NEW DEBATES ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY

ETS on the New Debates about Accountability

Although the success of our society has always depended on the educational attainment of its people, the educational landscape has changed dramatically in the 21st century. Globalization has had a significant impact on education worldwide, and the questioning of higher education institutions as agents of success for our students and learners has taken center stage. Many institutions are being challenged by the new economy and by new educational models, innovation and technology.

ETS, with its 25-year history of helping institutions measure student learning outcomes to satisfy accreditation requirements and assess student performance, is helping to shape this evolution in higher education. In an age of increasing accountability, we are working closely with higher education institutions and organizations on how to best provide evidence of learning to a variety of external stakeholders including accrediting bodies, students and their families, policymakers at the state and federal level, the public and employers.

In response to the changing needs of institutions and their students in this evolving educational environment, ETS is now developing more flexible ways to measure student learning, such as the new *HEIghten*™ Outcomes Assessment Suite. These modular assessments include skill areas that are aligned with national and international frameworks, the latest research and new education policies — Quantitative Literacy, Critical Thinking, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Digital Information Literacy, Civic Competency and Engagement, and Intercultural Competency and Diversity. Institutions can incorporate the assessments within their assessment plan to fit their unique needs and goals, as well as include a set of their own locally authored items. This comprehensive tool can be used to complement internal assessments for curriculum improvement and accreditation.

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As the accountability of higher education is debated, ETS will continue to support institutions by providing evidence-centered assessments to demonstrate student learning and program effectiveness. In collaboration with *Inside Higher Ed*, we're pleased to bring you information that will help you meet the demands of today's educational landscape.

David G. Payne

David G. Payne
Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Global Education Division
ETS

For more information on the HEIghten Outcomes Assessment Suite, visit **www.ets.org/heighten**.

INTRODUCTION

The word "accountability" is something of a Rorschach test in higher education. When people talk about the word in general or a specific accountability measure, it's sometimes hard to realize people are talking about the same thing. Some describe higher education as badly in need of more accountability – to students and their tuition-paying parents for the quality of education, and to the taxpayers for their investments in higher education. Others see accountability as a buzzword that allows bureaucrats to dictate educational practices that may provide little help for anyone, but a lot of extra work for faculty members.

The articles and essays in this compilation describe some of the efforts to promote accountability – and the very mixed reactions to those efforts.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to track these issues and welcomes your feedback on this compilation and ideas for future coverage.

--The Editors
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NEXT PHASE FOR GATES'S COMPLETION AGENDA

BY PAUL FAIN

After seven years and half a billion dollars, the Gates Foundation announces its four priority areas for college completion policies and plans to release a data framework for measuring performance.

After spending roughly half a billion dollars on the college completion agenda during the last seven years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is ready to be more assertive about what it thinks should happen in four key areas of higher education policy.

The foundation lays out what an official there calls its "strategy reboot" in a March 2015 document. It describes a focus on data and information, finance and financial aid, college readiness, and innovation and scale.

Going forward, the foundation's advocacy will support federal and state policies in those priority areas -- meaning overarching policies rather than specific bills, because charitable organizations face restrictions on lobbying.

First up among the foundation's target areas will be the data piece, which also is likely to garner the most attention.

The goal is to "create a national data infrastructure that enables consistent collection and reporting of key performance metrics for all students in all institutions that are essential for promoting the change needed to reform the higher education system to produce more career-relevant credentials," the foundation said in its strategy paper.

Gates plans to release its new data reporting framework in 2015. The foundation will use it to seek improvements to existing federal data sets. On the state level, it will work with state governments on their higher education accountability systems, including performance-based funding formulas.

The foundation has identified 10 states that it will emphasize in this work, most of them with large populations: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

In addition, future grantees in higher education will be required to use the metrics, the foundation said. That means measuring how grant money is impacting student outcomes, such as graduation rates.

The shift by Gates isn't an about-face. And the stated priorities will be no surprise to academics who have followed its work in recent years.

The foundation has collected enough evidence with its many grants and experiments in higher

education that it has been able to coalesce around "directions worth emphasizing," said Daniel Greenstein, the director of education and postsecondary success in the foundation's U.S. program. "We're articulating a point of view."

Yet while Greenstein argues that the newly stated approach is iterative and an attempt to be transparent about the foundation's evolving views, it's certain to drum up interest in higher education -- some of it critical.

That's partially because Gates is a big fish. The world's largest charitable organization spent $73 million on higher education-related grants in the United States in 2014. That's less than 0.5 percent of the $150 billion or so the federal government spends. But the money leads to plenty of influence, among both policy makers and college leaders, many of whom are eager to receive grants and might fear pushing back on the foundation's work.

Over the years academics have criticized the foundation for being overly prescriptive. Gates has also taken flak for being bureaucratic and less than coherent with its many initiatives. The news media has amplified those complaints.

Scott L. Thomas has been one of the critics. A professor and dean at Claremont Graduate University's School of Education Studies, Thomas is an expert on the role of Gates and the Lumina

Foundation in higher education. He has researched how such megafoundations can drown out alternative viewpoints.

Thomas, however, likes what Gates is saying about its new strategy, which he calls a tightening of focus. "This is a logical and natural thing for them to be doing," he said.

In addition, Thomas says Gates has done a better job in the last three years of being less ham-handed with its solutions to higher education's problems. It's improved in part by bringing in more voices from the academy, including researchers and faculty members.

"Their agenda has become more sensitive to a variety of expert views," said Thomas.

Another occasional yet nuanced critic of the foundation agreed with Thomas's take. Michael S. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation, said Gates has become more responsive to feedback on its education policy work. McPherson said he was cautiously optimistic that the foundation -- and Greenstein -- could succeed with their newly focused approach.

"They're in a good spot to become clearer about where they're pressing without becoming less open-minded," he said.

But it won't be easy, said McPherson, in part because of the foundation's large footprint. "Gates is the only foundation you can see

from space."

Policy Opportunities

Gabriella Gomez will play a prominent role in Gates's policy work. Before the foundation hired her last August, Gomez was the assistant secretary for legislation and congressional affairs at the U.S. Department of Education.

"This is about us providing policies based on what we know will provide the greatest leverage for change and in some instances based on what we know works," Gomez said via e-mail.

An early agenda item will be simplification of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Senator Lamar Alexander, the Tennessee Republican who heads the Senate's education committee, has called for a two-question aid application to replace the current, 108-question one. Meanwhile, President Obama has proposed cutting 30 questions from the form.

The Gates Foundation is working with higher education associations to come up with a compromise position, said Greenstein. That could come in the next month or so.

With the FAFSA, the foundation will operate somewhat like it plans to on the forthcoming data system. In recent years Gates has helped fund the creation of a hodgepodge of voluntary accountability systems for colleges and higher education groups to measure

student progress and institutional effectiveness.

Notable examples include data projects from Gates-funded groups like Complete College America and Completion by Design, as well as higher education association-created systems such as the Student Achievement Measure, the Voluntary Framework of Accountability and the Voluntary System of Accountability.

It's no easy task to sort through the various data collection projects, which overlap in many ways and differ in others. So the foundation will attempt to cut through the fog by releasing its own metrics framework later in 2015.

By drawing from the projects it funded, Gates said it will "focus on the data and systems needed to measure institutional performance and progress on access, cost and outcomes."

