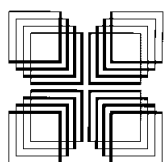
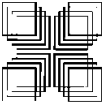


# Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education | Issues and Options

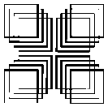


A POSITION PAPER FROM THE BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM, WASHINGTON, D.C.



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# Preface

Dear Colleague:

The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) is a national membership organization of chief executives drawn from American business and higher education. Our mission is to encourage dialogue among leaders of the two sectors on issues central to the role of higher education in the worldwide economy.

Our recent work has centered on the role of technology in strengthening teaching and learning, on the changing nature of skills needed in the workforce, and on the challenges of improving higher education delivery to an increasingly diverse population.

As co-chairs of the BHEF Initiative on Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education, we have prepared this paper to stimulate discussion about accountability for student learning in higher education. The Forum is interested in this topic because of several critical challenges:

- Maintaining high quality in and access to postsecondary education, despite funding declines.
- Meeting growing enrollment demand from increasingly diverse populations.
- Responding to corporate needs for sophisticated and skilled workers.
- Addressing public skepticism about quality and costs.

To tackle these challenges, we strongly encourage new approaches to public accountability for higher education—including measures of student learning.

We begin with a discussion of the reasons for the heightened demand for evidence about performance in higher education. We then juxtapose that need with a description of the current multilayered approaches to learning assessments, institutional performance review, and quality review in higher education—most of which are internally oriented and not designed for public or policy audiences. To provide a glimpse of the future, we describe some of the more promising innovations connecting assessment to public accountability. We conclude with recommendations for design principles that might form the basis for a new consensus about a public accountability structure that is appropriate to our diverse system of higher education.

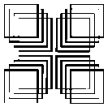
The economic and social vitality of our country depends upon the future success of our postsecondary educational system. Accomplishing this agenda will require not just preserving past successes, but also building new models for the future. We encourage others who share our vision to join us in this work.

**Edward B. Rust, Jr.**

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer  
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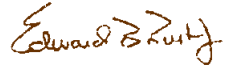
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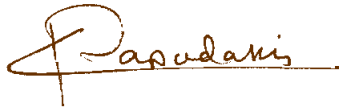
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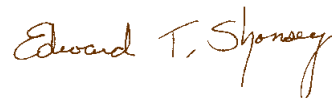
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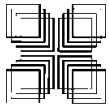
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# Introduction

What we mean  
by accountability  
and assessment.

**This paper explores issues of public accountability for American higher education, with a particular focus on how assessment of student learning is embedded into accountability measures.**

Learning assessment and public accountability are hot topics in educational and public policy arenas these days. But despite their ubiquity, *assessment* and *accountability* typically are not defined. To confuse matters further, the terms often are used interchangeably, so this paper begins with definitions:

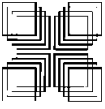
- **Assessment** is an analytical tool for evaluating performance.
- **Accountability** is the public presentation and communication of evidence about performance in relation to goals.

Accountability systems are built with data from assessments—but accountability is not achieved simply by making the results of those assessments available to the public. For accountability to occur, evidence about performance must be defined in the context of institutional and social goals that reflect a public agenda. And that evidence must be communicated in a way that is broadly accessible, rather than in the language of education insiders.

Accordingly, this discussion focuses on the intersection of goals, performance, assessment, and a public dialogue about results.

Our focus on student learning assessment and public accountability does not mean that we believe measures of student learning should be the only criterion for higher education accountability. Several other measures of institutional performance also shape public accountability in higher education: Resource use, research and service, and contributions to economic development are chief among them. These institutionally based measures are already common in higher education accountability systems. But measures of student learning are not, which is one of the reasons we are focusing on this topic.

For our purposes here, we are most concerned with the *national capacity to measure and publicly account for general knowledge and skill levels* that students obtain from higher education. It is not about grading individual students, nor about using student learning assessments as the primary measure for evaluating institutional performance (as we now are trying to do in public K–12 education). Also, *national* in this context does not mean federal or governmental, nor does it imply that there should be a single assessment instrument or test applied to all of higher education. National capacity can be developed, and in fact is probably enriched, through multiple types of assessments.



# One: Higher Education Under Pressure

What's driving the growing demand for student learning accountability?

**Some higher education leaders view the public discussion of student learning as an educational policy fad, fueled by political rhetoric about accountability and headed toward clumsy, governmentally imposed solutions to nonexistent problems.**

There's some truth to that. Forum members are acutely aware that improving public accountability for student learning will not be a panacea for the deep and serious challenges facing higher education.

But we believe this is not just an issue *du jour*. A number of economic, demographic, and labor force trends are shaping this discussion, which will persist long after the political mood shifts. From these trends, a national agenda for higher education is emerging, which includes an imperative to increase access *and* close achievement gaps without diminishing quality. Improving student learning, both within institutions and, most importantly, across sectors, is central to this agenda. The forces shaping this debate range widely and are discussed below.

**Tight labor markets.** The current economic slump notwithstanding, the trend of the past 20 years has been toward an international economy,

fueled by tight labor markets that have placed a premium on sophisticated skills.

