

# Embracing Accountability

BY ROBERT T. MUNDHENK

*Some observers believe that “traditional” forms of higher education accountability are not sufficient to meet the 21st -century challenges facing colleges and universities. Robert Mundhenk argues that higher education needs to embrace new forms of accountability.*

—Editors’ note

**A**lthough the value of a college degree is a given for most Americans, rising costs and some legislative questioning have led more and more stakeholders to demand that higher education demonstrate it is worth the expenditure by students, parents and government agencies. These calls for accountability are becoming increasingly strident, partly because higher education has not been particularly responsive to requests for information on student and institutional success.

While the reluctance to engage in a conversation about accountability is understandable, it is also dangerous. The longer higher education avoids the accountability discussion, the more likely it is that the terms of the discussion, when it is held, will be out of higher education’s control. Higher education institutions are now compiling, as a part of their accreditation processes, information about students’ learning success, the most important indicator of quality to most stakeholders. They should seize the opportunity to make this assessment information as open and transparent to the public as possible. This will allay public concerns, but on terms that truly and appropriately indicate their success and worth.

## **The View from Outside**

In an article in the June 17, 2005, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rep. John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) argues against a national database of student information and for more information about the ways colleges spend their money:

What is sorely lacking in higher education today is not personal information on students, but useful information on taxpayer-financed colleges themselves. When choosing between College A, with an annual tuition of \$15,000, and College B, with an annual tuition of \$25,000, parents and students have far too little ability to ascertain whether the \$10,000 gap is primarily attributable to legitimate differences in academic quality or to the existence of frivolous student perks like rock-climbing walls, luxury dormitories, and giant wave pools . . . The real culprit is the education establishment's continuing reluctance to give the public a clear and accurate glimpse at how colleges spend their money. What's missing, by and large, is "sunshine."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, as chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, which drafts education bills such as the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HR 609), he exercises great influence over federal legislation.

The current version of the bill, passed in July 2005, authorizes the creation of a government list of federally funded institutions that "repeatedly engage in excessive tuition hikes" (defined as increases more than twice the rate of inflation over a three-year period). Colleges and universities on this list would be asked to "provide information to the public about the causes of tuition increases, as well as strategies that will be used to hold down tuition in the future." The bill also directs the Department of Education to create a database of "College Consumer Profiles" that will contain "valuable information such as the school's mission, student demographics, accreditation, student/faculty ratios, faculty qualifications, costs, student services, credit transfer policies, graduation rates, and placement rates."<sup>2</sup> [Like most effective politicians, Rep. Boehner both reflects and shapes public concerns—in this case, concerns about higher education quality in relation to costs.]

There are few people who would dispute the *value* of a college education; annual reports on earnings testify to the economic advantages an associate degree or bachelor's degree holder has over a person without one. As more and more careers require entry-level skills attained in college, higher education's importance in securing access to economic and social status has become more obvious. The

perceived economic and social benefits of a college degree give a higher education an instrumental value that makes families willing to pay tuition. (For the sake of this argument, I am ignoring the intrinsic value of a college education, simply because parents tend to view college instrumentally and Boehner has framed the argument purely in terms of economic exchange.)

Very few people would disagree that the cost of a college education is getting very high. Average annual tuition increases tend to outpace inflation, and the higher cost is increasingly difficult to justify, even as an investment in a future economic benefit, because there seems to be no consistent connection between cost and academic quality or student learning. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in October 2004 reported that the annual cost of pursuing a degree for 2004-05 at a two-year public institution was \$2,849 for commuters and \$11,350 for residents, while the annual cost at a four-year public institution ranged between \$14,640 and \$21,931. Annual costs at four-year private institutions have a shorter but higher range, from \$30,124 to \$30,295.<sup>3</sup> When the total costs of receiving an associate degree exceed \$20,000 for resident students, and those for a bachelor's degree range from \$58,000 to \$87,000 at public institutions and slightly over \$120,000 at private institutions, the return on investment—the *value* mentioned above—seems distressingly distant to those who must pay for it.

