properly.
2. Show that they are working to achieve the mission or priorities set for their office or organization (such as meeting or exceeding accreditation standards).
3. Report to the public and the various stakeholders of their performance, for “power is opaque, accountability is public.” (The accreditation community state approval entities and the major funding source of post-secondary education, the U.S. Department of Education, have written standards and requirements regarding transparency and accountability.)
4. Efficiency and effectiveness require accounting for the resources used and the outcomes they create.
5. Ensure the quality of programs and services produced (the accreditation community has strong, explicit standards).
6. Serve the public need, as defined in the broader sense and in the more narrow sense as defined by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the Higher Education Act<sup>15</sup> (HEA; Burke 2).

For institutions to survive or even thrive in the era of “the new normal,” they must move boldly, guided by leaders who understand accountability, metrics and analytics. While many authoritative voices aspire to define quality through accountability and performance, it is most closely linked with the assessment of quality by private, independent and self-governed entities known as accrediting councils. However, deference to accreditation review of quality is becoming conditional and contingent; the momentum of demand for greater accountability is encountering the inertia of tried and true but sometimes opaque methods of accreditation.

“New normal” factors driving the demand for accountability include a strong focus on student success, reduced funding, rising costs and the push for more cost-effective solutions. Institutions are pressured to demonstrate return on investment made by learners for education and the subsequent outcomes gained in employment and careers. In addition, new models and structures of delivery have moved the dial on how we assess learning and student success.<sup>16</sup>

The array of higher education stakeholders demanding more accountability and more evidence of innovation and quality in higher education environments is broad and substantial. (Examples: White House College Scorecard, 2013 State of Union Address; The College Rating System – ED.Gov December 2014 (preliminary outline); proliferation of on-line college consumer information clearinghouses (GoRanku.com, etc) ; GAO 2014 Report to House Ranking Member of Education and Workforce Committee. (Summary in Appendix). Some of the entities hold a stake as providers of funding; others as protectors of consumers; and still others as policy makers or policy shapers, deliberately or unintentionally developing requirements that will advantage some organizations to the detriment of others in the same sector or industry.

In the case of funding sources, consider that among the Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2015, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) cited performance based funding as a high priority. States have been shifting from enrollment to Performance-Based Funding (PBF) for public colleges and universities during the last several years. The National Council of State Legislators (NCSL) reports that more than

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<sup>14</sup> Merriam-Webster 2003

<sup>15</sup> Burke, 2

<sup>16</sup> Schray, Vickie

half of the 50 states now have PBF in place, with wide variations in performance metrics applied and the amount of state funding distributed based on performance. After having PBF systems in place for several years, it may now be possible to see if they have served as catalysts for improving campus outcomes.<sup>17</sup> (Hurley, 2015.) But if campus-level outcomes are a function of performance at sub-campus levels, do PBF systems have the capacity to evaluate and award effectiveness at the program level, or even the individual course level? In terms of organizational hierarchy, it could be argued that quality and effectiveness at the individual course level beget effective programs, and effective programs are pre-cursors to quality institutions. Should performance-based funding models then favor effective courses and programs over ineffective ones?

### **Quest for Quality**

But what is quality in general, and in post-secondary education in particular? Is it primarily a function of inputs and outputs, keeping rules and reaching standards, fulfilling stakeholders' needs and expectations? Is quality about the education institution assuming accountability and through metrics, creating opportunities for people to become self-empowered through knowledge? In fact, to what extent does quality link to performance, competitiveness or excellence? What is the evidence showing that quality generates performance and that performance cannot be reached without applying quality concepts, principles, models, and eventually systems?

The five dimensions of quality as determined by Sandru are:

1. Quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards);
2. Quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects);
3. Quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications);
4. Quality as value for money, (efficiency and effectiveness); and
5. Quality as transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of customer satisfaction).<sup>18</sup>

Sandru concludes that the challenge is to decode the mechanism that makes these dimensions interact and stick together. In higher education, the evidence and measures of quality are closely tied to accountability and performance.