Greenstein described the foundation's approach as being a "third-party broker." It will draw from existing proposals and solutions, which experts devised, to select an accountability system it likes best.

The impetus for Gates's sharper take on higher education, according to Greenstein, is increasing interest in workforce development and concerns about rising inequity at America's colleges and universities. Both lawmakers and the general public have seized on those issues. And the scrutiny shows no sign of abating before the next presidential election or

during the debate over renewing the Higher Education Act, which is the law that governs federal student aid.

"We see a huge opportunity in the political environment," he said.

Readiness, Remediation and Innovation

The foundation's stated focus also is the culmination of work it began around 2012, when

Daniel Greenstein

Greenstein arrived after a flurry of turnover.

The Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) initiative is one of the more prominent foundation projects that hit after Greenstein's arrival. It featured 15 papers on financial aid policy by researchers and advocates, who received $3.3 million in grants. Those papers, which were released in 2013, helped inform the foundation's take

on federal and state aid, including how to structure performance-based funding policies.

In recent years the Gates foundation has been active in the discussion of how to improve college remediation success rates, which are disturbingly low. This work is part of the college readiness bucket, which is one of the foundation's four focus areas.

A Gates proxy, Complete College America, which receives a large chunk of its budget from the foundation, has been aggressive on state policies around remediation. Some of its efforts have been controversial, particularly in Connecticut and Florida. But the group has been effective.

The foundation said in the strategy paper that its goal is to reduce students' need to take remedial courses, typically in

mathematics and English. It seeks to do that by encouraging states to adopt college readiness definitions that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (which have become a hotly contested and politicized fight in K-12 circles).

Gates also said it would advocate for change in how colleges place students in remediation, with placement in credit-bearing courses as the default. And the foundation wants to remove policy barriers to what it sees as promising approaches, such as co-requisite models, where remedial students are placed alongside students in credit-bearing courses but receive extra supports.

The fourth emphasis area is the least developed, Greenstein said. That one includes a desire for providers of online and hybrid courses, as well as competency-based programs that do not rely on the credit hour, to have a pathway to access student aid. One example would be through the department's experimental-sites program.

However, the foundation also said it is seeking "relevant quality assurance standards" for those providers.

Finally, Gates wants states to have "simplified, rigorous and consistent requirements for authorizing distance education programs," such as through the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements.

And the foundation is seeking for states to push for "enforceable and comprehensive" transfer and articulation agree-ments, with a goal of helping students reduce the time and money they spend earning a degree.

The foundation acknowledged it is taking on a big challenge with the more open and aggressive approach it outlined in the paper.

"The priorities and issues outlined here are difficult and complex. They touch fundamental aspects and core values of the existing postsecondary system. Perhaps more significantly, these are areas where there is not universal agreement about the way forward and knowledge about what works is still being gathered," the foundation said in its strategy document.

"But the reason we are choosing to tackle them is simple -- postsecondary education can and must live up to its potential as an engine of economic development and social mobility." •

FINDING THE RIGHT FORMULA

BY PAUL FAIN

Report seeks to define and classify types of performance-based funding in 35 states, drawing tentative praise from researchers who have criticized the policies.
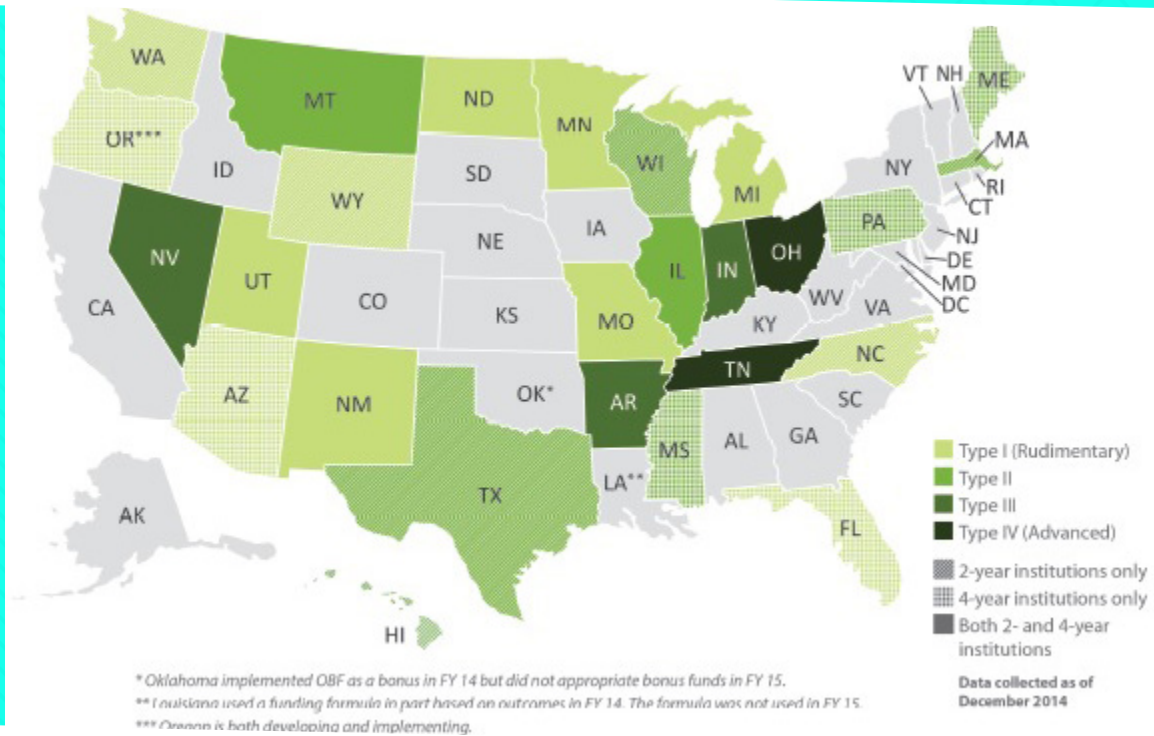
Performance-based funding in higher education is spreading, with 35 states either developing or using formulas that link support for public colleges to student completion rates, degree production numbers or other metrics.

The resulting debate over whether performance funding works is heating up, too. But a February 2015 report from HCM Strategists makes the case that there is great variation among the policies in those 35 states. It seeks

* Oklahoma implemented OBF as a bonus in FY 14 but did not appropriate bonus funds in FY 15.
** Louisiana used a funding formula in part based on outcomes in FY 14. The formula was not used in FY 15.
*** Oregon is both developing and implementing.

Data collected as of December 2014

Type I (Rudimentary)
Type II
Type III
Type IV (Advanced)
2-year institutions only
4-year institutions only
Both 2- and 4-year institutions

to classify four types of formulas to help inform policy makers, researchers and higher education officials.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports performance-based funding, paid for the report from HCM, a public policy and advocacy firm. Martha Snyder, a senior associate with HCM, wrote the paper. She has worked with policy makers in several states on performance funding.

Snyder said blanket statements about those policies tend to drown out the nuance. The report tries to move past this type of argument by distinguishing between state approaches and by describing which ones work best.

Four broad types of performance-funding models have emerged, according to the report, which uses the term "outcomes-based funding," the preferred nomenclature among advocates.

