

The National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education

Paul E. Lingenfelter
Executive Director, State Higher Education Executive Officers

American Council on Education
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The National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education was created by the association of State Higher Education Executive Officers to stimulate conversations and make recommendations addressing the issue of accountability in higher education. The Commission is co-chaired by former Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma, and former Secretary of Education and former Governor Dick Riley of South Carolina. The thirteen Commission members, drawn from every region of the country, include legislators, private sector leaders, one current and three former institutional presidents, and one current and two former state higher education executives. The Commission's final report will be released on March 10, 2005.

My assignment today is to give you an overview of the Commission's preliminary report. Governor Keating will comment from his perspective as a former governor concerned about educational attainment and as co-chairman of the Commission.

The description of this session in the program and the mood I have sensed in many similar rooms make it clear: the word "accountability" makes us uncomfortable in higher education.

We are accustomed to believing, and saying we have the world's finest system of higher education. We are unaccustomed to having either our competence or motives questioned. We know higher education is incredibly complex, and authentic learning and research cannot, and *must* not be standardized. We know simplified approaches to accountability will be damaging, costly, and ineffective in higher education. We know the most destructive thing one could do in higher education is to increase governmental regulation and control.

Many of us breathed a sigh of relief last week when Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said the Bush administration has no plans to impose price controls on college tuition or to extend strict accountability measures to postsecondary institutions. You may be wondering why Governor Keating and I even kept this appointment!

Even though all these things are true, accountability remains an important issue in higher education. We face pressure on accountability not because higher education is a miserable failure, but because the bar has been raised. Better accountability in higher education is required, not to fix blame, but to help improve performance, and build public confidence in and support for higher education.

I expect virtually every person in the room has made a speech about the growing importance of higher education in the global economy. We, or perhaps our global competitors, have successfully made the case to political and business leaders. Now we have to convince them we are committed to doing the job, we understand what it will take, and we are capable of delivering the goods at an affordable price.

When we take a look at the “status quo” in higher education accountability we see a lot of things that don’t work well.

- We generate massive, unfocused reports on every conceivable aspect of higher education that generally go unread and unused;
- States are developing complex, burdensome “incentive budgeting” schemes to motivate us to do what we should be doing anyway;
- We can’t answer straight-forward questions about success rates in higher education, and we are defensive about the graduation rates reported by the system we helped design;
- We have sticker prices that have grown much faster than inflation, and we cannot provide straight-forward answers to questions about net price to undergraduate students and changes over time; and
- We don’t have good answers when asked, “Have students learned what they need to know?”

We need a conversation about accountability because it is unavoidable. The need to improve performance is so compelling, greater “accountability for results” is inevitable.

The Commission Report highlights three areas where performance must be improved, student success, research, and productivity. Let me comment briefly on each.

- Student success. Eighty percent of high school sophomores say they plan to get a bachelors degree, forty percent plan on a graduate or professional degree, and ten percent plan on another postsecondary credential. Based on history and current performance, many of them *will not* meet their goals. But it will be much better for them and the country if *most* of them succeed. We need more achievement and *higher* quality.
- Research capacity. Others nations are competing more effectively for research talent and working hard to cultivate it. In science and technology we have prospered by importing, educating, and retaining many of the world’s brightest, hardest working people. (38% of our Ph.D.s in science and technology are foreign born.) We should keep the door open wide for such people, but this is not a sustainable strategy. The need to nurture future generations of scholars has implications for K-12 and undergraduate education as well as for graduate education.
- Productivity and cost-effectiveness. The current public dialogue about higher education costs strikes me as a war between two wrong ideas. One maintains nothing significant can be done to improve the cost-effectiveness of higher education. The

other insists we can achieve urgent national goals for higher education without investing more. We cannot increase scale *and* quality without spending more money. But no amount of additional money will do the job unless we educators make changes in how we do our work and how well we do it. Educators and policy makers need to work harder to come together on the money issue.

If more accountability is inevitable, it is time to talk about “better accountability.” What approaches to accountability can actually help improve performance? And what approaches are weak or harmful?

What Constitutes “Better Accountability”?

The National Commission reached consensus around two *principles* of accountability in higher education.

First, accountability in higher education must be viewed as a *shared responsibility*. Education is inherently collaborative. A student learns and a faculty member teaches by working together. An entire nation can learn only when policy makers and educators work together. Improving performance in education is all about interrelationships and mutual dependency. Accountability is damaging when it becomes an exercise in fixing or diverting blame; it is productive when it is about setting goals, rigorously measuring achievement, and shouldering reciprocal responsibilities for improvement.

Second, the purpose of accountability is to encourage the highest possible levels of achievement. The organizing principles of accountability in higher education must be pride, not fear – high aspirations, not minimum standards. Accountability based on fear and minimum standards is doomed to failure.