In the United States, the demand for high-level skills has made postsecondary education an economic necessity for most workers. In 1973, a male college graduate's first job typically paid 33 percent more than that of a male high school graduate; today, the difference has grown to 81 percent.<sup>1</sup>

But the production of skilled workers from higher education is not adequate to meet the needs of the future. By 2020 the U.S. economy will require 12 million to 14 million more skilled workers than are being produced today, according to Carnevale and Desrochers. Closing the degree attainment gap could add \$230 billion in national wealth, and as much as \$80 billion in new tax revenues per year.<sup>2</sup>

Employers increasingly are looking for something beyond degree attainment in new hires. Forum surveys show that employers are looking for a combination of skills and knowledge, including proficiency in leadership, teamwork, problem solving, analytical, critical thinking, communication, and writing skills. They want employees who have the skills to succeed in a global, multicultural environment. They also place a premium on colleagues who are proficient at multitasking and able to upgrade their skills continuously.

Unfortunately, consensus about broad learning outcomes expected for the baccalaureate degree has become less—rather than more—sharply defined. Nationwide, although regional accreditors agree that the baccalaureate degree is awarded after 120 credit hours, they leave it up to the institution to clarify what these credits include in terms of measurable educational goals or competencies. Unless employers recruit from institutions with clear learning standards and competencies, they have to hope for the best—and be prepared to supplement the college diploma with other measures, such as internally designed literacy and numeracy assessments, or even SAT scores, as a number of employers are reportedly doing.<sup>3</sup>

**Enrollment growth and change.** Nationwide enrollments in higher education will grow by about 2.5 million students by 2015. The large majority of new students will be minorities, with the greatest increase among Latino students.<sup>4</sup> Some of the expansion will come from population growth, but much of it will come from higher college-going rates, which already are at 70 percent for recent high school graduates. And enrollment of older, working adults is expected to continue to grow. Already, close to 40 percent of today's college and university students are 25 years of age or older.

Enrollment growth will not be evenly distributed across the country, nor among different sectors of higher education.<sup>5</sup> From 2002 to 2015, growth will be greatest in the Sunbelt, coastal states, and some western states, with the greatest percentage growth in Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina, and the greatest numeric growth in Florida and California. Much of the collegiate enrollment growth in these states is expected to come from low-income students in urban, public two-year institutions. Undergraduate enrollments may be steady, or even declining, in parts of the Midwest, the plains states, and New England.

Higher education traditionally has been a route to economic mobility in this country. But unless we do a better job of getting low-income students both *into* and *through* college, today's demographic trends could deepen social inequality and

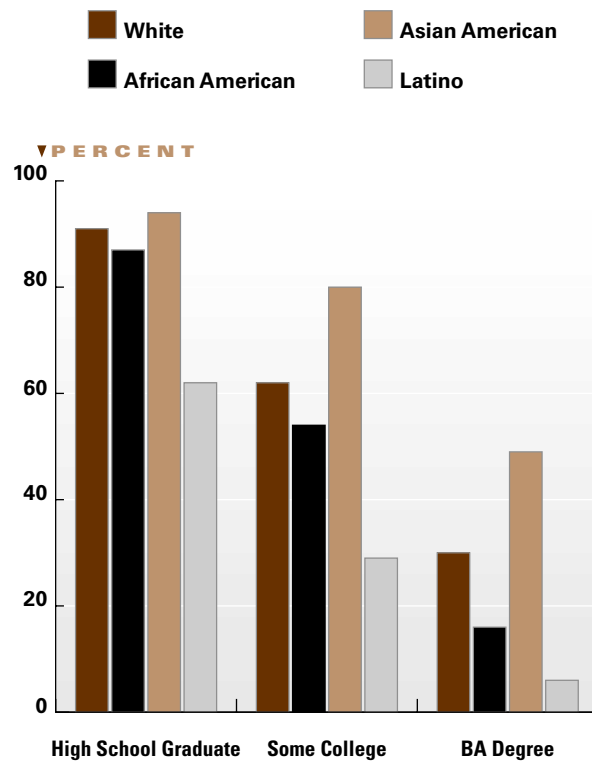
economic decline. Extending the diversity agenda from access to completion of an associate or baccalaureate degree is an economic imperative. Closing achievement gaps also will be central to national economic development, because of the competitive advantage enjoyed by companies with diverse workforces. This is especially true for companies that engage in international commerce.<sup>6</sup>

In the last 20 years, the United States has made modest progress toward closing the gaps among racial sub-groups in the transition from high school to initial enrollment in college.<sup>7</sup> However, the disparities in baccalaureate achievement rates remain substantial: White and Asian baccalaureate attainment rates are 20 or more percentage points higher than those for either Latinos or African Americans. We cannot make progress on workforce diversity without paying attention to degree completion and student learning. To do this, student learning assessments must be tools to improve teaching for today's diverse student populations—not merely screening and sorting devices, designed to sift students out of the system, rather than get them through it.

A national agenda for higher education is emerging, which includes an imperative to increase access *and* close achievement gaps without diminishing quality.

## The Leaky Pipeline

*Proportion of students who succeed and move through different educational levels, by racial sub-group<sup>8</sup>*



**Funding trends in higher education.** Higher education has undergone a financial sea change in the last decade, characterized by higher tuitions and reduced public funding.