Whereas in the past questions of value outweighed questions of cost, stakeholders—from parents to policymakers—are beginning to question the *worth* of investing in college. The question of worth underlies Boehner's snide reference to rock-climbing walls and wave pools. As colleges and universities spend more money on what many regard as fripperies designed to achieve higher rankings in *U.S. News and World Report*, stakeholders are developing legitimate concerns about the connection between cost and value, or the worth of a college education.

These questions of worth have their roots in two views of college, both stimulated and nourished by higher education. The first and ultimately more pernicious view, based on the economic advantage a college degree offers, presents a college education as having a primarily private benefit. This view, taken to the extreme, sees a college education as neither public benefit nor public responsibility, and therefore not something that governments need to support. The ranking systems and college guides exacerbate this problem by ignoring the quality of student learning and concentrating on secondary elements of the

college experience (living quarters, social life, athletic teams), on extraneous characteristics like endowment size, and on indirect indicators of academic quality (faculty reputation, graduation rates and application/acceptance ratios). The second view stems from the idea that higher education does indeed have a public value in its social impact, although this view is often reduced to economic terms as well, in economic impact reports and the like.

Both views, because they have an economic basis, have caused stakeholders to begin to ask how wisely and well their money has been used, to ask institutions and faculty to be accountable for the investment of public funds and tuition dollars in higher education. And higher education's response has been woefully inadequate. As Frank Newman, Lara Couturier and Jamie Scurry have noted, there is a "dangerous gap . . . between what the public needs from higher education and how colleges and universities are serving those needs. That gap has received little attention within institutions because they lack clear measurements for their performance and because they are generally satisfied with the status quo."<sup>4</sup> The "fissures" Newman, Couturier and Scurry see between higher education's rhetoric and its performance exist on many levels, but a central one is the need for higher education to take responsibility for learning:

Ninety percent of college graduates have reported that their degree was useful in getting a job but did not prepare them with the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. Employers also are concerned about students' lack of critical thinking, the ability to write clearly, and other skills. Despite the overall value of a college education, growing evidence suggests that students are not gaining the knowledge that they need in crucial areas.

*Colleges should determine whether actual learning is taking place on their campuses instead of focusing on surrogate performance measures of limited relevance, like the scholarly reputation of the faculty (italics added).*<sup>5</sup>

"Actual learning" is never an issue in college rankings and rarely is discussed publicly or promoted by colleges and universities themselves (with the notable exception of schools like Alverno College, which has assessed student learning

and used the results of that assessment for more than two decades). This is problematic at a time when higher education's worth, instrumental and intrinsic, is being questioned.

Higher education has exacerbated the problem by using primarily only two methods of demonstrating its quality, thereby its worth. One is voluntary participation in an accreditation process predicated upon peer review and, except for a handful of instances, on nondisclosure of specific results; in most cases, only the accreditation status of an institution is made public. The second method is an acceptance of traditional, convenient, relatively easy-to-capture measures of quality—graduation rates, years to degree completion, *U.S. News* measures—that only inferentially suggest quality and worth. Yet, because these indicators do not address such things as actual student learning, they are only indirectly relevant to current discussions of worth and quality. Furthermore, their use suggests a failure to understand what stakeholders want when they demand that institutions demonstrate and document their success in helping students learn.

Ironically, in selecting accreditation and persistence/satisfaction data as measures of accountability, higher education has selected measures that can be—and often have been—taken instead to indicate a desire for secrecy and no accountability. Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.) characterizes the position of higher education in this way: “Everything is fine, we are doing a great job, send us more money, and leave us alone.”<sup>6</sup> Despite publication of final accreditation decisions and a plethora of indirect indicators of success, like graduation rates required by the government, the perception of John Boehner’s predecessor as chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee is that higher education wants financing without accountability.

