

Book Review of *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* by Joseph C. Burke (editor)

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As postsecondary education becomes more important to state and national prosperity, debates about the quality and efficiency of higher education continue to rage. A higher education institution often agrees to implement some measure of accountability to appease the critics who charge that academia is inefficient and ineffective. However, the price of appeasement sometimes proves to be high. The accountability measure can become the primary indicator of the institution's success and a major factor in setting the institution's priorities. A narrow focus on specific accountability issues may cause government officials, concerned citizens and academic administrators to lose sight of the complex nature of higher education.

The impact of such "accountability myopia" is explored throughout *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), edited by Joseph C. Burke. By examining how nine specific accountability measures are related to state demands, market forces and academic needs, the essays in Burke's collection provide evidence of how accountability pressures are influencing what is valued in higher education. This review focuses on the narrowing of perspectives, as detailed in *Achieving Accountability*, and suggests one way in which to counteract accountability myopia in higher education.

Achieving Accountability describes how broad accountability forces are challenging public and private higher education institutions to adapt in response to state and national priorities. Zumeta (Chapter 2) describes how state and federal

demands for accountability have extended to include private higher education institutions. In seven states, for example, private higher education institutions are included in their state's performance reporting mandates and must submit reports that include data on a number of student accountability indicators. Private institutions also are facing increasing national pressure to restrain tuition costs, increase student retention and graduation rates, and assess student learning.

Richardson and Smalling (Chapter 3) outline ways in which academic governance can support federal and state demands for increased accountability and retain institutional shared governance. This is often accomplished through enhancements of system-level governance structures—such as state-wide higher education systems, coordinating boards, and planning agencies—that encompass large numbers of higher education institutions in a state. These initial chapters provide readers with clear illustrations of how accountability is shaping higher education and how higher education is responding to these changes.

Achieving Accountability also discusses and critiques nine specific accountability measures. These measures focus on institutional needs, state priorities and national concerns. The book considers how each accountability measure is redefining academia. National higher education experts critique how academic needs, legislative demands and market forces influence what measures are used most often in higher education. These discussions provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of each accountability measure and its policy implications, as well as some insights into the myopia that can ensue if higher education, the public and the state begin to value only that which is being measured.

At the institutional level, quality higher education is equated most often with positive measures of student learning and engagement. Accountability measures that target institutional needs regarding student learning include accreditation (Wolff, Chapter 4), assessment (Ewell, Chapter 5), standardized testing (Erwin, Chapter 6), student and alumni surveys (Kuh, Chapter 7), and academic audits (Massy, Chapter 8). As external demands for objective evidence of student learning increase, higher education must incorporate more of these accountability measures, and expend greater resources, to prove to the public that students are receiving a quality education. In an era of fiscal constraint, and with more money devoted to measuring student learning, the essays in *Achieving*

Accountability warn academic leaders against neglecting key aspects of higher education such as faculty and staff development, research, and service.

Higher education also must contend with state and national accountability demands. From the state perspective, quality higher education is linked not only to student learning but also to acceptance, retention, and graduation rates; job preparation; and other factors relating to the benefits students and the state derive from their investment in higher education. These measures are captured in state-by-state report cards (Callan and Finney, Chapter 9) and performance funding mechanisms (Burke, Chapter 10). Higher education institutions often have no choice but to participate in these state-level measures of accountability; failure to comply might have negative consequences on both state appropriations and academic reputation. As the lens through which higher education is viewed narrows to comply with state demands for data and information, academic leaders also must remember academic endeavors not currently valued by the state but which could be cast into the public spotlight at any time.

National-level demands for higher education accountability often are achieved through ratings, rankings, and groupings of public and private institutions (Volkwein and Grunig, Chapter 11). At the national level, quality higher education is defined largely by student access, completion, affordability, and quality of life, and to a lesser extent by institutional reputation and resources. *Achieving Accountability* reinforces how higher education is being defined and evaluated largely through a student learning paradigm, and how this learning is but one of many important aspects of higher education. Those internal and external to academia must remain cognizant of this accountability myopia and its potential impact on higher education issues that are absent from the public spotlight.

Throughout *Achieving Accountability*, Burke and his colleagues provide readers with numerous examples of data, reports and policies that help measure higher education quality. The examples include specific data indicators such as student learning outcomes, graduation rates, faculty workload, staff diversity, sponsored research, student transfers and standardized test scores. They also provide broader information on teaching and learning processes, institutional achievements, curriculum design, high school preparedness, alumni perceptions and student satisfaction, to name a few. Together, the information in these examples can help counteract the myopic approach to measuring success, an approach

that relies on a few government-mandated indicators of student learning.

Achieving Accountability asks us to replace such a myopic viewpoint with a broader appreciation of higher education as a complex system involving students, faculty, support staff, administrators, and dynamic relationships with the state and federal government. Burke and his colleagues stress that a concerted effort must be made to educate the public on the diverse types of data, to disclose these data in a timely manner, and to communicate the findings in uncomplicated language. Although this effort may seem daunting, the rewards of such disclosure and transparency include greater public trust in and respect for higher education that exists not only to educate students but also to seek and advance knowledge that will benefit all citizens of the state.

Everyone involved in higher education accountability—both internal and external to academia—is strongly encouraged to read and reflect upon the current accountability issues discussed in *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education* and to consider how these issues influence the ways in which higher education is defined, measured and evaluated.