Changes are most dramatic in public institutions. There, tuition at the start of the 1990s accounted for roughly 20 percent of overall revenues. Now, tuition averages almost twice that share.<sup>9</sup> (This shift has been caused in part by recession-driven state funding cuts.) Higher spending within colleges, particularly evident among research institutions in the boom times of the late 1990s, also has contributed to the financial strains. The problem is exacerbated because state spending in mandatory areas—in particular the state share for Medicaid—has been increasing faster than population or revenue growth. This creates a revenue squeeze that particularly hurts higher education, which is a discretionary spending item at the state level.

Unfortunately for higher education, there is no reason to believe that the funding increases

enjoyed in the late 1990s will return any time soon. Fully 44 of the 50 states are projected to have structural funding gaps between revenues and expenditures, which, if left unaddressed, will require further cutbacks in higher education funding.<sup>10</sup> The hard reality is this: Even with tuition increases, total funding is not likely to increase commensurate with enrollment growth, and funding per student will decline.

The rising cost of college has become one of the more potent galvanizing forces shaping public discussion about accountability in higher education. Elected officials at both the state and federal levels are being asked to *do something* to stem the tide of rising tuitions, are asking hard questions about institutional spending priorities, and want to see evidence of value added for the costs of college. It doesn't matter that state budget cuts are responsible for some of the tuition increases; the public does not have to reconcile its support for tax reductions with a consistent position on tuition increases. As a result, the historical deference shown to institutional judgments about quality is being replaced by external judgments about spending priorities.

**Increasing educational productivity.** Accommodating the new generation of students means there will be a much greater imperative to maintain or improve learning outcomes while containing or reducing costs. To accomplish this requires attention to real productivity in higher education. Failure to act on this imperative could result in reduced access, increased time to degree, higher attrition, more tuition dependency, and a lower quality of learning.

This scenario is not likely in the small number of institutions with diverse funding sources, strong endowments, and national or international reputations. These institutions are already strong, and likely will remain so. But pressure to maintain or increase enrollments and increase degree production despite funding reductions will be intense. Absent interventions to ensure attention to learning quality as the first priority, reduced access and lowered quality are serious threats for many American higher education institutions.

Measuring higher education productivity has always been tough, in part because of the difficulty of measuring student learning. Instead, conventional institutional performance reporting uses input measures (resources, student admissions standards, faculty credentials) or activity measures (enrollments, time to degree, graduation rates).

Unfortunately, it is possible to produce so-called improvements in these measures while actually hurting teaching and learning. Institutions wanting to “game” retention and graduation numbers can do so by raising admissions standards, avoiding part-time and adult students, and passing marginal students despite evidence of basic skills deficits. One of the most important public policy imperatives in higher education is to enhance real institutional productivity by focusing on learning in the face of altered funding circumstances.

**The “deinstitutionalization” of higher education.** Higher education traditionally has relied on institutional controls—for example, requirements for student admissions and curriculum prerequisites to graduation—to assess and maintain student learning standards. However, changes in higher education now mean that these controls capture ever-smaller proportions of students who earn the bachelor’s degree.

For instance, admissions standards—traditionally one of the first lines of quality control—affect only about one-fifth of the students who go to college. Stanford University researchers estimate that 80 percent of students who matriculate into higher education go to institutions with low or no admissions standards.<sup>11</sup> Because so many students take courses from several institutions before graduating, institutional quality controls on curriculum and course sequencing also are breaking down. In fact, 60 percent of undergraduates attend more than one institution, and more than 40 percent of students who transfer do so across state lines.<sup>12</sup> Although successful graduates earn the required 120 units, all this mobility makes it tough for educators to gauge whether their students have met specific learning goals.

One of the most important public policy imperatives in higher education is to enhance real institutional productivity by focusing on learning in the face of altered funding circumstances.

The most obvious manifestation of the “deinstitutionalization” of higher education is distance learning. Almost all college students now experience some part of their learning electronically, through Internet-enhanced classroom instruction supplements, if not through courses taught completely online. A recent survey of distance-based learning among accredited institutions found that online enrollments are growing in excess of 20 percent per year. In 2002–03, a reported 1.6 million learners across the United States enrolled in at least one online course. This includes both traditional students who use online instruction to supplement their residential experience and many older working adults. If current growth rates continue, by 2015 “virtual” student enrollments will almost equal the number of conventional college and university students enrolled today.<sup>13</sup>

As distance learning has grown, distance-based learning providers have been forced to demonstrate that they are meeting standards for learning comparable to conventionally delivered education. As a result, they have

## Public policy makers at both the state and federal levels are calling for stronger accountability systems patterned after the K–12 model.

become pioneers in student learning assessments. This has also led to a growing awareness that there are no benchmarks for learning standards in conventional education that could serve as a basis for comparison with nontraditional providers.

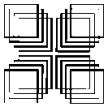
**Public policy pressures.** Public interest in institutional accountability is by no means confined to higher education. Opinion polls show a continued erosion of public trust in institutional decision making in both the public and private sectors. In the public sector, the “reinventing government” movement has generated a change in the language of public service, away from discussion of *organization* and *process* to focus on measurable goals, performance indicators, and customer service. Respect for self-regulation also has eroded among the professions, from health care and accounting to K–12 education.

The progress of the K–12 standards-based assessment and accountability reform movement has, to many, set the stage for an extension of this paradigm into higher education. The K–12 model explicitly links student learning assessments with institutional performance measures, and is accompanied by sanctions or rewards for under-performing schools. The goal is to ensure that all students are taught to the same set of standards, and that they achieve learning goals through a centralized curriculum and assessment instruments aligned to it.