The report assigns types to policies based on increasing levels of "sophistication and adherence to promising practices." Type I, for example, covers some of the earliest approaches, which do not include completion goals and only affect low levels of funding -- less than 5 percent of public college budget contributions. But Type IV features at least 25 percent of

funding and factors in outcomes for underrepresented students.

"These typology characteristics reflect commonly articulated and research-informed design and implementation principles," the report said.

A key point in assessing whether performance-based funding works, according to HCM, is to first determine how much money is at stake.

While 26 states have performance policies on the books, only 5 tie more than half of overall state support for public institutions to the formulas. Those states are North Dakota, Nevada, Ohio, Tennessee and Mississippi.

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It's a steep drop-off after that group -- the other 21 link less than 10 percent of state funding to performance.

That money doesn't go far on a per-student basis. The report said states with some performance-funding average $810 per student in outcomes-tied spending. Tennessee and Ohio both top $4,000 per student, while Washington is $23 and Texas is $377.

The share of performance funding should be large enough to gain attention, shape priorities and influence actions, according to the report. Others, however, would prefer that experiments with funding formulas are limited, and seek to sway colleges' behavior without risking large pots of state money.

*North Dakota and Wyoming OBF formulas are based on course completions only; no other measures, such as degree completions, are used. Nevada's formula is 96 percent course completion, with approximately 3.8 percent distributed on degree completion and student progression measures.

**Tennessee has a longstanding performance funding formula that includes measures such as licensure rate passage and student satisfaction. It was maintained within the more recent OBF policy as a quality assurance mechanism. The funds are part of the base/general allocation dollars appropriated to institutions. Total OBF and performance-based funding in Tennessee make up approximately 85 percent of the overall institutional allocation.

^Mississippi has a stop-loss policy in place. In FY 15, the stop-loss ensured that no institution gained less than 2 percent of prior-year funding.

^^Texas includes funding to the Texas State Technical College System. Funding for TSTC is based entirely on value-added outcomes for students.

Critics Weigh In

The Gates Foundation is a prominent supporter of completion-oriented accountability in higher education. Some skeptics likely will be unmoved by a Gates-funded report in its attempt to reframe the debate around performance funding.

However, two academics who have produced studies that cast doubt on the efficacy of performance-based funding said the HCM document will be helpful.

"They're offering some guidance and some classification themes," said Nicholas Hillman, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who studies higher education finance and policy.

David Tandberg agreed. Tandberg, an assistant professor of higher education at Florida State University, said he appreciates that the report is distributing information about the program design of funding models.

He praised its use of portions of studies by Kevin J. Dougherty, an associate professor of higher education at Columbia University's Teachers College who is a senior research associate with the university's Community College Research Center. But Tandberg also said he was disappointed that the study did not draw from the growing body of quantitative research on performance-based funding.

"We cannot expect to improve public policy if we choose to ignore the results of rigorous evaluations," Tandberg said in an e-mail.

In response, Snyder said much of the existing research is about funding models that no longer exist, weren't focused squarely on completion and were done on the margins. She also said that some of

those studies "make broad claims that reach beyond the findings."

The HCM report in part seeks to shape the conversation by pointing to design principles that it said research has shown to work best. Many of those lessons have been learned from the trial and error of early funding formulas. States can use these emerging "best practices" to develop their own models, according to the report, or to update existing policies.

The report's recommendations include establishing a consensus around goals before developing a policy, making funding meaningful and secure, identifying limited and measurable metrics, including all institutions while allowing for differentiation, rewarding progress, and evaluating and adjusting.

"The analysis of state funding policies must continue in an effort to inform these considerations and understand the most effective way to direct their investment in higher education," the report concludes. "Moving toward results-based policies may require fundamental shifts in resources and mind-set -- but our students deserve no less."

For his part, Hillman said deep questions plague performance-based funding.

A big one, he said, is that it's unclear if the use of incentives to move institutional behavior is effective.

"The design oftentimes isn't the problem," said Hillman.

Yet both Hillman and Tandberg said further discussion is warranted.

"Hopefully moving forward we can establish a better dialogue between independent researchers and those advocates who are working with the states on such issues," Tandberg said. "These are very important and high-stakes issues that deserve serious consideration and empirical evaluation."

GAMING THE SYSTEM

BY PAUL FAIN

Public colleges may be using grade inflation or tightening admissions standards to comply with performance-based funding, survey finds.

Performance-based funding is increasingly popular among both state and federal policy makers, who want public institutions to graduate more students, more efficiently. Yet colleges may cope with these funding formulas by using grade inflation or admitting fewer at-risk students.

That was the central finding of a survey of college administrators in Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee, all of which have substantial performance-funding policies in place.

In addition to unintended consequences such as weakened academic standards and tightened admissions policies, the survey's respondents cited concerns about the costs of compliance with performance funding and damage to cooperation between institutions. Lower morale, a narrowing of the institutional mission, and threats to the faculty role in governance also

made the list.

The Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College conducted the survey and produced a report on its results, which the center released in November 2014.

The study is based on phone interviews with 222 officials at nine community colleges and nine public universities in the three states. They included senior and mid-level administrators, academic deans and department chairs.

Quotes from respondents pepper the report. For example, a faculty member at an Ohio university cited concern about the "watering down" of course materials in response to the state's funding formula.

"In an effort to promote student success, there is a substantial pressure to minimize the failure rates of the students in some of these undergraduate courses," the faculty member said. "That would translate into inflation of grades."

Researchers divided the survey responses into potential and observed impacts of performance-based funding. The mix was evenly divided.

"Reports of potential impacts could be testimony more to our respondents' fears than to their understanding of processes actually unfolding," the study said.

However, both categories are worth watching, according to the report.

Some fears will become a reality as performance-based funding is phased-in more fully. And even those that remain possibilities "testify to a widespread disquiet about performance funding among higher education administrators and faculty that needs to be sensitively addressed by the advocates of performance funding," said the report.

Nick Hillman is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He has studied performance-based funding, which he said is "politically convenient" but "unfortunately has little empirical or theoretical grounding to justify it as a viable policy solution."

Other experts, however, have cautioned against dismissing performance-based funding, which they said could be a valuable tool in helping to improve student success.

Community college leaders have cited worries about the funding formulas for some time, said David Baime, senior vice president for government relations and research at the American Association of Community Colleges. Yet as in this survey, he said those concerns largely remain hypothetical.

"A bigger concern is whether performance-based funding will produce its explicit goals," Baime said via email, "or whether those goals can only be met through that funding structure."

Will Versus Resources

The survey is part of a broader series of research by the center on performance funding. The Lumina Foundation has funded much of that work.

One overview study, released in 2013, described the various facets of the strategy, pieces of which 27 states now use.

Most formulas seek to incentivize colleges to do better on student success measures such as student retention rates, milestones for credits earned, and graduation numbers. Sometimes "intermediate student outcomes," such as success rates in remedial coursework, are used.

Another 2013 paper from the center examined the goals and policy approaches of performance-based funding systems. It concluded that some are ill-defined and overly narrow.

Ohio and Tennessee have among the most aggressive policies in place, according to the new report, with four-fifths of base support in the two states now being linked to performance indicators. Indiana, in contrast, ties just 6 percent of its funding to a performance formula.