Sadly, higher education’s cloak of confidentiality in accreditation and the widespread use of indirect indicators of academic quality have allowed those suspicious of higher education, and those merely concerned about its quality, to fear at the very least that higher education is unwilling to be accountable in any meaningful way. Furthermore, those who would attack higher education can use this lack of meaningful communication as an indicator of higher education’s failure to facilitate student learning, perhaps even as a sign that higher education is trying to hide evidence of that failure. While there is no evidence that higher education institutions are interested in hiding failure or deceiving the

public, the lack of meaningful communication about their core public mission, facilitating student learning, can be interpreted or used to suggest that they are.

### **A New Basis for Discussions about Quality**

A general sense of dissatisfaction with higher education based on relatively weak performance on traditional but indirect measures of quality, like graduation rates, plus an accreditation system that is essentially closed to the public, have led to demands that higher education prove that it is delivering what it promises in its mission statements. When those demands came from clearly self-interested politicians and individual parents, they were often ignored. Now, however, higher education is being asked by many other groups, both within and outside higher education, to be publicly accountable and to demonstrate its worth to its stakeholders. While the statements of these groups do not necessarily define worth or accountability in the same way, they all call for a fundamental reformulation of the relationship between higher education and its stakeholders.

In its recent report “Building a Nation of Learners,” the Business-Higher Education Partnership, composed of corporate and higher education leaders, calls for “a fundamental systemic change in learning and teaching . . . in order to achieve a nation of learners. To obtain the broad analytical skills required, as well as the specific job-driven skills in demand, students need programs and courses that are both more individualized and better able to produce measurable results and standards.” The emphasis on the functionality and measurability of learning suggests a radical shift from the discipline-based structures and instruction at most institutions of higher education, and that impression is reinforced almost immediately with specifics:

When evaluating courses, programs, and styles of teaching, educators need to address questions such as: How do programs improve student leadership abilities? What kinds of multidisciplinary courses enhance analytical thinking? What learning experiences can help students become aware of global concerns and responsibilities? How can course requirements and exams enhance communication skills, both oral and written?<sup>7</sup>

This statement seems to suggest that specific knowledge within a specific disci-

pline is less important than the skills students develop in using or demonstrating that knowledge. We might infer further that traditional ways of signifying student success, like grade point averages within a major, are less indicators of academic worth than those things that higher education courses and professors traditionally do not assess in any significant or systematic way, except perhaps in a general education core.

From the point of view of a very important stakeholder group, those who employ higher education's graduates, higher education institutions need to produce evidence that students have content knowledge, but also that they can apply knowledge to new situations, can lead and work with others, can see their work in a larger (perhaps global) context and can communicate what they have done. Grade point averages, graduation rates, persistence studies and satisfaction surveys do not provide such evidence.

The Johnson Foundation's report "An American Imperative: Putting Student Learning First" makes the point much more explicitly—and damningly:

But skills such as these—written and oral communication, critical analysis, interpersonal competence, the ability to obtain and use data, the capacity to make informed judgments and the skills required in community life—are essential attributes of a liberal education when they are accompanied by discipline-based knowledge. These skills can be learned. If they are to be learned, however, they must be taught and practiced, not merely absorbed as a result of unplanned academic experience.<sup>8</sup>

The report argues strongly that discipline-based knowledge, while important, is not the only thing that must be learned in college. Explicit attention should be given to "skills" that are rarely a part of any major or are often presumed to develop in what most institutions call "general education," which in many institutions is simply a collection of distributed credit hours. It further argues that, just as what professors teach needs to transcend content without ignoring it, the ways they assess student work need to change as well:

Examinations in educational institutions (including elementary and secondary schools) normally establish competitive

rankings and sort students. They rarely diagnose strengths and weaknesses, examine needs, or suggest what steps to take next. In almost no institutions are a student's skills systematically assessed, developed, and then certified. This assessment issue transcends the needs of learners. In an institution focused on learning, assessment feedback becomes central to the institution's ability to improve its own performance, enhancing student learning in turn.<sup>9</sup>

Defining quality and performance in terms of student learning, thereby documenting success in preparing students for work and for life (the kind of preparation that stakeholders seem to want and expect), requires serious rethinking of what higher education institutions seem to value in their curriculum design, their pedagogy and their grading practices. It requires, for example, considering carefully why students are required to take three to six credits of mathematics or history as part of a general education core. If the reason is the development of analytical or critical-thinking skills, then the teaching and assessment strategies of the courses should address those skills, so that "coverage" and recall of information become less important than what a student does with them.