Despite many bumps in the road, momentum from this model has increased expectations for analogous approaches in higher education. Public policy makers at both the state and federal levels are calling for stronger accountability systems patterned after the K–12 model. Many higher education leaders argue that the K–12 model is inappropriate and unworkable in higher education because of postsecondary education’s enormous variety and diversity, the absence of common curricula, and the different types of student learning goals.

States also have played a very different role in standards and quality assurance in public postsecondary education, in contrast to the system of local control and finance in elementary and secondary education. To many public policy makers, articulation of these differences between K–12 and postsecondary education, however valid, begs the question of what model higher education leaders are *for*, rather than what they’re *against*, when it comes to public accountability for learning.

The forthcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act could set the stage for an expanded federal role in accountability patterned after the No Child Left Behind legislation and linked to federal concern over the rising costs of higher education. It is possible that a bipartisan consensus will form between Congress and the executive branch, leading to the imposition of federal higher education accountability standards that are tied to student aid eligibility. Even if the federal government stays out of it, state governments will continue their push toward greater accountability. This is raising concerns in the higher education community, where many are worried about the prospects of government intrusion into academic policy areas. But the absence of alternative measures of institutional performance may have created a vacuum that policy makers will try to fill.



# Two: The Assessment Jungle

Multilayered approaches to internally focused learning assessments, institutional performance, and quality reviews.

**H**igher education does not suffer from a lack of assessment.

To the contrary, there is a complicated system of assessment, including program and institutional quality review, that has evolved in a decentralized fashion during the last 100 years. It is, by design, not an integrated framework, but one that supports a highly decentralized, market-oriented system. The diversity of colleges and universities and the wide range of options available to students are strengths of the American system. While the majority of institutions are private—59 percent—most students—76 percent—enroll in public institutions. Community colleges constitute the single largest sector, enrolling more students nationwide than either the public or private four-year sectors. Competition among institutions for resources, including students, is often intense.

Unlike other developed nations, our country does not have a central ministry of education to control or regulate quality in higher education. Student learning assessments and institutional performance reviews are conducted through a series of decentralized and largely disconnected assessments.

Student learning assessments generally do not connect to public measures of institutional performance, outside of professional licensure examinations and specialized forms of accredita-

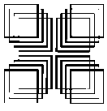
tion. There are some exceptions. Some state systems—Florida and Kentucky, for example—mandate broad tests of learning for advancement or graduation, and these test results are reported by institutions on state accountability reports. Institutional-level pass rates for students taking professional examinations are also included in some public accountability reports.

Generally speaking, the growing interest in student learning outcomes has been focused on ways to connect learning assessment with institutional improvements, not with broad public goals for higher education. The internal focus has been motivated by the conviction that improvement in performance should, after all, be the primary purpose of any system for public accountability, because accountability is about results and performance. But the inward focus means that there may be weaknesses in an institution's public communication about performance, as well as in the tools that root out performance problems occurring *between* rather than *inside* institutions.

We summarize these different approaches in Figure 1, organized according to the audience, purpose, and unit of analysis—students, institutions, or other levels—for review.

**Figure 1: Types of Assessments in Higher Education**

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Unit of analysis/scope</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Screening for admissions, placement	Internal to the institution	Student/inputs	Admissions tests (SAT/ACT), placement tests
Determining credits or assigning grades for individual courses	Internal to the institution, students and faculty	Student/course level	Tests, essays
Assessment of learning across curriculum, can be required for individuals to move to upper-division work or to graduate; may also be included in state accountability reports	Internal to the institution, students and faculty	Student/cross-curricular learning or skills	“Rising junior” examinations, Capstone examinations, portfolio assessments
Public information about proxies for performance, such as actuarial data on time to degree, retention, graduation, finances; may include institution-level results from exams	Internal and external institutional leaders, government, consumer information (used in third-party reviews)	Institutional/campus or sector/system/performance data	Student Right to Know, NCES-IPEDS data, state accountability reports
Public certification of quality, for government funding and institutional improvement	Governing board members, faculty, state government, general public	Institutional (typically at the campus level)/peer review	Accreditation reviews
Comparisons among institutions on different indicators of quality, including student inputs (admissions) and retention and graduation rates	Consumers, institutional leaders	Institution/campus-level performance and reputation	Third-party reviews such as rankings
Primarily for licenses; results also may be included in other accountability reports	Public certification for licensure	Student learning/discipline or subject area	Accounting, bar, medical, teachers examinations
Primarily for institutional improvement, to improve student learning experiences	Institutional leaders (reports are public only if institution permits)	Student/institution–assessments of learning experiences	National Survey of Student Engagement, Community College Survey of Student Engagement
Assisting with state policy and planning	State policy makers	Aggregate state performance across all institutions	State accountability reports, National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education Report Card
Identifying broad patterns of student learning	National research (although some states “oversample” to use in state accountability reports)	National snapshots of student learning or competencies	National Assessment of Adult Literacy



# Three: Making the Connection

Promising innovations that link accountability with learning assessment.

**As we have seen, most student learning assessments fail to make a connection to the public accountability conversation, in spite of layers of activity and a vast array of assessment tools.**

Fortunately, some educators, policy makers, and researchers from the institutional level to regional, state, and federal venues are moving toward a more holistic approach. They are using assessment information in their efforts to make progress toward public policy goals.