Kevin Corcoran, a strategy director at the foundation, said the findings from the various reports should be considered together. He said the research has identified promising aspects of performance-

"IN AN EFFORT TO PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS, THERE IS A SUBSTANTIAL PRESSURE TO MINIMIZE THE FAILURE RATES OF THE STUDENTS IN SOME OF THESE UNDERGRADUATE COURSES. THAT WOULD TRANSLATE INTO INFLATION OF GRADES."

based funding.

"It's clear that it changes the conversation," said Corcoran, citing an enhanced focus on student supports and academic success.

As for the newly released survey results, he said it was unclear how much weight to give respondents' predictions, which may or may not prove true. And some of the cited concerns are hardly new or linked solely to funding formulas.

"Grade inflation has long been a problem," he said.

The survey's unintended consequences don't appear uniformly across sectors and states. For example, university administrators were much more

likely to mention tighter admission standards. Only one respondent from a community college mentioned that concern, which is probably a reflection of the open-door admissions policies of most two-year colleges.

Kevin J. Dougherty, an associate professor of higher education and education policy at Teachers College, has been a co-author on several of the center's studies, including the new report. He said the researchers chose Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee for the survey because they have been careful and deliberate in creating their formulas.

"What these states are doing is very important," he said.

Partially as a result, Dougherty said, the majority of the 222 respondents support the concept behind performance funding. "These people wanted it to work," he said.

However, the policies appear to run into problems, Dougherty said, because colleges have "insufficient organizational capacity" to comply with them. For example, they may not be able to do enough institutional research or to pay for experimental programs, he said. And states typically aren't helping to pay for that work.

The challenge for colleges, Dougherty said, "may not be will as much as knowledge and resources." •

COUNTING STUDENTS EQUALLY?

BY MICHAEL STRATFORD

The Education Department's ratings framework embraces the concept of adjusting outcomes for student demographics -- an approach that would be unusual for the federal government.

A core premise of the Obama administration's college ratings plan -- and one that makes it controversial -- is that colleges and universities need to be held more accountable for student outcomes.

College presidents have repeatedly argued that those outcomes, like completion rates and graduates' earnings, are largely a reflection of the student population they serve, and therefore not necessarily a good benchmark of their institution's success.

A ratings system, they warn, could discourage colleges from recruiting students they're not confident will graduate.

U.S. Department of Education officials working on the ratings have long said they're going to overcome that problem by comparing colleges' performance only to that of other institutions with similar missions.

But in the 17-page ratings framework released in December 2014, officials also said they're eyeing an additional strategy to make fair comparisons: adjusting a college's outcomes based on the demographics of the students it enrolls.

That approach is largely unprecedented in federal higher education policy. The standards to which colleges are now held by the federal government's aid programs do not generally take student demographics into account.

It's also a controversial approach that some are criticizing for setting up lower expectations for colleges that serve disadvantaged students.

Department officials said they are exploring the possibility of using a statistical model to predict a college's graduation rate and graduates' earnings based on the demographics of its student body. They would then compare colleges' statistically expected outcomes to their actual outcomes.

Among the student demographic information that the department is considering including as part of that regression analysis: family income, parents' education attainment, age, gender, marital status, veteran status and zip code. The department's list did not include race or ethnicity. The federal aid application does not ask for such information.

Adjusting a college's graduation rate or its graduates' earnings data for those data points, department officials wrote, would "provide a more fair assessment of institutional performance to the

public than one that relies solely on raw outcome data."

The department's proposal for adjusting outcomes embraces, to some extent, what public universities and others have been seeking.

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities has called on the administration, in lieu of a ratings system, to hold colleges accountable for outcomes like completion rates and graduates' employment rates -- but only after first taking into account "student readiness."

Michael Tanner, the APLU's vice president for academic affairs, said that the group was still working on how a regression analysis should work but that it would allow much more fair comparisons between institutions.

Without making an adjustment, he said, "the effect is that almost every institution can improve just by becoming more selective."

But others have criticized making "input adjustments" to student outcome metrics.

David Bergeron, a former Education Department official who is now vice president for postsecondary education at the Center for American Progress, largely praised the administration's ratings outline but said he was concerned about adjusting outcomes.

"If you do a statistical manipulation that says, 'We know that students who come from 150 percent below poverty [line] are half as likely to complete,' then we're really saying that those students don't matter as much as the more affluent students," he said. "That, I find, morally problematic."

"Doesn't the student who has everything against them -- aren't they entitled to be counted and treated with the same level of commitment to their outcomes as the student who has no risk factors?" he added. "That's my fundamental concern."

Mary Nguyen Barry, an education policy analyst at Education Reform

Michael Tanner

Now, a progressive think tank, said that while it is appropriate to adjust outcomes for differing groups of students based on varying levels of academic preparation, like their high school grade-point average, she opposes using some of the metrics the department has floated, like gender or income.

"If you adjust for those factors, you're attributing different expectations to different groups of students," she said.

Adjusting standards for colleges that take student demographics into account is also an approach that the Obama administration has previously rejected in other areas, too.

During debates on gainful employment, the administration, over the objections of for-profit colleges, said it wanted to hold all institutions to certain minimum standards -- even if they enrolled large numbers of low-income students, for instance.

Other standards that the federal government currently has for colleges -- cohort default rates, for instance -- do not generally take into account income levels and other student-level demographics.

Robert Kelchen, a professor of higher education policy at Seton Hall University, has developed an input-adjusted model as part of his work on *Washington Monthly*'s rankings of colleges.

"Something needs to be done to account for the different students that colleges serve," he said. "The question is how you do it. Whenever you do input adjustment you always run the risk of promoting what was famously called 'the soft bigotry of low expectations.'"

Asked in December 2014 about whether adjusting student outcomes would create different standards and expectations among different types of students, Under Secretary of Education Ted Mitchell said that the department is still wrestling with the issue.

"We think that it's important to get comment from the field about whether that kind of adjustment is worthwhile or not," Mitchell told reporters. "Our goal here is not to create different sets of standards but to make sure that we are measuring like [institutions] against like."

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TEST ANXIETY

BY COLLEEN FLAHERTY

Purdue's politician turned president wants a nationally normed measure of what students learn -- and he's tired of waiting. Professors want meaningful assessment but aren't sold on standardized exams.

All eyes were on Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana, when he took on the presidency of Purdue University in 2013. How would the politician adjust to life in academe, and would he push his standardized test agenda for K-12 schools up the ladder, many wondered? But apart from a few scuffles with the faculty -- including his abrupt cancellation of the student common reading program, which he attributed to budget cuts -- Daniels's tenure had been relatively quiet. Until now, that is.

Two years into the job, Daniels arrived at a major impasse with Purdue's faculty: how to prove that students are actually learning something while at the university. Backed by Purdue's Board of Trustees and inspired by the work of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (the authors of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*) and others who argue that undergraduates aren't learning crucial critical thinking skills, Daniels says the university must be accountable to students, parents, taxpayers and policy makers. He's tasked a faculty body with choosing just how Purdue will assess gains in critical thinking and other skills after four years there, and he wants to start the assessment process soon -- by the fall of 2015.

Purdue wants the student growth assessment "for the same reason that hundreds of other universities are already doing this -- that research has shown that in some cases little to no intellectual growth occurs during the college years," Daniels said in an interview with *Inside Higher Ed*. "And the marketplace is saying emphatically that they find far too many college graduates lacking in critical thinking and communication skills and problem solving, et cetera."