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<sup>17</sup> Hurley, 2015

<sup>18</sup> Sandru, Ioana Maria Diana. 2008. Dimensions of Quality in Higher Education: Some Insights into Quality-based Performance Measurement. Retrieved from the World Wide Web. May 12, 2015.



Decoding the connections may be the key to moving accountability from reporting to action and establishing an even more critical role in the formation and application of accreditation standards. The following is a chart that takes the Sandru performance measures and determines benchmarking activities with which to compare outcomes.

**Metrics of Quality**

<b>Exceptional Performance</b>	<b>Benchmarked against peers, aspirations, historical data, national data, other</b>
<b>Consistency and Transparency</b>	Activities result in similar results over time and over populations served; activities and outcomes reported openly
<b>Value</b>	Return on investment, outcomes expected for price, placement, gainful employment
<b>Fitness for Purpose</b>	Delivering on mission for stakeholders
<b>Transformative</b>	Flexibility, resilience, innovation, culture of change, business models that support transformative activities.

A resource produced by Linda Suskie<sup>19</sup> (2015) is an outstanding practical guide to assessment, accountability and accreditation. Suskie describes five dimensions of culture: relevance, community, focus and aspiration, evidence and betterment. Relevance reflects doing the right thing in meeting responsibilities, putting students first, knowing stakeholders needs, keeping promises and serving the public good. The culture of community begins with respect, communication, documentation and collaboration. Its foundation is supporting growth and development of expertise across the institution. It includes a respect for shared governance.

The culture of focus and aspiration claims the purpose of the institution that knows where it’s going and how it wants to get there. It is based on systematic evidence and collaboration with a clear understanding of targeted clientele. The culture of evidence is about how the institution gauges success: i.e, student success and student learning, economic development, responsiveness to the changing student population, contributions to the

<sup>19</sup> Suskie, Linda. 2015

common good, and achieving college purpose and goals. Finally, the culture of betterment is based on using evidence to ensure and advance quality and effectiveness.

The key to understanding these five dimensions is the interrelations between them:

*“A quality college not only ensures and advances all five cultures of quality but appropriately interrelates them. Regional accreditors are unanimous, for example, in believing that a quality college links goals, plans, evidence, and resource deployment decisions. Goals inform assessment strategies and resource allocations, while evidence informs goals, plans, and resource allocations. In other words, the culture of focus and aspiration (goals) affects the culture of evidence (assessment) and the culture of betterment (resource allocation). The culture of evidence, meanwhile, informs the culture of focus and aspiration (goals and plans) and the culture of betterment (resource allocation).”<sup>20</sup>*

### **Who Defines Quality? Why is it Important?**

For more than 100 years, accreditation has been the primary vehicle for defining and assuring quality in post-secondary and higher education in the U.S. “In this complex public-private system, recognized accreditation organizations develop quality standards and manage the process for determining whether institutions and programs meet these standards and can be formally accredited.”<sup>21</sup> Accrediting organizations play a key “gatekeeper” role because accreditation is used to determine whether higher education institutions and programs are eligible to receive the more than \$130 billion in federal and state grants and loans available in the current federal fiscal year, which serves to inform and protect consumers against fraud and abuse.

Shray continues with a focus on three major sets of questions and issues related to accreditation:

- Assuring performance. How can the accreditation system be held more accountable for assuring performance, including student-learner outcomes, in accredited institutions and programs?
- Open standards and processes. How can accreditation standards and processes be changed to be more open to and supportive of innovation and diversity in higher education including new types of educational institutions and new approaches for providing educational services such as distance learning?
- Consistency and transparency. How can accreditation standards and processes be made more consistent to support greater transparency and greater opportunities for credit transfer between accredited institutions?<sup>22</sup>

Shray concludes that “while the accreditation system has taken steps in recent years to address these issues, after almost 20 years of dialogue and debate, there is still no clear consensus on how to change accreditation to respond to these new demands.”<sup>23</sup>

The formation and application of quality assurance standards must be considered in the context of the two types of accreditation organizations – institutional and specialized or programmatic. Shray expands on the formal definitions.<sup>24</sup>

- Institutional Accreditation. National and regional institutional accreditors review entire institutions and assure the quality of more than 95% of all students enrolled in post-secondary education in the U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 31-32