Here we describe a range of efforts underway to strengthen the connection between assessment and accountability in higher education. These efforts include new collaborations across sectors, next-generation approaches to state accountability reporting, and federal data collection. (See Figure 2, “New Connections Between Assessment and Accountability,” for a summary.)

**P–16 collaborations.** Researchers estimate that two-thirds of the institutional variations in college graduation rates are caused by characteristics of the incoming students—in particular, the intensity of their academic preparation for college-level work. Improving student preparation for college is essential to national strategies to close college achievement gaps for poor and

## Improving the P–16 Connection

Voluntary P–16 collaborative structures are designed to focus on strategies to increase college preparedness for all students, improve college-going rates, and enhance retention and graduation from college. The agenda includes aligning high school curricula with graduation requirements, and giving more attention to the skills needed for students to succeed in college. The following examples, which are two among many, show the promise of this work.

In 2003, the **Association of American Universities** sponsored work by a group called **Standards for Success (S4S)** to study the alignment between high school examinations and the standards needed to succeed in college. Their study, *Mixed Messages*, shows state-by-state results of their analysis, which demonstrates a spotty match between high school exams and college learning requirements. The results shouldn’t be surprising, because neither side has considered itself responsible for addressing these misalignments. But the research allows the work to move to the next level, which is engagement of strategies to ensure smoother transitions from high school to college.<sup>14</sup>

In another effort, officials in the **California State University (CSU)** partnered with K–12 officials to use the results of an already mandated statewide exam administered to 11th graders as their placement exams for remedial work in CSU. This allows them to identify potential learning deficiencies for CSU-bound students while the students still have a year of high school to complete, thus allowing them to raise their skill levels before, rather than after, enrolling in college. The results are expected to reduce the need for remediation among CSU students, thus increasing retention and graduation, and shortening time to degree.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 2: New Connections Between Assessment and Accountability**

Innovation	Public Policy Goals	Connections
<b>P-16 collaborations and alignments</b>	Improve transitions from high school to college; improve high school graduation rates; reduce college remediation; increase college graduation; and lower college time-to-degree and cost to the student.	Alignment between high school graduation exams and college-entrance learning assessments.
<b>Measuring student engagement</b>	Improve conditions for student learning; and develop tools to allow comparisons of learning engagement across institutions.	Provide feedback to institutions (and public) on student survey results regarding college experiences.
<b>Regional accreditation focus on student learning outcomes</b>	Boost accrediting agencies' and institutions' focus on student learning; and connect evidence of student learning to institutional quality review.	Ensure institutions have policies/ processes to gauge student learning goals and results; and help institutions and accrediting agencies develop a common language to communicate their work.
<b>State accountability reports</b>	Retool information to support decentralization with accountability; clarify levels of data required by state policy audiences vs. institutional governing boards; and assign responsibility for student learning assessment to institutions, connected to broad state goals for postsecondary education.	Strengthen capacity to make policy decisions based on performance data.
<b>Improved federal data and research</b>	Track students across institutions and states; improve information on student preparation, course work, retention, and graduation; and update information on adult literacy and workforce readiness.	Provide improved building blocks for state accountability reports, third-party reviews, and federal and state policy.

minority students. Many institutions and some states are working to address the quality of student preparation for college through better collaborations between K-12 and higher education. These collaborations are commonly known as P-16 initiatives. (See “Improving the P-16 Connection.”)

**Measuring student engagement.** The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its counterpart, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), are surveys conducted at the individual institutional level, assessing college students’ views on different aspects of their experience.<sup>16</sup> Neither NSSE nor CCSSE purports to measure student learning

outcomes or attribute learning results to the institutions; instead they measure processes and activities, such as types of assignments, time spent with faculty members, and time spent in conversation with other students.

These measures were selected because they are widely believed to contribute to effective teaching and learning, and are measures of good teaching practices that should exist in all institutions, regardless of their mission. NSSE survey results are provided in confidence to the institution (although some institutions make the results public) whereas institutional results from CCSSE are public.

**Regional accreditation.** Accreditation is a fundamental part of the American system of quality assurance for higher education. It has evolved over the last hundred years, from its roots in voluntary and largely private institutional peer reviews to an increasingly public partnership between institutions and government. This public partnership is overseen by the federal government through periodic reviews of the accrediting agencies to ensure that they meet federal standards.

For many years, the federal standards for accreditation focused on processes for review of organizational characteristics (such as mission, finance, governance, and curriculum design, as appropriate to each institution’s mission). Since 1992, the federal government has required agencies to develop an additional standard on student learning outcomes. The new requirements have accelerated an ongoing national conversation about the purposes of accreditation and the role of student learning in institutional accreditation. (See “Student Learning and Institutional Accreditation.”)

**Strengthening state accountability reporting—and improving federal data and research.** Most of the work being done nationally on public accountability is occurring at the state level, through various instruments designed to provide public information about higher education performance.

Over the past decade, every state has developed some type of accountability report for higher

Recent improvements  
in these data are having  
widespread impact.

