

POLICY REPORT

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A New Role for Accountability: Increasing Access and Equity in Higher Education

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“In the 21st century we must do more than just provide the finest education possible to a select few—we must provide all Americans with the skills they need to succeed in the global economy and lead satisfying, productive lives” (National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, 2005, p. 6)



INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing importance of educational attainment on individual, social, and economic outcomes; disparities in college enrollment and graduation among racial and ethnic groups as well as between low-income students and their more affluent peers are a major issue for higher education (Haycock, 2006; Kelly, 2005). Educational disparities are even more marked when comparing groups in the United States with educational attainment in top-performing countries such as Norway and Canada (Kelly, 2005). As a result, America's colleges and universities have a critical role to play in attaining educational parity, both with leading countries worldwide and among racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups here at home. This role can be significantly enhanced through the utilization of institutional accountability.

Unlike primary and secondary education, where federal policy in the form of the *No Child Left Behind Act* directly addresses disparities in educational outcomes, higher education has not been systematically subjected to similar requirements (Bensimon, Hao, & Bustillos, 2003). Currently, there is little incentive for colleges and universities to prioritize access and equity; instead, institutions often focus on measures (e.g., admissions test scores, research performance, and the prowess of sports teams) that have little to do with assessing the extent to which institutions can offer an affordable, high-quality, education for all students (Cary & Aldeman, 2008; Haycock, 2006).

For the most part, differential opportunity has been addressed within the context of affirmative action and diversity rather than accountability. Some researchers have noted lower priorities for access and equity indicators as being counter-intuitive with regard to public concerns regarding college affordability and social justice (Burke & Minassians, 2002) while others believe that the absence of equity as a measure of institutional performance undermines access and equity goals in higher education (Bensimon et al., 2003).

THE ROLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACCESS AND EQUITY

Accountability refers to the process by which organizations and individuals are answerable to some higher authority for their actions and outcomes. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) defines accountability systems as “mechanisms by which (1) responsibilities and those responsible are identified, (2) evidence is collected and evaluated and, (3) based on the evidence, appropriate remedies, assistance, rewards, and sanctions are applied by those in authority” (American Evaluation Association, 2006, ¶ 2).

Accountability is especially critical in the public sector (Gortner, Nichols, & Ball, 2007) and no program, public or private, that receives external funding can expect to avoid this issue (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). Public accountability increases democratic control and governmental integrity by allowing “watch dogs” such as special interest groups, the media, members of legislative bodies, and others to monitor program performance (Bovens, 2005). Accountability also increases program transparency and public confidence (Gortner et al., 2007) while showing an increasingly critical public that agencies and programs are functioning as they should (Bovens, 2005).

Colleges and universities, especially those in the public sector, face two types of accountability: external and internal. External accountability involves responsibility to individuals and organizations outside the institution such as government agencies and boards while internal accountability focuses on institutional self-examination and evaluation (Gortner et al., 2007). Because the federal government is involved in postsecondary education mainly through financial aid programs, research funding and specific programs and projects, most policy making that addresses inequality in higher education occurs at the state level (Alexander, 2000; Kelly, 2005). Colleges and universities, therefore, are generally responsible for reporting to state officials or agencies as well as to their own governing boards and finally, to the people of their state.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS

Accountability often involves complex political, administrative, assessment, and evaluation issues. Before data collection and analysis can begin, institutional leaders must clarify not only the goals and objectives of the organization but those of the accountability process as well. What questions need to be answered? How will this information be used? In what ways will this information impact the institution? In the administrative arena, who will collect and analyze the data and what resources will be allocated to this project?

The accountability process can be seen as having three components: (a) assessment, (b) evaluation, and (c) accountability. Although treated as discrete components for illustrative purposes, in reality, they are all part of a single overarching, integrated process. In addition, assessment and evaluation are often stand-alone mechanisms with overlapping purposes, activities, and outcomes (See Figure 1).

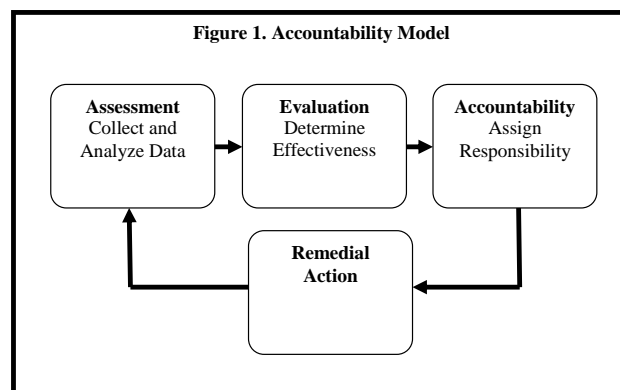
Assessment, in this context, is the process by which data are gathered and analyzed and represents a key component with regard to access and equity. Without significant demographic information (i.e., gender, race and ethnicity, disability status, and some measure of income or socioeconomic status), there is little chance that disparities will be observed, documented, and acted upon.