"An American Imperative" was published in 1993; more recently, "Accountability for Better Results" (a report issued in March 2005 by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education) echoes its call for accountability, but with a somewhat more complex view of responsibility for learning in higher education. While "Accountability for Better Results" argues that "better accountability for results at the institutional and state levels requires clearer goals (especially for student learning) and better information about outcomes,"<sup>10</sup> the commission goes further than other reports in recommending "reciprocal accountability: continuous dialogue [between higher education and its stakeholders], rigorous measurement of outcomes, and open disclosure of results among policymakers, institutional leaders, faculty, and students."<sup>11</sup> The concept of reciprocal accountability is both a boon and a challenge to higher education: the former because it makes clear that effective learning is the responsibility of many parties, the latter because it asserts the necessity for open dialogue. Whether the confidentiality-based culture of higher education can tolerate open dialogue with its stakeholders is open to question; that it must attempt to do so is beyond doubt.

Whatever its degree of toleration for openness, higher education is already facing the prospect of much more open discussion of student learning and educational effectiveness, at least in the processes of accreditation. While in the past regional and specialized accreditation processes tended to focus primarily on capacity issues (budget, facilities, faculty qualifications, library holdings), they have in the last decade increasingly emphasized institutional effectiveness as demonstrated by the achievement of stated student learning goals.

Last year the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) published *Principles for Good Practice*, a list of five principles for regional accreditors. The first of these principles asserts, "Evaluation of an institution's success in achieving student learning is central to each Commission's function and public charter." When the statement deals with the question of evidence used for accreditation, the commissions promise to "give particular attention to how the institution's collection and use of student learning evidence helps it to achieve its learning goals." While this statement may not seem particularly radical, it in fact changes the nature of the accreditation process, forcing the institution, the commission and the visiting team to have open dialogue about the achievement of learning goals.

The statement of principles goes further than the requirement to give "particular attention" to learning; it also makes clear that institutions will be expected to develop and provide evidence of the *quality* of student learning:

*Forms of appropriate evidence.* Evidence examined by Commissions for the purpose of evaluating the quality of student learning may include:

- a. fulfillment of institutional purpose in the form of evidence of *student learning outcomes* appropriate to its educational goals;
- b. institutional *processes* for evaluating educational effectiveness, in the form of student learning goals appropriate to its mission, procedures for collecting data on student achievement of these goals, and evidence that these data are used to effect improvements in educational offerings;
- c. effective teaching and learning *practices*, including such characteristics as academic challenge, engagement of stu-

- dents with faculty and each other, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experiences; and
- d. institutional *capacity* in the form of a climate conducive to educational and academic freedom, and appropriate and sufficient resources for effective teaching, learning, and assessment.<sup>12</sup>

*Principles for Good Practice* clearly states the expectation that the accreditation process will deal with evidence of an institution's processes, practices and capacity for achieving student learning outcomes. While some of that evidence may be in the form of traditional indirect measures of quality, like graduation and persistence rates, the emphasis here is on the achievement of learning outcomes. Documenting learning and responding to evidence of learning become a central part of institutional accountability, at least insofar as regional accreditation agencies are concerned. It should be noted that, while the statement is not so different from the reports mentioned earlier in its concern for learning, it is much more explicit in its requirement that evidence of learning—of achievement of outcomes—be a primary indicator of institutional quality.