## Student Learning and Institutional Accreditation

Within the past six years, all regional accrediting agencies have rewritten their standards for review to include a new standard on learning results. To accomplish this while respecting the realities of organizational complexity and institutional autonomy, they have focused on evidence of institutional assessments of learning goals and results, defined in the context of each individual institution. In other words, the review is of institutional policies and processes, not measures of student learning. Accrediting agencies offer guides for learning assessments, and maintain libraries of institutional best practices in learning assessments.

The regional agencies also are collaborating at the national level. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation is leading these cooperative efforts through its national project on student learning outcomes. This project is ongoing, and is funded in part by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The project goals are as follows: to help accrediting agencies develop a coherent way to explain their work; to develop a common language to communicate about student learning within higher education; and to develop common resources to help agencies and institutions improve their focus on student learning.<sup>17</sup>

education, ranging from institutional-level data compilations, to “report cards” for each institution showing common state indicators, to statewide data collections that aggregate data from all institutions to produce a composite statewide picture. Several important initiatives are helping state leaders strengthen the transparency of information contained in these reports on student learning, as well as better collect data for specific policy and oversight purposes.

Federal data provide some of the building blocks for these state accountability reports, as well as for third-party reviews such as rankings services. Recent improvements in these data are having widespread impact. And a new generation of federal research on the skills of traditional students and adults is boosting the capacity of policy makers and higher education leaders to tailor policy and programs more precisely to the needs of today’s learners. (See “The Next Generation of State Accountability Reporting and Federal Research.”)

## The Next Generation of State Accountability Reporting and Federal Research

Interest in **accountability at the state level** has grown, as states have changed their governance structures by trading in old state control mechanisms for stronger accountability for results. Historical approaches to program-level control (such as program review) are being discarded in favor of greater institutional autonomy to respond to local markets.

The result has been that many states—and institutions—are looking for information system changes that support decentralization along with accountability. States have struggled to find ways to embed information about student learning into their statewide accountability systems.

Several projects are developing better models for states seeking to embed student learning into public accountability reporting.

Historically, the *federal government's* primary role in postsecondary education has been to ensure broad-based economic access to higher education through the need-based student aid programs. But the federal government has a second and important role with regard to the accountability agenda, because it is the primary keeper of national data about higher education institutions. Among other things, the federal methodology for calculating cohort retention, time-to-degree, and graduation rates has become the gold standard for institutional, state, and accrediting agency reporting.

**State accountability initiatives.** The Pew Charitable Trusts—sponsored National Forum on College-Level Learning is working with a small group of states to generate state-based data about the intellectual qualities of their graduates, by developing statewide average scores from existing tests. The effort is designed to lead to a model that will grade states on student learning, potentially to be used in the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's *Measuring Up* report card on state performance.<sup>18</sup> The grades will focus on the statewide level, and will not include data about individual students or institutions.

Another effort is underway through the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. The center is working with a number of states to discuss the effectiveness of their accountability reporting, and to find ways to generalize beyond their experiences to create some best practices. One of the lessons that is emerging from this work is that statewide accountability systems should be tiered, to distinguish between aggregate statewide data aimed at state policy audiences, and the more detailed institutional

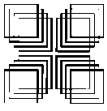
performance data needed by institutional governing boards. In this model, state policy makers would require that institutional governing boards take responsibility for defining learning goals and for measuring learning results, consistent with their mission within the broader state structure.<sup>19</sup>

**Federal data and research improvements.** Nationally collected data on retention and graduation currently provide the most significant basis for accountability reports about institutional performance leading to student success. These programs are more important than ever, given the changing economics of higher education.

Unfortunately, these data tell us about student enrollment, or "seat time," measured in credits accumulated, and about attrition patterns, but not much about what students have learned or what they are able to do. Even with this limitation, however, these data reveal a good deal about the gaps between national performance and institutional-level data, gaps that are caused by the growing number of students who take courses from more than one institution. These students currently are counted in institutional-level reports as drop-outs, despite the fact that the majority ultimately earn a degree. Improvements in student data collection are being made to allow individual students to be tracked across institutions and across states.

National research also has improved through the administration of periodic sampling of student transcripts and skills assessments done by the National Center for Educational Statistics, specifically through the center's National Educational Longitudinal surveys (NELS), the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) surveys, and the Baccalaureate and Beyond surveys. These surveys provide the best source of national data about student preparation and coursework, and how these factors affect student progress through the K–16 pipeline.

There is one direct assessment—or test—of some adult learning, called the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL).<sup>20</sup> Administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, NAAL is an examination of English-language prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills administered to a nationally representative sample of American adults aged 16 and older. NAAL provides national snapshots of broad changes in adult literacy. NAAL or a similar instrument conceivably could be administered to a national sample of individuals who have attended or graduated from college.



# Four: Toward a New Accountability Consensus

Public accountability design principles for a diverse higher education system.

**The gaps between learning assessments and public indicators of performance in higher education are pervasive enough that changes are needed to meet the goals of improved measures of learning and public accountability. Wholesale changes creating a single system, integrated through a common vocabulary with common metrics, are neither practical nor appropriate, given the diversity and decentralization of American higher education.**

But clearly, there continue to be significant gaps in the information that the public and policy makers can access about learning assessment in the context of accountability systems.

- There is a lack of consensus within higher education and in government about what constitutes an appropriate accountability model for higher education. The default model for public accountability is the K–12 approach, which connects individual student assessment with common measures of insti-

tutional performance. The diversity of colleges and universities, however, prevents this from becoming a workable model for higher education.