<sup>21</sup> Shray, Vickie

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 3

National accreditors review colleges and schools throughout the country, while regional accreditors focus their efforts in prescribed geographic territories. National institutional accrediting agencies have quality assurance authority over more than 3,400 institutions: 35.9% are degree-granting; 64% are non-degree granting; 20.9% are non-profit and 79% are for-profit. Many are single-purpose institutions (e.g. information technology.) Of the 2,963 regionally accredited institutions, 97.4% are traditional, non-profit degree-granting colleges and universities. All institutional accreditors recognized by the U.S. Department of education serve as gatekeepers to Title IV – Federal Student Aid (FSA) participation.

- Specialized Accreditation. Specialized accrediting agencies operate throughout the country and review programs, departments, or schools in specific fields (e.g. business, law) that are parts of an institution. Some specialized accrediting organizations also accredit professional schools or other specialized or single purpose institutions. Some specialized accrediting agencies are state government agencies such as agencies responsible for regulating healthcare professions. There are 18,713 of these accredited programs and single purpose institutions. Many do not play the role of providing institutional access to FSA participation.<sup>25</sup>

### **Assuring Performance**

Many who are looking for more public accountability point to performance as best evidence of quality. But how to effectively measure performance? One key measure is student learning outcomes. In addition, national and state efforts have identified several other measures including access, productivity and efficiency, degree completion, and economic returns from post-secondary education. (See Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education, National Center for Public Policy and Education.

[http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/about/whats\\_new.php](http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/about/whats_new.php))<sup>26</sup>

Historically, evaluation of the performance of post-secondary colleges and schools has been based in part on measured inputs (size of endowment, access to funding, mix of funding sources, investment in new buildings and facilities, pedigree of faculty, pedigree of students admitted, research grants and contracts received) and measured outcomes (student retention and persistence rates, graduation rates, rates of placement in jobs, and post-graduation income levels). Private, independent colleges and schools organized as for-profit institutions confront additional outcomes measures, including the rate at which students default on loans post-graduation (Cohort Default Rates) and the numerical relationship between the price of education and the post-completion earning performance of the completer (so-called Gainful Employment regulations.)

All effective measurement requires a point of reference. Some measures are benchmarked against peer institutions, aspirational standards (such as published mission statements and strategic objectives), historical data, statewide data or national data.

Other sources of performance evaluation in higher education are more focused on aggregate performance, rather than course level, program level or even campus level performance.

The National Report Card on Higher Education, authored by The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, focuses on five measures that apply to sets of institutions, an entire community (or state) or a set of communities. These measures by implication integrate social and economic conditions into the performance

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<sup>25</sup> Shray, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education, National Center for Public Policy and Education.

evaluation of post-secondary education. The key indicators were selected because they are broad gauges for understanding success in key performance areas:

- **Preparation:** Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds with a high school credential (1990 to 2006)
- **Participation:** Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college (1991 to 2007)
- **Affordability:** Percentage of income (average of all income groups) needed to pay for college expenses at public four-year institutions (1999-2007)
- **Completion:** Certificates and degrees awarded per 1,000 state residents (age 18-44) without a college degree (1992 to 2007)
- **Benefits:** Percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds with a bachelor's degree or higher (1990 to 2006) <sup>27</sup>

“Change Over Time” arrows in the Report Card’s *Measuring Up 2008* compare each state’s current performance with its own previous performance in the 1990s. This year, however, a state’s Change Over Time is determined by its improvement or decline in performance on a key indicator in each performance category. States receive either an “up” or a “down” arrow: an “up” arrow indicates that the state has increased or remained stable on the key indicator; a “down” arrow indicates that the state has declined in the key indicator. Affordability is different from the other categories in that lower percentages indicate higher performance. The National Center does not establish benchmarks for improvement; however, the change-over-time performance of the top states is depicted graphically in the summary report cards. Many states, but not all, have improved on these key indicators.

