Increasing attention is paid to the importance of colleges and universities in combating a severe recession and building the future of our society. Unprecedented amounts of new federal money are now available for students and institutions alike. Community colleges have emerged as the centerpiece of building educational capacity, a result of the new administration's powerful focus on access and success. This may be a new era.

However new, the emerging era is still captive to some familiar and "old" issues. One of the most important for higher education is "accountability": colleges and universities answering to students and society about what has been done to assure success with student learning and overall institutional performance. Accountability is about demonstrating that resources available to institutions yield presumed educational gains.

Accountability: An "Old" Issue

Accountability emerged as a high-profile issue in the Bush administration and particularly with the 2005-06 Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. In this new era, the federal interest continues. The 2008 reauthorized Higher Education Act was completed during the Bush years. Its implementation through revised or new regulatory practices has fallen to the new administration. If the five Negotiated Rulemaking Committees established in early 2009 for this purpose are any indication, interest in regulation for greater accountability remains high, similar in some ways to the approaches that the administration has taken with, for example, banks, the financial industry, housing and the automotive industry, as we all struggle to deal with the faltering economy.

This continuing federal interest has significant support from the public. As the Wall Street Journal reported in July 2008, there is considerable public sentiment that government solutions and expanded government oversight are preferable to leaving businesses, professions and industries to assure accountability on their own. Other polling and surveys confirm this result. The public is increasingly comfortable with additional government management and oversight of key social institutions.

The Academy: A Heavily Scrutinized and Accountable Enterprise

Higher education enters the new era an already heavily scrutinized and accountable social enterprise. Colleges and universities have ongoing, formal accountability obligations to multiple constituents, including students, governing boards, institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations and local, state and federal governments. Higher education is also accountable to alumni, donors and the taxpayer. Moreover, higher education has entered this new era with an impressive array of its own national accountability activities, many developed during the past ten years. These national activities are only part of the accountability story. Colleges and universities around the country are also developing their own individual institution-based approaches to accountability, augmenting and enhancing these national efforts.
All the national activities provide tools or frameworks by which higher education informs students and society about what is being done to promote student learning and advance institutional performance. All are characterized by colleges and universities (1) making conscious decisions to assertively address accountability, (2) locating and judging accountability at the institutional level and (3) acknowledging and embracing faculty leadership as central to academic judgments.

Some activities provide a valuable frame of reference and organize institutional approaches to student learning. These include the "Essential Learning Outcomes" of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the National Association of Independent College and Universities' University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities/Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). Other activities provide testing assessment and survey tools. These include the Council for Aid to Education's Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), Educational Testing Service's Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).

Undergirding all of this work is institutional and programmatic accreditation, the periodic process of peer/professional review that requires colleges and universities to examine and provide evidence of student achievement and institutional performance, among many other features of institutional operation. Accreditation provides a foundation for the various accountability efforts through review of institutions and programs to assure that fundamentals for academic quality are in place and that institutions are living up to their commitments to students and society and are improving what they do.

More than 4,400 degree-granting colleges and universities routinely undergo accreditation. In addition, many of these institutions are involved in one of these national activities mentioned above. Some may engage in more than one. The information presented here is based on material from organizational Websites and personal correspondence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VSA</td>
<td>Approximately 300 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAAP</td>
<td>Approximately 400 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U-CAN</td>
<td>728 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAPP</td>
<td>380 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>Approximately 200 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSSE</td>
<td>1,208 colleges and universities (2000-2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
<td>More than 400 colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSSE</td>
<td>712 colleges and universities (2001-09)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beyond accreditation and the national and institutional accountability activities, various national rankings systems have been developed.

Rankings constitute another form of accountability - institutions voluntarily agree to participate in them and the public relies on them to obtain information and make judgments about colleges and universities. /US News and World Report /annually ranks what it considers to be America's "best colleges," some 1,400 institutions in 2009. It also ranks more than 1,500 graduate schools. The Princeton Review currently ranks 368 "best" colleges.
More national accountability initiatives are emerging. For example, the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, originating with the Teagle Foundation, seeks to build a national "culture of evidence" and encourage common expectations for student learning through sustaining a national dialogue. The National Institute on Learning Outcomes Assessment, a project of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana University, focuses on identifying and sharing effective practice in student learning, seeking to inform and strengthen undergraduate education and enrich information provided to the public.

Another "Old" Issue: The Perception That Higher Education is Not Accountable

A second familiar issue - a persistent perception that higher education is not accountable - is also finding a home in the new era. Just as emphasis on accountability is an old issue brought forward, so are the arguments that higher education is not accountable. This second "old" issue emerges from some in the press, some opinion leaders, some government officials and critics of higher education.

Why - in spite of all the forms of scrutiny and accountability described above - does the view that higher education is not accountable have traction? In general, the "not accountable" claim is based on dissatisfaction with three key features to be found in much of the academy's accountability work. The academy is judged to be inadequate because its accountability (1) is self-referential or "mission-based," (2) is reliant primarily on peer/professional ("expert") review and (3) prefers primarily qualitative analysis and judgment.

Those who claim higher education is not accountable are seeking (1) a more expansive role for the public in judging accountability, (2) establishment and application of authoritative external norms of educational performance, perhaps leading to comparability and even standardization of expected results from institutions and (3) some means by which colleges and universities visibly assume greater responsibility for expanding the number of individuals who are demonstrably successful at the higher education level, i.e., building national education capacity. The "not accountable" claim is buttressed by reports that purport to show a diminution of the effectiveness of higher education, reports such as the National Assessment of Adult Literacy and documentation of educational attainment from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The New Era: Might We Find Common Ground?

The new era is an opportunity to take on old and familiar issues with fresh energy and perspective. It is time to move beyond the higher education "is - is not accountable" debate. What if there were common ground between the accountability efforts of higher education and some of the issues raised by those who find this accountability wanting? While it is likely that neither party would be satisfied, it may also be the case that both parties would make some gains.

The following suggestions preserve the voluntary, institutional basis for action that has characterized the academy's approach to accountability while addressing expectations of expanded information and public judgment about higher education performance.

* Higher education can use its institutional-based approach to accountability to bring together similar institutions and examine what each has achieved with regard to student learning and
institutional performance. Institutions might work together to compare results. This has already been done by the Council of Independent Colleges using the CLA. Institutions could also pursue voluntary efforts within a state or several states working together.

* Institutions and accreditors can further enhance the value to the public of peer/professional review by expanding information about student learning and institutional performance and directly sharing this with the public through, e.g., profiles or templates.

* Institutions can use the current work associated with, e.g., Essential Learning Outcomes, VSA and the tests and surveys such as the CLA and MAPP, for example, to develop a platform to launch additional consideration of common expectations of what students are to achieve as a result of undergraduate education.

* Higher education can focus additional attention on national concerns about perceived or real diminution of student educational progress - aligning institutional and national interests, perhaps starting with a re-commitment to the critical societal role that colleges and universities play in building the future of the country.

We can all gain by building on the current work of the academy, exploring additional institutionally based efforts to meet national needs, examining where qualitative analysis might be appropriately augmented with quantitative data and further enriching peer/professional review through greater public involvement and disclosure.

Inside Accreditation/ is a publication intended to keep presidents of CHEA member institutions informed about developments in external quality review of higher education.

<http://www.chea.org>

One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 510
Washington DC 20036-1135
(tel) 202-955-6126
(fax) 202-955-6129
chea@chea.org <mailto:chea@chea.org>

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