Daniels said he is "very confident learning is happening on our campus," and that he thinks Purdue will "stack up well" against other institutions in terms of student learning gains. But showing that is a matter of "responsibility and necessity," he added.

Faculty members, meanwhile, say that the process is too rushed, and that they can't endorse an assessment instrument they're not sure is valid. Then there

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are procedural issues, such as how to choose a representative student sample to take the test as freshmen, and how to get seniors -- who are busier and harder to find -- to take it at all. They're also concerned about how the university will use the data it gathers from any assessment. Will the data truly be aggregate, as the university has said it will be, professors wonder, or will it be somehow used punitively against them?

"There are a wide variety of issues of concern," said Patrick Kain, an associate professor of philosophy and a member of the both the Student Growth Task Force Oversight Committee, which is studying the assessment issue, and the university's standing Educational Policy Committee. "One area of concern is whether any of these existing [assessment] instruments are good enough to answer or to begin answering these questions. And I think there are concerns about how this test or results might be used or misused, potentially.... Could they drive decision-making about programs to invest in, or could they be used to recruit for some programs and not others?"

Kain added, "They could affect perceptions about the strength of Purdue compared to other institutions if the test isn't fairly accurate and fairly useful. They could provide potentially misleading information -- these

are the family of concerns I hear people raise."

The assessment debate actually began in 2013, when Daniels tasked a joint faculty and administrative committee with recommending an assessment tool to help prove to university "stakeholders" what he said he already knew: that students were learning something at Purdue. Relatively quickly, that committee named an assessment tool: the Collegiate Learning Assessment Plus, run by the Council for Aid to Education. The assessment has been used or is in use at more than 150 institutions to tests gains over time in small, representative groups of freshman and seniors, but it remains controversial.

A 2013 study, for example, found that student performance on such tests varies widely based on motivation for taking the test. In other words, a student who has no reason to do well on the test might not take it seriously, and therefore can skew the results negatively for the institution. Others have questioned the appropriateness of basing assessment on small groups of students and whether the gains are likely to be notable at a university like Purdue that admits well-prepared students.

The faculty-administrative committee included some similar concerns about the test in its report, which soon went to the University Senate and the Student Growth

Task Force Oversight Committee for further discussion. That's where it got held up for about a year and a half, as faculty members debated on and off whether the institution needed an external assessment and, if so, what assessment it might use.

"The Purdue faculty constantly performs a lot of assessments and student assignments -- quizzes, exams, portfolios, journals, internships -- I could go on," said Patricia Hart, professor of Spanish and chair of the University Senate. "So I guess the first reaction is that we think that any assessment initiative should come from the faculty. The first question we would want to ask is, 'Is this needed? Is this a good idea?'"

Instead, she said, it feels like faculty members were told, "Go pick a test."

In December, the project's faculty oversight committee asked the university's Board of Trustees for more time -- until fall 2016 -- to answer outstanding questions from the faculty and make a recommendation about a test. But the board rejected that idea, saying it wanted answers by February.

At a University Senate meeting in January 2015, Daniels again made his case to the faculty with a PowerPoint presentation showing that many peer institutions already use the Collegiate Learning Assessment. He said he wanted the assessment to "demonstrate

Graduation day at Purdue University

what we know: a Purdue degree has high value," and that Purdue students gain critical-thinking, reasoning and communication skills. He said he wanted the institution to track its progress over time, and make the information "transparent" to students and potential students, parents, "fellow citizens," and policy makers. He said the assessment would not be used to rate colleges within Purdue, individual majors, programs or individual faculty.

But faculty members remained unconvinced. They again asked Daniels for more time, and he gave them until April 2015 -- not quite the year and a half they'd wanted. Faculty members also asked for the immediate formation of an expert panel to look at all available assessment tools, and to consider whether or not it's necessary to create a new one, specific to Purdue. (Daniels said an internal tool "won't fly," since it's important to be able to compare Purdue to other institutions.)

Kain said the new deadline wasn't much time, but it was "some" time. Asked if his oversight committee might be able to make a recommendation by then, he said it hasn't even been able to meet formally yet to review the results of a pilot study of assessment tools from the fall.

Daniels said he's confident he'll "work it out" with the faculty before August, when he plans to begin the new assessment program. He said he didn't regret taking a "consultative route" to planning, but noted that other institutions have taken a definitively "top-down" approach. In the event that the faculty committee does not make a recommendation in time, he said, "We have a faculty recommendation from an expert committee."

Referring to the University Senate meeting, he added, "I didn't hear from anybody who feels we shouldn't be accountable and shouldn't be taking any such measurements. I didn't hear that. I heard discussion about the best ways of doing this. But we've already extended things for really two years and I'm not inclined to postpone it further. But we'll continue talking."

Hart said that Daniels "can ask as many times as he wants, but the answer is always going to be the same: the faculty is very concerned about student growth and could not be more interested in proving or studying it. But in order to do that you have to design the study." •

RANKING AND NETWORKING

BY PAUL FAIN

LinkedIn gets into college rankings with an employment outcomes tool based on big samples and plenty of specifics about real people.

LinkedIn in October 2014 officially joined the jam-packed college rankings party. And with 313 million users, the job networking site has a big data sample both for creating the rankings and for marketing them.

The new ranking system tracks the success of college graduates in eight broad career paths, adding weight for jobs deemed "desirable." It lists the top 25 institutions in each career category.

Last July LinkedIn released a "field of study explorer" that allowed people to link college majors with jobs. The rankings are aimed more overtly at prospective college students, both high school students and returning adults.

To create them, the company tracked employment patterns of its users to figure out what the most in-demand careers are, as well which graduates get jobs in those fields. The categories of jobs it used are accounting professionals, designers, finance professionals, investment bankers, marketers, media professionals, software developers, and software developers at startups.

"We define a desirable job to be a job at a desirable company for the relevant profession," LinkedIn said in a written statement.

Defining a desirable employer comes first. The rankings assign points for both attracting and retaining talent. For example, an investment bank looks better if it lures LinkedIn users away from another bank.

Only "relevant" graduates are considered in the rankings, the company said. So colleges are rated based solely on graduates who work within the eight tracked career fields. And the rankings seek to reflect recent employment trends by looking only at users who earned their undergraduate degrees within the previous eight years.

When a user clicks on a ranked college, LinkedIn reveals more details, such as where alumni work and live. And it features individual alumni profiles.

The top 25 lists include filters for the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Two experts on measuring career outcomes said LinkedIn's rankings are a welcome addition.

"I am no fan of rankings, let alone ranking institutions, but as a way of differentiating programs based on outcomes, I find this terribly interesting," Tod Massa, director of policy research and data warehousing at State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, said in an email. "In many ways, this might be a more valuable approach than just wages, in that it does appear to represent what individuals feel about their jobs and education."

Mark Schneider agreed that the rankings are intriguing. Schneider, a vice president at the American Institutes for Research and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said LinkedIn could show a big audience the various pathways to career

Source: LinkedIn

success.

"It's going to have a lot of eyeballs," he said.

'Big Data'

Both Massa and Schneider noted that LinkedIn is ranking only a tiny swath of the academy. Listing 25 institutions in each category is remaining in rarefied air, they said.