### **Assessment of Learning and Accountability**

The CRAC principles make it clear that stimulating, measuring, documenting and acting upon evidence of student learning are central parts of institutional accountability. As Margaret Miller has argued:

Colleges and universities should therefore continually check to be sure that [their] general goals are being reached by an appropriate and timely curriculum. They should define clearly, succinctly, and publicly their criteria and standards for graduates' attainment of these goals. . . . They should support curricular and cocurricular strategies and pedagogies to enable that learning. Finally, they should be willing to assess their results to determine how they might improve their practice.<sup>13</sup>

The collocation of institutional goals, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the context of publicly stated criteria and standards is indicative of the current trend to broaden the conversation on educational effectiveness to include

learning goals. It suggests the necessity to expand the concept of accountability beyond mere cost-effectiveness to actual worth. (It should be noted here that the political statements with which we began and that, to some degree, have forced this conversation, do focus on cost-effectiveness, but the concerns of other stakeholders—students, parents, employers and communities—are more complex.) Documented achievement of publicly understood learning outcomes is an accountability measure more relevant to what most stakeholders seek from higher education than a federal correlation between tuition increases and the rate of inflation.

If the learning outcome approach is more relevant an indicator of accountability than others currently being discussed outside higher education, then it is incumbent upon higher education to be proactive in pursuing it. In a sense, the regional accreditation commissions have already begun the process of redefining accountability with their principles, but higher education leaders—from presidents to heads of faculty unions—need to participate directly, fully and openly in that process. If the leaders treat the accreditation requirements as a compliance issue, rather than an opportunity to document and proclaim educational worth, higher education will jeopardize its credibility in the conversation about accountability.

Thus, the choice for higher education is a simple one: Do we develop an accountability approach that accurately depicts the quality of the education we provide, or do we wait for a higher education equivalent of No Child Left Behind? While there may be problems in developing the first alternative, the second is no alternative at all. So what is higher education to do?

First and foremost, it must embrace the idea that it should be accountable, partly out of pragmatism (public demands for accountability cannot be ignored and will not disappear), and partly out of ethical obligation (those who support higher education have a right to know how successful it is). Higher education institutions assess student learning in many ways every day, so making at least some relevant information on student learning outcomes available to stakeholders should not be difficult, especially since refusal to do so is no longer an option.

But embracing accountability has its perils at institutional and individual faculty levels. Chief among them is the fact that any accountability system will document

a degree of failure, for no institution or faculty member is perfect, and not all students are A students. A second reason for apprehension is the fact that that these data can be misused for political ends, both in legislative bodies and in department chairs' offices.

At the same time, embracing accountability offers distinct advantages. First, higher education can seize the momentum that is already building and develop credible accountability strategies that are both transparent and protective of the rights of institutions and faculty. (The other alternative is to have an externally imposed system that may do neither.) Second, it can actively make learning, not the number of keg parties or six-year graduates, the centerpiece of any discussion of accountability. Third, since stimulating learning is closer to institutional mission and faculty work than merely graduating people, accountability based on learning will be more reflective of what higher education is designed to do and thus will more likely produce impressive and positive results.

Among a number of different strategies institutions can use to assess and document the achievement of learning outcomes are standardized, discipline- or skill-oriented tests. Certification exams, graduate school entrance exams, and commercially available exams like those from ETS and ACT all provide some measurement of learning and so may well provide some information useful for documenting achievement of learning outcomes. While their major advantages are their validity, reliability and comparability, one of their major disadvantages is their necessarily general nature; they in no way can address the particular missions of individual institutions. Thus, while they are valuable for reporting and benchmarking, they are much less effective tools for improving learning or teaching at individual institutions, and are much more susceptible to misuse or misinterpretation by stakeholders and policymakers.

Other, more nuanced approaches, like the Rand Corporation's Collegiate Learning Assessment project, may offer results that are more tailored and useful to individual institutions and faculty. This critical thinking test crosses disciplines and modes of inquiry, so an institution may be able to use its results in a variety of contexts. Likewise, the National Forum on College-Level Learning, which is studying the use of multiple measures statewide in five states, offers some hope of subtler, more useful results that could well be used to improve learning.