- Most of the attention to accountability in higher education is institutionally defined and is designed to measure learning as a tool for institutional improvement. Much of the information is not translated to the public, and lacks context from comparative data about other institutions or from national measures of expected outcomes. Public accountability cannot be achieved when the learning assessment system is so self-referential.
- Broad measures of student learning remain disconnected from public policy decisions concerning allocation of resources at the state and federal levels. Neither state nor institutional decision makers can look at broad trends to understand the consequences of changed resources on student learning. Too often, “productivity” is seen as a way to cut costs, rather than a way to protect and improve quality.

In our judgment, these gaps cannot be solved entirely by improving communication about what is already in place. We believe it is time for higher education leaders to recognize this and take a proactive, constructive stance toward public accountability and student learning. This is not a short-term political problem that will

blow over. In fact, there are substantive and serious reasons for fresh alternatives to our historical approaches to internal assessment and external accountability for learning.

To solve the problem of incomplete public measures of student learning while preserving the strengths of the existing system, we need coordinated strategies, beginning with the individual institution, and extending to states, accrediting agencies, and the national level. These strategies must be grounded in a shared vision of how they fit into a larger structure of public accountability for student learning, based on some broadly shared values about purpose, audience, and priority.

This paper stops short of making specific recommendations about how this might work. We do, however, offer some design principles that could form the basis for a national consensus about a new, constructive framework for accountability in postsecondary education. These principles include the following:

**Purpose and need.** Better tools for public accountability are needed to improve performance in teaching and learning across all of higher education, and to ensure public trust in higher education institutions.

**Language.** Assessment and accountability are not synonymous. Assessment is analysis of data for the purpose of institutional improvement. Accountability is the public communication about different dimensions of performance, geared to general audiences, and framed in the context of goals and standards. Public accountability systems are built upon and support effective institutional-level assessment and accountability structures, but they are not substitutes for them. This is a key distinction from the accountability model applied to K–12 education, which uses assessment as the basis for accountability. Without debating the merits of this approach in K–12, we have concluded that this model is not useful to higher education.

**Distinction among roles.** There are multiple actors involved in accountability for quality in

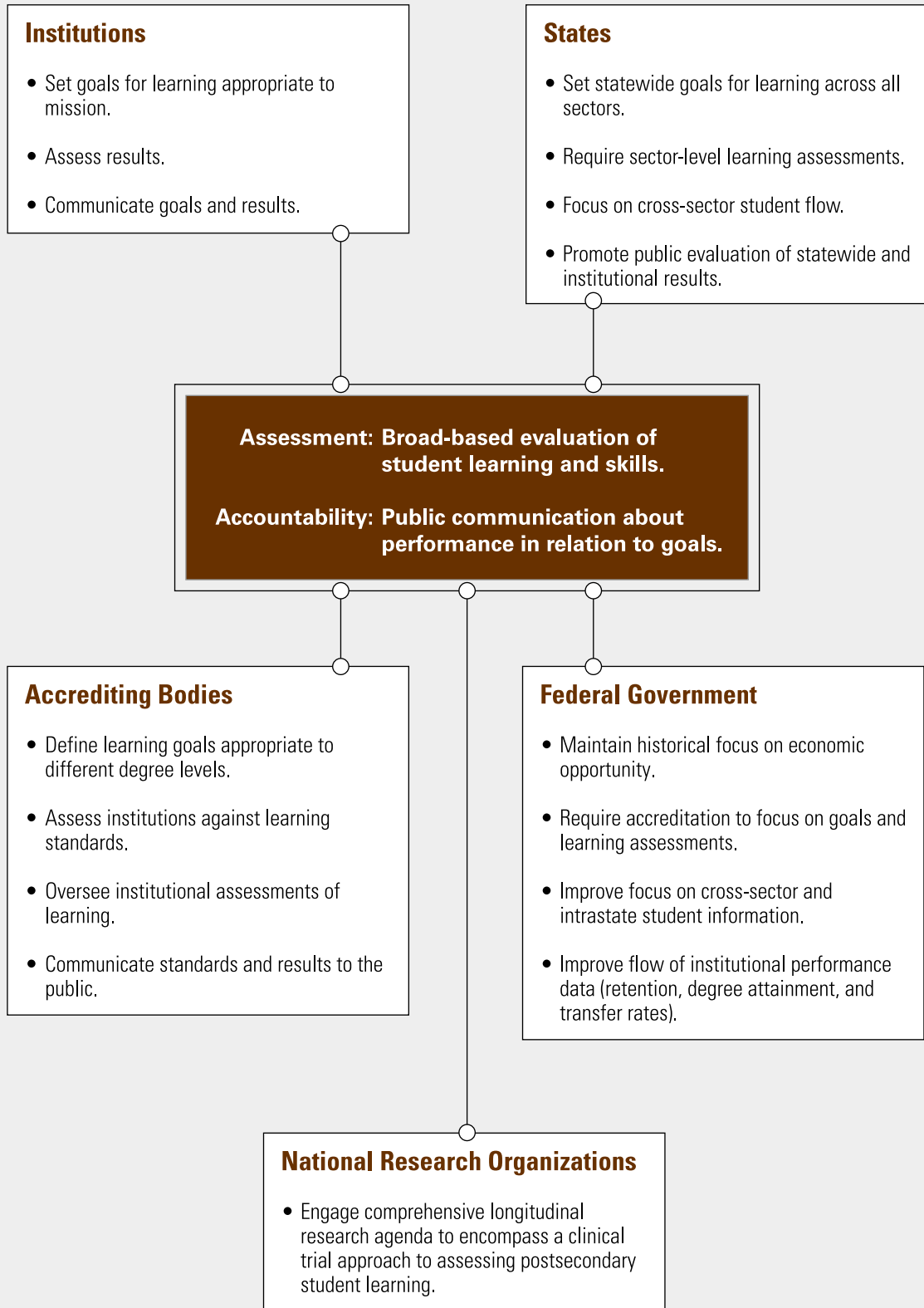
This is not a short-term political problem that will blow over. In fact, there are substantive and serious reasons for fresh alternatives to our historical approaches to internal assessment and external accountability for learning.