"It does seem to miss a few thousand colleges and universities," said Massa. He said he would rather see LinkedIn move away from rankings to listings of the best academic programs and career outcomes for all colleges.

The company said in the future it would consider creating college rankings for a broader spectrum of career paths.

Given the relatively small lists of colleges, the usual suspects tend to dominate.

For example, all eight Ivy League institutions landed in the top 12 spots for investment bankers (but Georgetown University beat out the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University for first place). Likewise, Carnegie Mellon University and the California Institute of Technology were the top two institutions for software developers.

There are some surprises in the rankings, however, with lesser-known institutions placing well.

For example, Fairfield University and Bentley University were among the top 25 in accounting. And while it's certainly a big name, the University of Phoenix might be a surprising choice for ranking 11th in marketing.

Each ranking list includes a link to another tool LinkedIn released in October 2014.

The University Finder is a search engine for colleges based on a student's interest in a possible career. Users type in what they'd like to study, which employer they might want to work for and where they might want to live. The site then spits out "popular schools for this career goal."

A hypothetical student might say she wants to study game and interactive design, with a preference for living in greater Chicago. The top three institutions for that path are DePaul University, Columbia College Chicago and the Illinois Institute of Art, according to LinkedIn.

That search can be refined further. For example, if the student wants to work for WMS Gaming and High Voltage Software, two more institutions -- Full Sail University and Sacred Heart University -- pop up on the top of the list. And all those listings are based on actual users who work for specific employers.

LinkedIn also released a social networking application for prospective students to chat with each other about colleges, and to talk with current students.

Huge samples and granular details make the new rankings interesting, Schneider said, whether or not they really take off as a consumer guide to college.

"They're getting smart about how to tap into this big database," he said of LinkedIn. "This is big data." •

VIEWS A selection of essays and op-eds

PROFESSORS SHOULD DEFINE STUDENT SUCCESS

BY NORM JONES AND HARRISON KLEINER

Faculty members should lead the process of redefining how colleges gauge if students are ready for careers and life -- with the help of the Degree Qualifications Profile, Norm Jones and Harrison Kleiner argue.

The Lumina Foundation in 2014 released an updated version of its Degree Qualifications Profile (D.Q.P.), which helps define what students should know and what skills they should master to obtain higher education degrees.

This revised framework marks a significant step in the conversation about measuring students' preparedness for the workforce

and for life success based on how much they've learned rather than how much time they've spent in the classroom. It also provides a rare opportunity for faculty members at colleges and universities to take the lead in driving long-overdue change in how we define student success.

The need for such change has never been stronger. As the economy evolves and the cost of college rises, the value of a college degree is under constant scrutiny. No longer can we rely on piled-up credit hours to prove whether students are prepared for careers after graduation. We need a more robust -- and relevant -- way of showing that our work in the classroom yields results.

Stakeholders ranging from university donors to policy makers have pushed for redefining readiness, and colleges and universities have responded to their calls for action. But too often the changes have been driven by the need to placate those demanding reform and produce quick results. That means faculty input has been neglected.

If we're to set up assessment reform for long-term success, we need to empower faculty members to be the true orchestrators.

The D.Q.P. provides an opportunity to do that, jelling conversations that have been going on among faculty and advisers for years. Lumina

Foundation developed the tool in consultation with faculty and other experts from across the globe and released a beta version to be piloted by colleges and universities in 2011. The latest version reflects feedback from the field, based on their experience with the beta version -- and captures the iterative, developmental processes of education understood by people who work with students daily.

Many of the professionals teaching in today's college classrooms understand the need for change. They're used to adapting to ever-changing technologies, as well as evolving knowledge. And they want to measure students' preparedness in a way that gives them the professional freedom to own the changes and do what they know, as committed professionals, works best for students.

As a tool, the D.Q.P. encourages this kind of faculty-driven change. Rather than a set of mandates,

the D.Q.P. is a framework that invites them to be change agents. It allows faculty to assess students in ways that are truly beneficial to student growth. Faculty members don't care about teaching to the assessment; they want to use what they glean from assessments to help improve student learning.

We've experienced the value of using the D.Q.P. in this fashion at Utah State University. In 2011, when the document was still in its beta version, we adopted it as a guide to help us rethink general education and its connection to our degrees and the majors within them.

We began the process by convening disciplinary groups of faculty to engage them in a discussion about a fundamental question: "What do you think your students need to know, understand and be able to do?" This led to conversations about how students learn and what intellectual skills

 "MANY OF THE PROFESSIONALS TEACHING IN TODAY'S COLLEGE CLASSROOMS UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR CHANGE. THEY'RE USED TO ADAPTINGTO EVER-CHANGING TECHNOLOGIES, AS WELL AS EVOLVING KNOWLEDGE."

they need to develop.

We began reverse engineering the curriculum, which forced us to look at how general education and the majors work together to produce proficient graduates. This process also forced us to ask where degrees started, as well as ended, and taught us how important advisers, librarians and other colleagues are to strong degrees.

The proficiencies and competencies outlined in the D.Q.P. provided us with a common institutional language to use in navigating these questions. The D.Q.P.'s guideposts also helped us to avoid reducing our definition of learning to course content and enabled us to stay focused on the broader framework of student proficiencies at various degree milestones.

Ultimately the D.Q.P. helped us understand the end product of college degrees, regardless of major: citizens who are capable of thinking critically, communicating clearly, deploying specialized knowledge and practicing the difficult soft skills needed for a 21st-century workplace.

While establishing these criteria in general education, we are teaching our students to see their degrees holistically. In our first-year program, called Connections, we engage students in becoming "intentional learners" who understand that a degree is more than a major. This program also gives students a conceptual grasp of how to use their educations to become well prepared for their professional, personal and civic lives. They can explain their proficiencies within and beyond their disciplines and understand they have soft skills that are at a premium.

While by no means a perfect model, what we've done at Utah State showcases the power of engaging faculty and staff as leaders to rethink how a quality degree is defined, assessed and explained. Such engagement couldn't be more critical.

After all, if we are to change the culture of higher learning, we can't do it without the buy-in from those who perform it. Teachers and advisers want their students to succeed, and the D.Q.P. opens a refreshing conversation about success that focuses on the skills and knowledge students truly need.

The D.Q.P. helps give higher education practitioners an opportunity to do things differently. Let's not waste it.   •

Norm Jones is a professor of history and chairman of general education at Utah State University. Harrison Kleiner is a lecturer of philosophy at Utah State.

ASSESSING ASSESSMENT

BY CHRISTOPHER B. NELSON

Current efforts devalue learning and the responsibility of students for their own success, writes Christopher B. Nelson.

In higher education circles, there is something of a feeding frenzy surrounding the issue of assessment. The federal government wants assessments to create ways to allow one to compare colleges and universities that provide "value"; accrediting organizations want assessments of student learning outcomes; state agencies want assessments to prove that tax dollars are being spent efficiently; institutions want internal assessments that they can use to demonstrate success to their own constituencies.

By far the main goal of this whirlwind of assessment is trying to determine whether an institution effectively delivers knowledge to its students, as though teaching and learning were like a commodity exchange. This view of education very much downplays the role of students in their own education, placing far too much responsibility on teachers and institutions, and overburdening everyone with a never-ending proliferation of paperwork and bureaucracy.