But higher education need not go down the path of standardized testing. Most higher education institutions have at least rudimentary accountability mechanisms in the assessment systems they have been developing over the last decade, partly under pressure from regional accreditation agencies. As accrediting agencies have increasingly required institutions to produce evidence of student learning, faculty and institutions have developed or are developing reasonable, credible ways to document their degree of success in stimulating student learning at course and program levels. Further, they are recognizing that even evidence of lack of success can be used to improve teaching and learning strategies at program, course and section levels, something that is impossible with most standardized tests. Evidence of “failure” thus can be transformed into evidence of an institution’s commitment to continuous improvement if assessment data are integrated into planning, budgeting and curriculum revision.

The issue here is not measuring but using and reporting results. When the assessment movement first gathered strength in the 1980s, its emphasis was on processes for measuring learning. That emphasis shifted in the 1990s to improvement of learning. “Evidence” became a much more plastic concept that included a wide range of “data,” from validated, standardized tests to the professional judgments of faculty and external evaluators on capstone projects. How an institution measures the achievement of student learning outcomes is less important than the fact that it uses this evidence to improve learning and to engage in public discourse.

If an assessment system is to be a credible means of proving an institution’s worth to its stakeholders, it must be a system both culturally and temporally. That is, assessment must occur across campus in all departments and areas that are responsible for learning, from the classroom to the library to Student Affairs to distance education and instructional technology, and there must be common agreement on the outcomes as well as the means of assessing them.

Second, the acquisition of learning outcomes such as critical thinking, communication skills, and problem-solving—three skills that are likely to appear on most institutions’ lists of core learning outcomes—is a complex process that cannot be measured by a final examination or a grade in a single course. The outcomes must be assessed multiple times in multiple contexts. Seeing the outcomes as developing over time makes them institutional priorities, rather

than course-bound tasks, so they become the basis for conversations between students and faculty, advisors and other institutional staff, as well as a means to document institutional worth. In “Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission,” the Association of American Colleges and Universities recommends such an approach for liberal education, in which outcomes are “addressed and cultivated throughout the entire educational experience” through a process of orientation, planning, milestone assessments and a capstone or culminating experience.<sup>14</sup> This sensible approach can be used throughout colleges and universities.

Assessment systems offer higher education the opportunity to reshape the dialogue about accountability in ways that are both more appropriate and more flattering to higher education (because higher education is, by and large, doing a good job of facilitating and assessing learning) than the data sets currently in place. While most current assessment systems are incomplete, flawed and inconsistent, they at least form a basis for responding to calls for accountability by opening a discussion about academic quality and students’ achievement of learning outcomes. The evidence we have been collecting to document student achievement of learning outcomes can and should become the core of a response to those demanding accountability.

It is reasonable for stakeholders to ask higher education how well students are achieving the goals we claim for them. More important, it is reasonable—and prudent—for higher education institutions to develop direct, transparent responses to those questions as quickly and as honestly as possible. We can no longer ignore the cries for accountability; we must either seize the initiative or be overwhelmed by a tide of distrust and regulation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Boehner, “A Monster Database is Not the Answer,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 17, 2005): B20.

<sup>2</sup> *The College Access and Opportunity Act*, 109th Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 609. Available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/109th/education/hea/hr609billsummary.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hoover, “Public Colleges See a 10% Rise in Tuition for 2004-5,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 29, 2004). Available at <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i10/10a00101.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry, "Higher Education Isn't Meeting the Public's Needs," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 15, 2004): B6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, B6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tribble, "Colleges Must Get Used to Collaborating with Congress," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 15, 2005): B16.

<sup>7</sup> Business-Higher Education Forum, *Building a Nation of Learners* (2004), 15.

<sup>8</sup> The Johnson Foundation. *An American Imperative: Putting Student Learning First*, 2. Available at <http://www.johnsondn.org/AmericanImperative/puttinglearning.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, *Accountability for Better Results* (Denver: State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2005), 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, *Principles for Good Practice: Regional Accrediting Commissions* (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Miller, "The Meaning of the Baccalaureate," *About Campus* (September-October 2003), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Our Students' Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission* (2004).