higher education. Each entity should do what it does best and with the greatest legitimacy. Duplication of effort should be avoided. (See Figure 3, “Toward a New Accountability Consensus: Levels of Responsibility,” next page.)

**The institutional role.** Each college and university should be able to define its expectations for student learning and provide evidence of its success in meeting these goals in broadly understandable terms. Institutions must find ways to clearly communicate their goals—and evidence of their effectiveness—to students, parents, employers, and others. Institutions already are required to factor learning assessments into the accreditation review. It is time to build upon this platform by extending what has been an internally directed agenda to include public audiences. Individual institutional governing boards, working with faculty, students, and other stakeholders, need to be part of this discussion.

**Figure 3: Toward a New Accountability Consensus: Levels of Responsibility**

Assessment is an analytical tool for evaluating performance, and accountability is the public presentation and communication of evidence about performance in relation to goals. What are the various roles and responsibilities for developing the tools and systems to translate data into information from the institutional level to the levels of regional accreditation, as well as to state and federal policy?



**The states' role.** State governments should build accountability structures that distinguish between aggregate statewide and institutional performance. The primary audiences for statewide data are state public policy makers, who need to be able to assess broad progress toward well-defined state goals. They should pay particular attention to student flow across institutions, including transitions from high school to college, student transfer, and patterns for returning adult student enrollment and graduation. States should structure accountability systems such that institutions bear the primary responsibility for institutional accountability, including setting goals and documenting outcomes for student learning.

**Regional accrediting bodies' role.** Regional accreditation plays a key role as the bridge between individual institutional assessment and public accountability for quality. The American system of self-regulation through accreditation has much that is worthwhile, and it should be strengthened and preserved. Accreditation already is regulated by the federal government, and is a likely target for even more government intervention as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. In this process, the potential exists for the government to move beyond requiring public disclosure to dictating the terms under which disclosure must take place. Unless done carefully, this process could become a vehicle for federal intrusion into academic policy, including admissions, curriculum, and graduation standards. To maintain appropriate independence from government, accreditors need to improve public communication about their standards and expectations for learning, including broad learning outcomes expected at the baccalaureate and associate degree levels.

**The federal government's role.** The federal government has two roles to play in this agenda. The first and most important is to maintain its historical focus on educational equity and economic opportunity in higher education. The nation's commitment to higher education access for all students, regardless of their economic circumstances, has never been more important. States and institutions need the federal govern-

There are multiple actors involved in accountability for quality in higher education. Each entity should do what it does best and with the greatest legitimacy.

ment to maintain need-based aid for college. But the federal role in research and data collection is also key to this agenda. Improvements in federal data collection and research have helped shed light on broad patterns of student flow across institutions and states. The federal government needs to continue to lead data collection efforts to track student flow across institutions.

**The role of national research.** Better data about student learning is needed, and a national research agenda needs to be engaged toward that end. We need the equivalent of clinical trial research on student learning in higher education—independent from inappropriate intrusion by governmental, institutional, or other interests. That will require a much more sustained, focused, and disciplined investment than is now being made in comprehensive longitudinal research, using a variety of measures of learning.

# Summary and Conclusions

Assessment, accountability, and America's future.

**This paper has explored some of the issues of assessment and accountability for student learning in American higher education.**

The Forum is convinced that improved performance on student learning—including closing gaps among ethnic groups in different dimensions of learning—is central to the national imperative to maintain economic growth, improve worker skills, enhance the diversity of the workforce, and increase educational productivity within higher education. Greater transparency about learning is also needed to maintain public credibility about quality and performance in America's higher education institutions.

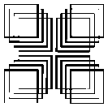
Moving forward on this agenda will require changes in both national and institutional assessments of student learning.

Unless we develop better instruments that will allow us to be seriously engaged in this issue, efforts to improve teaching and learning will be addressed only rhetorically and politically. A strong potential exists for one-size-fits-all solutions, imposed from outside higher education. The results could be a waste of time at best, and damaging at worst.

A better path is one that will respect the diversity and decentralization of American higher

education. This path also will require consensus about models for connecting learning assessment with public accountability that respect a higher education system that is the envy of the world.

A strong potential exists for one-size-fits-all solutions, imposed from outside higher education. The results could be a waste of time at best, and damaging at worst.



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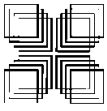
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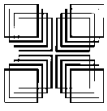
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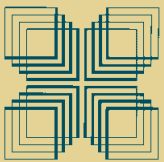
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