Almost every state reports some type of enrollment data for its postsecondary institutions. These data are usually broken down into racial and ethnic categories. Some states go even further. South Carolina, for example, tracks enrollment by race/ethnicity, academic program, age, gender, county of origin, high school of origin, full-time versus part-time, and transfer status (Cary & Aldeman, 2008).

While these types of data may be critical for identifying and addressing access and equity issues, they are not always available, especially historical data for comparison. Kelly (2005), for instance, notes that 2002 was the first year that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provided the results of their Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Graduation Rate Survey by race/ethnicity. Other critical information is often missing from datasets and performance reports. Conversely, while data may be available on enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for disadvantaged students, the information is not always utilized, obscuring important outcomes.

Data analysis methods are critical for gauging the progress of underrepresented groups. Aggregated data offer a great deal of information but also fail to detect important group distinctions. Using means (averages) without adequate knowledge of how data are distributed may conceal information that can play important roles in the decision making process. Disaggregated data can highlight disparities in areas such as academic preparation, enrollment, financial aid, student services, retention, completion, and workplace outcomes. To illustrate, in 2007, the aggregate college participation rate in the U.S. was 37% (Mortenson, 2009). Breaking the data into income groups, however, demonstrates that the college-going rate for low-income students was just slightly greater than half that of the more affluent students.

During the evaluation phase, it is important to examine the institutional goals, objectives, and measures and then, using empirical data, determine the effectiveness of programs or policies. The evaluation component also provides the context in which to interpret the data. Evaluations range from a relatively straightforward look at a single stage or component of a program to more comprehensive designs that



include detailed descriptions of organizational, cultural, demographic, and historic data for a college or university. The evaluation process is critical to accountability in that it examines the gaps between articulated standards and actual performance and renders a judgment as to program effectiveness. Evaluators can also assist stakeholders in developing relevant goals in addition to determining how well the institution is addressing previous ones.

In the final segment of the accountability process, authorities must examine the evidence from the assessment and evaluation processes, as well as assign responsibility and provide appropriate responses. Also, at this juncture, individuals or groups must be able to justify or defend program decisions, processes, and outcomes (Gortner et al., 2007). Since accountability has important political, legal, social, and economic implications, the process, whether internal or external, must be both credible and transparent.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Disadvantaged groups bring a variety of unique issues to the postsecondary education scene. Thus, a first step toward access and equity in educational outcomes is to identify issues specific to disadvantaged students. For example, African American students graduate from high school at much lower rates than their White peers and are more likely to be unprepared for college (Haycock, 2006). Moreover, some minority students may be less likely to be prepared to enroll in a selective four-year college or university (Kelly, 2005). Developing measures that capture these and other elements can pinpoint areas of concern or highlight successful interventions (See Table 1). Also, institutional factors such as the campus climate (Teagle Foundation, 2006) as well as the availability of remedial and support services may also prove useful in determining success for many underrepresented and minority students (Haycock, 2006).

IMPLICATIONS

- Accountability has the potential to improve access to and equity in higher education for disadvantaged students by providing evidence of disparities to various stakeholders and oversight entities.
- Because it has a component that imparts responsibility, often to a specific individual, agency or organization, accountability is more likely to bring about desired changes in programs and services.
- The accountability process is only as good as the planning and execution. Ignoring important issues and using inappropriate data or methodologies may negatively impact the effort.

Table 1. Equity Indicators

(By race or ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status)

- High school graduates enrolled in college as a percentage of their 9th grade cohort
- Percent of college freshmen needing remedial classes
- Percent of students receiving Pell Grants
- Percent majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines
- Percent retained after their freshman year
- Ratings of campus climate
- Availability of support services
- Utilization of support services
- Percent graduating within 6 years
- Percent of eligible graduates obtaining professional licensure

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Well-planned and well-executed designs are vital. Ideally, these designs should include relevant student outcomes as well as institutional factors that impact them.
- Recognize the limitations of accountability. Prudent management practices would dictate allocating adequate authority and resources to carry out assigned responsibilities.
- Avoid making accountability a political struggle or using it as a punitive process. To be effective, accountability must recognize the need for a democratic process in which the needs of various stakeholders are acknowledged and addressed.

CONCLUSION

In times of economic hardship, it is especially vital that organizations operate as efficiently as possible. State funding for higher education is shrinking as the missions of colleges and universities are expanding. Thus, in the future, it appears that postsecondary institutions will be asked to do more with less. This will undoubtedly include enrolling, retaining, and graduating students who may require more resources and new approaches. Today's colleges and universities cannot afford to be ivory towers, relying solely on the reputation of their faculties and researchers. Instead, they have to address the needs of their state and the nation for a highly educated, diverse workforce. As these needs become more critical, public demands for accountability and transparency will increase.

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