Another source of information about the aggregate performance of colleges and universities is Complete College America (CCA). Established in 2009, Complete College America is a national nonprofit with a single mission: to work with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. Thirty-four states are currently participating in Complete College America.<sup>28</sup> (<http://completercollege.org/about-cca/>)

CCA has identified factors that appear to be material to institutional contributions to higher education success:

*“Through research, advocacy, and technical assistance, we help states put in place the five GAME CHANGERS that will help all students succeed in college. The metrics include: performance funding, co-requisite remediation, full-time is fifteen, structured schedules, and guided pathways to success.”<sup>29</sup>*

Shray has observed that a long standing debate persists regarding accreditation’s role in assuring to the government and the public that higher education institutions and programs are effective in achieving results, especially student learning outcomes:

*“Currently, accreditation standards focus primarily on resource and process standards (e.g. faculty qualifications, facilities and support services) and do not require evidence that institutions have achieved results consistent with their missions, especially student learning outcomes. They also maintain that accreditation has a long way to go in establishing quality standards for student assessment to assure that institutions can and do provide valid and reliable evidence of student learning outcomes.”<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>27</sup> National Report Card on Higher Education, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Complete College America <http://completercollege.org/about-cca/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Shray, 6

(Also see Ewell 2002 Assessment, Accountability and Improvement. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.)<sup>31</sup>

[http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell\\_005.pdf](http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell_005.pdf)

### **What is higher education doing about improving accountability?**

There has been a long history of accountability conversations. What is accountability? Joseph Burke describes many faces of accountability:

*“Accountability is the most advocated and least analyzed word in higher education. Everyone uses the term but usually with multiple meanings. Writer says it faces in every direction—upward, downward, inward, and outward. It looks bureaucratic, participative, political or market centered. It may appear two-faced, with sponsors and stakeholders demanding more services while supplying less support. Of critical concern is the fact that with the conflict over accountability, there is growing erosion of public trust and support for higher education as a public good for all Americans and not just a private benefit for college graduate.”<sup>32</sup>*

It is critically important to the future of higher education that there be a balance between federal, state and local interest. Policies must continue to be reviewed and developed at the highest possible level where impartiality to all incumbent actors is manifest, protected and valued. At a time in higher education when support for innovation and entrepreneurialism is needed in order to improve and expand quality educational opportunity and success, policy and political bias toward one or more incumbent sectors of higher education stymies innovation thwarts financial investment and deliberately or by happenstance create barriers to entry. This fundamental challenge for policy makers and regulators should be kept front and center during policy formation.

### **Historical Context**

In the mid-1980s the National Governors Association published *A Time for Results*. States began to require colleges and universities to report on performance. Congress developed the Student-Right-To-Know Act which mandated significant new disclosures regarding graduation rates and school safety. The joint state-federal State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs) were added to monitor and evaluate institutional performance. The SPREs didn't last long as the government tone moved away from this form of accountability by the mid-1990s.<sup>33</sup> (Carey 2-3)

In the mid-2000s, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education<sup>34</sup> provided a strong indictment of the sector. It focused on costs that were too high and graduation rates that were too low, especially among low-income and minority students. Learning outcomes remained a mystery.

Overall, the response to the Commission's report was similar to previous calls for more accountability: the higher education community developed strong defenses against the criticisms, ultimately convincing policy makers that it

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<sup>31</sup> Ewell, Peter. 2002 Assessment, Accountability and Improvement. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

<sup>32</sup> Burke, Joseph C. Many Faces of Accountability in Achieving Accountability in Higher Education, Jossey Bass, 2004. P.1

<sup>33</sup> Carey, 2007. 1-3

<sup>34</sup> Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education xx

was already accountable in many ways. The higher education community also argued effectively that “institutions are so diverse and unique that no single form of accountability could be used to assess all fairly.”<sup>35</sup> (Carey 1-3)

Those not swayed by the response to the Commission’s report argued that defensiveness is not effective, particularly from a multi-million or multi-billion dollar enterprise with great prominence and profile in the community that is routinely afforded great deference and respect. Persistent are demands for higher education to enumerate and explain how existing accountability systems work and why they are effective; and for institutions at all levels, public, private and for-profit, to stand for comparative review and evaluation if they have similar missions and are serving similar types of students.