True learning requires a great deal of effort on the part of the learner. Much of this effort must come in the form of self-inquiry, that is, ongoing examination and reexamination of one's beliefs and habits to determine which ones need to be revised or discarded. This sort of self-examination cannot be done by others, nor can the results of it be delivered by a teacher. It is work that a student must do for himself or herself.

Because of this, most of the work required in attaining what matters most in education is the responsibility of the student. A teacher can make suggestions, point out deficiencies, recommend methods, and model the behavior of someone who has mastered self-transformation. But no teacher can do the work of self-transformation for a student.

Current assessment models habitually and almost obsessively understate the responsibility of the student for his or her own learning, and, what is more consequential, overstate the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers are directed to provide clear written statements of observable learning outcomes; to design courses in which students have the opportunity to achieve those outcomes; to assess whether students achieve those outcomes; and to use the assessments of students to improve the courses so that attainment of the prescribed outcomes is enhanced. The standards do not entirely remove the student as an agent — the course provides the opportunity, while the student must achieve the outcomes. But the assessment procedures prescribe in advance the outcome for the student; the student can achieve nothing of significance, as far as assessment goes, except what the professor preordains.

This is a mechanical and illiberal exercise. If the student fails to attain the end, is it because the professor has not provided a sufficient opportunity? Or because, despite the opportunity being perfectly designed, the student, in his freedom, hasn't acted? Or maybe

St. John's College

the student attains the designed outcome due to her own ingenuity even when the opportunity is ill-designed. Or, heaven forbid, the student has after reflection rejected the outcome desired by the teacher in favor of another. The assessment procedure accurately measures the effectiveness of the curriculum precisely to the extent that the student's personal freedom is discounted. To the extent that student's freedom is acknowledged, the assessment procedure has to fail.

True learning belongs much more to the student than to the teacher. Even if the teacher spoon-feeds facts to the students, devises the best possible tests to determine whether students are retaining the facts, tries to fire them up with entertaining excitement, and exhibits perfectly in front of them the behavior of a self-actuated learner, the students will learn little or nothing important about the subject or about themselves if they do not undertake the difficult discipline of taking charge of their own growth. This being the case, obsessing about the responsibility of the teacher without paying at least as much attention to the responsibility of the student is hardly going to produce helpful assessments.

True learning is not about having the right answer, so measuring whether students have the right answers is at best incidental to the essential aims of education. True learning is about mastering the art of asking questions and seeking answers, and applying that mastery to your own life. Ultimately, it is about developing the power of self-transformation, the single most valuable ability one can have for meeting the demands of an ever-changing world. Meaningful assessment measures attainment in these areas, rather than in the areas most congenial to the economic metaphor.

How best to judge whether students have attained the sort of freedom that can be acquired by study? Demand that they undertake and successfully complete intellectual investigations on their own. The independence engendered by such projects empowers students to meet the challenges of life and work. It helps them shape lives worth living, arrived at through thoughtful exploration of the question: What kind of life do I want to make for

myself?

What implications does this focus have for assessors? They should move away from easy assessments that miss the point to more difficult assessments that try to measure progress in self-transformation. The Gallup-Purdue Index Report "Great Jobs, Great Lives" found six crucial factors linking the college experience to success at work and overall well-being in the long term:

1. At least one teacher who made learning exciting.

2. Personal concern of teachers for students.

3. Finding a mentor

4. Working on a long-term project for at least one semester.

5. Opportunities to put classroom learning into practice through internships or jobs.

6. Rich extracurricular activities.

Assessors should thus turn all their ingenuity toward measuring the quality of the students' learning environment, toward measuring students' engagement with their teachers and their studies, and toward measuring activities in which students practice the freedom they have been working to develop in college. The results should be used to push back against easy assessments based on the categories of economics.

Higher education, on the other hand, would do well to repurpose most of the resources currently devoted to assessment. Use them instead to do away with large lecture classes — the very embodiment of education-as-commodity — so that students can have serious discussions with teachers, and teachers can practice the kind of continuous assessment that really matters. •

Christopher B. Nelson is president of St. John's College, in Annapolis.

JOB SUCCESS CAN BE MEASURED

BY STEPHANIE BOND HUIE

Stephanie Bond Huie shares how the University of Texas is collecting and sharing information without violating anyone's privacy or dictating academic choices.

With rising tuition, families are increasingly concerned about what students can expect after graduation in terms of debt, employment, and earnings.

They want to know: What is the value of a college degree? Is it worth the cost? Are graduates getting good-paying jobs?

At the same time, state and federal policy makers are sounding the call to institutions for increased accountability and transparency. Are students graduating? Are they accruing unmanageable debt? Are

graduates prepared to enter the workforce?

Colleges and universities struggle to answer some of these questions. Responses rely primarily on anecdotal evidence or under-researched and un-researched assumptions because there are little data available. Student data are the sole dominion of colleges and universities. Workforce data is confined to various state and federal agencies. With no systematic or easy way to pull the various data sources together, colleges universities have limited ability to provide the kind of analysis of return on investment that will satisfy the debate.

But access to unit-record data — connecting the student records to the workforce records — would allow institutions to discover those answers. What's more, it would give colleges and universities the opportunity to conduct powerful research and analysis on post-graduation outcomes that could shape policies and program development.

For example, education provides a foundation of skills and abilities that students bring into the workforce upon graduation. But how long does this foundation continue to have a significant impact on workforce outcomes after graduation? Research based on unit-record data can also show the strongest predictors of student earnings after graduation —

educational experience, the local and national economy, supply and demand within the field, or some combination of each.

President Obama and others have proposed that colleges share such information, and many colleges have objected. They have suggested that the information can't be obtained; that data would be flawed because graduates of some programs at a college might see different career results than others at the same institution; that such a system would jeopardize student privacy; that it would penalize colleges with programs whose graduates might not earn the most one year out, but five or more years out.

At the University of Texas System, we have found a solution – at least within our own state – and, for the first time, are able to provide valuable information to our students and their families. We are doing so without assuming that data one year out is better or worse than a longer time frame – only that students and families should be able to have lots of statistics to examine. We formed a partnership with the Texas Workforce Commission that gives us access to the quarterly earnings records of our students who have graduated since 2001-02 and are found working in Texas. While most of our alumni do work in Texas, a similar partnership with the Social Security Administration might

make this approach possible for institutions whose alumni scatter more than ours do.

With that data, we created seekUT, an online, interactive tool — accessible via desktop, tablet, and mobile device — that provides data on salaries and debt of UT System alumni who earned undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees for 1, 5, and 10 years after graduation. The data are broken down by specific degrees and majors since we know that an education major and an engineering major from the same institution – both valuable to society – are unlikely to earn the same amount. Also, seekUT introduces the reality of student loan debt to prospective and graduate students. In addition to average total student loan debt, it shows estimated monthly loan payment alongside monthly income, as well as the debt-to-income ratio. And because this is shown over time, students get a longer view of how that debt load might play out over the course of their career as their earnings increase over time.

When we present data in this way, we provide students information to make important decisions about how much debt they can realistically afford to acquire based on what their potential earnings might be, not just a year after graduation, but 5 and 10 years down the road. Students and families can use seekUT to help inform decisions

about their education and to plan for their financial future.