These principles must shape the ways accountability is designed and implemented. The Commission Report recommends four simple components of an effective approach to accountability. Effective accountability must:

1. **Affirm and pursue fundamental goals.** The fundamental goals of higher education are teaching, research, and service. Competition is a good thing, but fundamental public priorities seem to recede to the background when institutions compete for rankings and status based on student selectivity, faculty prestige, and similar measures. Pursuing higher rankings on such measures has degraded cost-effectiveness and detracted attention from our most authentic goals. Both institutional goals and public policies must be focused more intensely on teaching, learning, research, and service.
2. **Establish and honor a practical division of labor.** An effective division of labor reflects the different roles and responsibilities of students, faculty, institutional leaders, trustees, state and federal policymakers, civic and business leaders, and accreditors.

3. **Focus attention on a manageable number of explicit goals for different roles and responsibilities.** Each domain of responsibility, from states to academic departments, must concentrate effort on a few goals in order to make progress on high-priority needs. Beyond three to five goals you get a laundry list, not priorities for improvement.
4. **Measure results rigorously and work for improvement.** This is elementary Baldrige. It cannot be measurement or reporting for its own sake; it must be focused on priorities and contribute to improving performance.

Honoring a practical division of labor establishes boundaries for both state and federal involvement, but it does not make any topic “off limits” for discussion and vigorous debate. Shared responsibility requires reciprocal, 360-degree accountability: continuous dialogue, rigorous measurement of outcomes, and open disclosure of results among policy makers, institutional leaders, faculty, and students. Policy makers should focus on policy, faculty should focus on teaching and research, and both should hold themselves and each other accountable for their contributions to better performance.

Who should do what?

These principles have implications for all who contribute to the quality and performance of higher education in the United States. Without commenting on all the specific action recommendations in the draft Commission report, let me give you some of the highlights.

First, the Commission urges high-level business and civic leaders to become and stay involved in public dialogues about higher education policy and to serve as lay board members. Their feedback to educators and policy makers is essential, they need to understand the challenges of operating a world-class system of higher education, and their leadership is crucial for building and sustaining public support.

Second, the Commission urges governors, legislators, and state boards and executives for higher education to articulate and focus attention on specific state needs and priorities. Every sector of higher education, public, independent, for-profit, and non-profit has a role to play in meeting public needs. State policies for tuition, institutional support, and student assistance should be designed and coordinated to reach clear public goals. The report also recommends that states assess the knowledge and skills of the adult population and of current college graduates as an indicator of the “educational capacity” of its work force. It specifically recommends *against* state assessments of learning as a means of *institutional* accountability. Nothing in public policy should create incentives for institutions to avoid the hard work of educating students who need extra support or assistance. At the same time, monitoring learning at the state level will help keep the public focused on education and our institutions focused on this fundamental priority.

The draft Commission report urges the Federal government to continue its historical focus on student aid, educational opportunity, and research, paying close attention to the

importance of federal programs in meeting national goals. It also recommends the federal government improve its data collection and reporting function by creating a student unit record system. Such a system is needed to monitor educational progress when students move among institutions and to provide more valid and reliable data on cost trends. This recommendation includes an insistence on absolute safeguards to protect individual privacy. This database should never be used to extract information on particular people, but when used to analyze the experience of groups of students it can help improve both public policies and institutional practice.

The recommendations for institutions will not seem revolutionary or even innovative to many of you, because they reflect current exemplary practices. The challenge is to make them *normal* practice. These recommendations were especially informed by the Greater Expectations initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the recent report of the Business-Higher Education Forum on Accountability for Student Learning.

The Commission draft report urges institutions to establish clear learning goals for students, assess their achievement, and disclose the results. It encourages them to close the “perceptual gap” between institutional priorities and public priorities, by making improved learning, student success, and quality research and service highly visible institutional priorities. It encourages institutional leaders (not states or the federal government) to employ appropriate rewards and sanctions to help improve performance. And it encourages institutions to work for productivity gains, through a variety of approaches, including the use of technology, the continual reassessment of priorities, and working with K-12 education to help improve student preparation.

Let me conclude by summarizing the vision and aspirations of this report in a few sentences.

The report of the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education is based on the strong belief that educators, policy makers, and the public share a common purpose: reaching unprecedented levels of educational quality and achievement to strengthen our nation and improve the lives of our people.

It views rigorous accountability for results, not as something imposed on higher education, but as a reciprocal responsibility voluntarily and collectively assumed by policy makers and educators who are committed to achieving urgent national goals.

It concludes that real progress requires four things: a focus on priority goals, good data on performance, rigorous monitoring and disclosure of results, and continuous, vigorous dialogue about what policy makers and educators must do to attain our common goals.

We have no illusions about saying the “last word”, but we hope this report will make a productive contribution to a national conversation about improving performance in higher education.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Co-Chairs:

The Honorable Frank Keating, President, American Council of Life Insurers
Former Governor of Oklahoma

The Honorable Richard W. Riley, Senior Partner, Nelson, Mullins, Riley & Scarborough, L.P.
Former U.S. Secretary of Education and former Governor of South Carolina

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Martha Romero, Founding Director, Community College Leadership Development Initiatives; Professor,
Claremont Graduate University

Blenda J. Wilson, President & CEO, Nellie Mae Education Foundation

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With support from the Ford Foundation, the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education was organized by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), the national association of chief executives of statewide governing and coordinating boards for postsecondary education. The mission of the association is to assist its members and the states in developing and sustaining excellent systems of higher education.