Over the years, there have been many panels, commissions, acts and proposals to move towards a stronger sense of accountability in higher education. An ongoing challenge is the premises behind the accountability methods of the past which were often flawed. Institutional performance was often based on historical information that lacked context or meaning.

### **Data, Information, Knowledge and Decision-making**

Access to reliable, authoritative data and evidence for performance and accountability analysis of higher education institutions is a fundamental issue. Currently, a huge void exists in the availability to adequate, accurate data across institutions, states and at the national level. Only recently has there been investment in statewide data systems to better measure the performance and outcomes produced by higher education within a given state. (See NCHEMS report on state based data systems)<sup>36</sup>

A recent proposal in Congress demonstrates the high level attention is being paid to that void:

*“The Evidence-Based Policy-Making Commission Act of 2014 would establish a commission to initially survey the types of federal data that are available to inform policymaking. It would then produce recommendations related to data the government needs but doesn’t have—more specifically, asking whether and how to create a clearinghouse that would facilitate linkages between existing federal datasets that can help answer critical questions. In the higher education arena, this approach could be a huge win for students, families, taxpayers, and policymakers. The bill would ... make lawmakers consider policy in a way they rarely do: with evidence.”<sup>37</sup>*

The importance of this act is that it acknowledges that without definitional standards, a reliable clearinghouse and the ability to “facilitate the linkages between federal databased” the promise that can come from improved accountability will not be realized. As of January 2015, this legislation failed to be enacted.

Today, technological advances in data collection, warehousing, mining and analysis have empowered institutions to make quantum leaps in the use of data to improve institutional performance and student success. By harnessing those data sources, and framing their application and analysis in the appropriate context, leaders of colleges and universities can deliver to various stakeholders accountability and performance results that are accessible, credible, and based on measurements that are replicable.

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<sup>35</sup> Carey, 2007. 1-3

<sup>36</sup> NCHEMS state-based data systems

<sup>37</sup> Evidence-Based Policy-Making Act of 2014 <http://www.edcentral.org/evidence-bill>

## Dualities of Expectations

Evaluating institutional effectiveness may forever remain part art and part science, but aspiring to make it more scientific is arguably honorable. When demonstrable accountability has potentially existential consequences – that is, a lack of accountability can curtail or terminate access to critical resources – the need for defensible and reliable social science and empirical evidence, not just intuition, becomes mandatory.

In addition to the duality of evaluative methodology, higher education exists within an environment of conflict between autonomy and collegial governance. It must exhibit effectiveness to current and former students while acknowledging the demands of accountability by federal, regional, state and local governmental and community stakeholders.

As Paul Lingenfelter indicates, “A meaningful discussion of accountability should take into account who is accountable to whom, for what purposes, for whose benefit, by which means, and with what consequences.”<sup>38</sup> (Lingenfelter, 2003). As previously noted, conflicts over accountability may produce opportunities for one set of institutions to gain advantage over another in the policy arena; avoiding this outcome will require scrupulous attention to process and impartiality by those managing the various policy venues.

Berdahl further describes conflicting and dynamic demands:

*“Universities have generally had ambivalent relations with their surrounding societies: both involved and withdrawn; both serving and criticizing; both needing and being needed.”*<sup>39</sup>

Berdahl insists that post-secondary institutions must stay sufficiently safe from external pressures to safeguard their societal critique yet sufficiently responsive to external needs to sustain societal support. They must simultaneously serve and scrutinize the society that supports them. Burke indicates that the dual roles demand “both autonomy and accountability.”<sup>40</sup>

Burke (Bogue and Hall)<sup>41</sup> develops a helpful view of the tension between the civic and collegiate interests and cultures as well as the commercial and entrepreneurial culture that constitute today’s higher education environment. This tension is manifest as a series of accountability conflicts between institutional autonomy and external accountability:

- Institutional improvement versus external accountability
- Peer review versus external regulation
- Inputs and processes versus outputs and outcomes
- Reputation versus responsiveness
- Consultation versus evaluation
- Prestige versus performance
- Trust versus evidence<sup>i</sup>
- Qualitative versus quantitative evidence.<sup>ii</sup>

Some of these conflicts may be considered false dichotomies. That is, many good institutions have the capacity to demonstrate external accountability for internally-generated quality improvements; prestige should not be

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<sup>38</sup> Lingenfelter, 2003

<sup>39</sup> Berdahl

<sup>40</sup> Burke, Burke, 4

<sup>41</sup> Bogue and Hall

sacrificed because of having to prove performance; and gaining the trust of various external stakeholders should not grant an institution a waiver from producing evidence of performance.