Admittedly, it is an incomplete picture. Many of our graduates, especially those with advanced degrees, leave the state. If they enroll elsewhere to continue their education, we can discover that through the National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker. But for those who are not enrolled, there is no information. In lieu of a federal database, we are exploring other options and partnerships to help fill in these holes, but, for now, there are gaps.

With unit record data we can inform current and prospective students about past performance for graduates in their same major; this is a highly valuable product of this level of data. Access to this information in a user-friendly format can directly benefit students by offering real insights — not just alumni stories or survey-based information — into outcomes. The intent is not to change anyone's major or sway them from their passion, but, instead, to help students make the decisions now that will allow them to pursue that passion after graduation.

There are a multitude of areas we need to explore, both to answer questions about how our universities are performing and to provide much-needed information

to current and prospective students. The only way to definitively provide this important information is through unit-record data.

We recognize that there are legitimate concerns, especially given the nearly constant headlines regarding data breaches, about protecting student privacy and data. And the more expansive the data pool, the larger and more appealing the target. A federal student database may be an attractive target to hackers. But these risks can be mitigated — and are, in fact, on a daily basis by university institutional research offices, as well as state and federal agencies.

We safeguard the IDs, locking down access to the original file, and not using any identified data for analysis. And when we display information, we do not include any data for cell sizes less than five. This has been true for the student data that we have always held. Given these safeguards, I believe that the need for the data and the benefits of having access to it far outweigh the risks.

seekUT is an example of just some of what higher education institutions can do with access to their workforce data. But for all its importance, seekUT is a tool to provide users access to the information, to inform individual

decisions. It is from the deeper research and analysis of these data, however, that we may see major changes and shifts in the policies that impact all students. That is the true power of these data.

For example, while we are gleaning a great deal of helpful information studying our alumni, this same data gives us insights into our current students who are working while enrolled. UT System is currently examining the impact of income, type of work, and place of work (on or off campus) on student persistence and graduation. The results of this study could have an impact on work-study policies across our institutions.

Higher education institutions can leverage data from outside sources to better-understand student outcomes. However, without a federal unit record database, individual institutions will continue to be forced to forge their own partnerships, yielding piecemeal efforts and incomplete stories. We cannot wait; we must forge ahead. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to students and parents and to the public. •

Stephanie Bond Huie is vice chancellor of the Office of Strategic Initiatives at the University of Texas System.

SAY 'NO' TO CHECKLIST ACCOUNTABILITY

BY BELLE S. WHEELAN AND MARK A. ELGART

Proposals to judge colleges with federal scorecards and rating systems would replace accreditors' thorough reviews of quality with a simplistic checklist that will only address symptoms and encourage gaming, argue Belle Wheelan and Mark Elgart.

Calls for scorecards and rating systems of higher education institutions that have been floating around Washington, if used for purposes beyond providing comparable consumer information, would make the federal government an arbiter of quality and judge of institutional performance.

This change would undermine the comprehensive, careful scrutiny currently provided by regional accrediting agencies and focus on cursory reviews.

Regional accreditors provide a peer-review process that sparks an investigation into key challenges institutions face to look beyond symptoms for root causes. They force all providers of postsecondary education to investigate closely every aspect of performance that is crucial to strengthening institutional excellence, improvement, and innovation. If you want to know how well a university is really performing, a graduation rate will only tell you so much.

But the peer-review process conducted by accrediting bodies provides a view into the vital systems of the institution: the quality of instruction, the availability and effectiveness of student support, how the institution is led and governed, its financial management, and how it uses data.

Moreover, as part of the peer-review process, accrediting bodies mobilize teams of expert volunteers to study governance and performance measures that encourage institutions to make significant changes. No government agency can replace this work, can provide the same level of careful review, or has the resources to mobilize such an expert group of volunteers. In fact, the federal government has long recognized its own limitations and, since 1952, has used accreditation by a federally recognized accrediting agency as a baseline for institutional eligibility for Title IV financial-aid programs.

Attacked at times by policy makers as an irrelevant anachronism and by institutions as a series of bureaucratic hoops through which they must jump, the regional accreditors' approach to quality control has rather become increasingly more cost-effective, transparent, and data- and outcomes-oriented.

Higher education accreditors work collaboratively with institutions to develop mutually agreed-upon common standards for quality in

Dollar Photo Club

programs, degrees, and majors. In fact, in the Southern region, accreditation has addressed public and policy maker interests in gauging what students gain from their academic experience by requiring, since the 1980s, the assessment of student learning outcomes in colleges. Accreditation agencies also have established effective approaches to ensure that students who attend institutions achieve desired outcomes for all academic programs, not just a particular major.

While the federal government has the authority to take actions against institutions that have proven deficient, it has not used this authority regularly or consistently. A letter to Congress from the American Council on Education

and 39 other organizations underscored the inability of the U.S. Department of Education to act with dispatch, noting that last year the Department announced "it would levy fines on institutions for alleged violations that occurred in 1995 -- nearly two decades prior."

By contrast, consider that in the past decade, the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges stripped nine institutions of their accreditation status and applied hundreds of sanctions to all types of institutions (from online providers to flagship campuses) in its region alone.

But, when accreditors have acted boldly in recent times, they been criticized by politicians for going too far, giving accreditors the

sense that we're "damned if we do, damned if we don't."

The Problem With Simple Scores

Our concern about using rating systems and scorecards for accountability is based on several factors. Beyond tilting the system toward the lowest common denominator of quality, rating approaches can create new opportunities for institutions to game the system (as with U.S. News & World Report ratings and rankings) and introduce unintended consequences as we have seen occur in K-12 education.

Over the past decade, the focus on a few narrow measures for the nation's public schools has not led to significant achievement gains or closing achievement gaps. Instead, it has narrowed the curriculum and spurred the current public backlash against overtesting. Sadly, the data generated from this effort have provided little actionable information to help schools and states improve, but have actually masked -- not illuminated -- the root causes of problems within K-12 institutions.

Accreditors recognize that the complex nature of higher education requires that neither accreditors nor the government should dictate how individual institutions can meet desired outcomes. No single bright line measure of accountability is

appropriate for the vast diversity of institutions in the field, each with its own unique mission. The fact that students often enter and leave the system and increasingly earn credits from multiple institutions further complicates measures of accountability.

Moreover, setting minimal standards will not push institutions that think they are high performing to get better. All institutions – even those considered "elite" – need to work continually to achieve better outcomes and should have a role in identifying key outcomes and strategies for improvement that meet their specific challenges.

Accreditors also have demonstrated they are capable of addressing new challenges without strong government action.

With the explosion of online providers, accreditors found a solution to address the challenges of quality control for these programs. Accrediting groups partnered with state agencies, institutions, national higher education organizations, and other stakeholders to form the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, which use existing regional higher education compacts to allow for participating states and institutions to operate under common, nationwide standards and procedures for regulating postsecondary distance education. This approach provides a more uniform and less costly regulatory environment for institutions, more focused oversight responsibilities for states, and better resolution of complaints without heavy-handed federal involvement.

Along with taking strong stands to sanction higher education institutions that do not meet high standards, regional accreditors are better-equipped than any centralized governmental body at the state or national level to respond to the changing ecology of higher education and the explosion of online providers.

We argue for serious -- not checklist -- approaches to accountability that support improving institutional performance over time and hold institutions of all stripes to a broad array of criteria that make them better, not simply more compliant.　　　　•

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