Additionally, the application of accrediting compliance and greater institutional accountability may have unintended consequences, some would argue. Those include the protection of the status quo: incumbent providers benefit, while new providers who offer delivery modalities or systems of education that defy conventional evaluation are from stymied by regulation and requirements that favor the conventional and impede or resist innovation. The inherent effect of accreditation as inhibitor rather than facilitator of institutional innovation has been noted and verbalized during Congressional review of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.<sup>iii</sup>

But rather than arguing about the degree to which formalized quality assurance either facilitates or inhibits innovation at colleges and schools, the accrediting community has strong interest in how to assure the quality of education delivery modes and organizational structures that do not exist today. If accreditation standards reasonably apply to colleges as we know them now, will the standards be enduring and applicable to those institutions that, in response to market and policy pressures, transform themselves? Or will the standards of quality have to be transformed as well?

Others in the accrediting community view the duality (innovation versus accreditation compliance) as superficial. A primary focus of all accreditation is the respectful but unrelenting push for quality and integrity. The force of that prerogative does not inherently preclude innovation or reinforce status quo; on the contrary, if done effectively, the only way an incumbent institution is going to fulfill evolving, dynamic accreditation requirements and remain operationally viable is through innovation, in some cases rising to the level of transformation.

### Models for Accountability

At least some of the conflicts over the meaning and value of accountability might be avoided if the various stakeholders could explore the subject with a common model or theory. An inventory of various accountability models is shown in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1 Accountability Models<sup>42</sup>

	<b>Bureaucratic</b>	<b>Professional</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Managerial</b>	<b>Market</b>	<b>Managed Markets</b>
<b>Levers</b>	Rules	Expertise	Policies	Management Market	Markets	Markets Policies
<b>Agents</b>	Bureaucrats	Peers	Policy makers	Managers	Entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurs Policymakers
<b>Goals</b>	Efficiency	Quality	Priorities (driven by	Productivity	Responsiveness	Responsiveness Priorities

<sup>42</sup> Burke, Joseph C. 12-14

	availability of funding)					
<b>Indicators</b>	Inputs	Processes	Outcomes	Inputs	Outputs	Outputs Outcomes
<b>Conditions</b>	Stability	Autonomy	Consensus	Dynamic	Demand	Demand Capacity Incentives
<b>Techniques</b>	Regulation	Consultation	Planning	Cost-benefit	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Satisfaction Priority Planning
<b>Consequences</b>	Continuation Sanctions	Participation Neglect	Incentives Losses	Promotion Demotion	Profits Losses	Profits Incentives
<b>Governance</b>	Centralized	Collegial	Direction decentralized	Decentralized	Market forces	Public private partnerships
<b>Theory</b>	Scientific Management	Collegial Governance	Public Policy	Reinventing government	Market economies	Market steering
<b>Programs</b>	Financial program audits	Assessment Accreditation Academic audits Standardized testing	Report cards Performance reporting Budgeting Funding	Performance reports	Student alumni Satisfaction surveys Reputational ratings	Charter colleges Vouchers Financial aid

Burke, the author of the inventory, observes that “past and present models of accountability suggest little progress in the process of reconciliation between the collegiate, civic, and commercial cultures. Higher education has featured at least six models of accountability: *bureaucratic, professional, political, managerial, market, and managed market.*”<sup>43</sup>

Each model has its own levers or drivers, agents or actors, and goals or purposes. The goals have shifted over time from efficiency to quality to productivity and, finally, to responsiveness to public priorities and market demands.

The techniques of accountability differ by model. Bureaucrats like rules. Professionals demand consultation. Policymakers prefer planning, although government officials still revert to regulation. Managers calculate costs and benefits; entrepreneurs respond to customer satisfaction and anticipate market demand. Each approach seems suited to different conditions.

The *bureaucratic* model demands stability, the *professional* requires autonomy, and the *political* necessitates consensus or at least majority consent. The *managerial* model works well in dynamic periods of considerable change. Both *market* models adjust capacity to demand, with government incentives shaping supply and demand to suit public priorities in *managed markets*.

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<sup>43</sup> Burke, Joseph C.

Each model has positive or negative consequences based on performance or results. The bureaucratic rewards compliance with continuation and penalizes deviations with sanctions. Success in the professional model encourages consultation on decisions; failure results in neglect of professional advice. Financial incentives represent the positive and funding losses the negative in the political model, although performance reporting usually has only a positive or negative effect on the reputations of colleges or universities because it lacks a direct, formal connection to funding. The management approach involves either promotion or demotion, or possibly acclaim or disapproval. Markets produce profits or losses, and managed markets add incentives to the positive consequences.

Bureaucratic accountability centralizes governance. All the other models, with the possible exception of the political, demand decentralized decision making, although the political, managerial, and managed markets add varying degrees of policy directions. The political model can lead to intrusive regulations. Some of the accountability models rest on mature theories, but others represent practices outrunning theory. Each accountability model has generated accountability programs that accent the goals of efficiency, quality, productivity, market responsiveness, and public priorities.

Of course, the accountability systems in place are seldom as pure as the above categories may suggest. Each model has advantages and disadvantages, depending on application and timing. Bureaucratic accountability lives on in many states and constantly threatens a comeback in all organizations, public or private. Recent scandals in the stock market remind us that some regulation is required to prevent outrageous behavior. Conversely, uniform regulations do not work well in diverse and complex organizations such as colleges or universities. Professional accountability (or faculty participation) is essential to effective accountability systems in colleges and universities, but it can lead to gridlock in collegial decision making and to diminished responsiveness to public priorities or market needs. Policies and politics, management and markets are necessary parts of accountability in state higher education systems and in public and private colleges and universities. Yet each of these levers can divert higher education from its fundamental purposes in favor of momentary fads."<sup>44</sup>

## **Conclusions**

A number of perspectives on quality as applied to higher education have been inventoried and expressed in this report, all in support of strengthening the ability of colleges and schools to articulate their value to students, communities, and society.

Though it may seem obvious, it is worth reiteration that quality and accountability driven by institutional impetus and managerial self-interest have perhaps the greatest value and durability. Quality and effectiveness metrics as defined by the institution are not exclusive or inherently contradictory to indicators of accountability shared with the public, policy makers or funding sources. To the degree they overlap, there is a natural common ground on which to build more systemic and perpetual measurements of effectiveness. Leaders must work to balance these different and sometimes competing expectations.

While acknowledging the resistance of education performance to pure scientific analysis, harnessing the plethora of data, empirical evidence and other emerging resources is a high priority for accreditors and other students of quality assurance. At minimum, the emphasis on data-driven accountability and evidence-based practices will lead

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<sup>44</sup> Burke, Joseph C. 10-12.

to better understanding and improved models of what is effective and what is sub-optimal. Furthermore, when the culture of evidence-based, data driven quality and accountability is integral to the operations of the institution, rather than imposed, the gains in performance will be more profound and recurring.<sup>45</sup>

Yet questions and risks manifest as well. New technological tools and data solutions are having a profound effect on the ability of higher education to identify metrics for change, assess what makes a difference and focus on improving performance targets. If more robust, empirical, data-driven quality assurance standards and reviews drive substantial (or even transformative) change of institutional performance, will the broader community adapt to the new models of delivering education? And will accreditation's current standards endure or will new ones be required that will defy recognition by those calling for more accountability?

Leadership will confront these issues and others as it attempts to identify trends and needs, lead change agendas, invest in what makes a difference, and remain authentic and courageous. Those attributes of strength will serve higher education well while confronting the challenges of a dynamic environment.

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<sup>45</sup> Baer and Norris. 2015

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