

# Accountability for Community Colleges: Moving Forward

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Recent calls for increased investments in postsecondary education have been accompanied by demands for greater accountability from colleges and universities. It is politically difficult in a time of scarce resources to allocate new funds without requiring measurable outcomes in return. At the same time, effective accountability systems in education are rare. Therefore, in this chapter I consider the potential for successfully framing and enacting accountability frameworks for community colleges. I argue that the usual approach to accountability requires substantial reform if it stands any chance of succeeding in this sector, but that success is possible and likely.

Accountability systems only work if they are given significant legitimacy by those being held accountable. Actors need to feel part of the process and believe that their performance is assessed in meaningful, worthwhile ways.<sup>1</sup> My research indicates that community-college leaders are prepared, given the right circumstances, to enter into new accountability arrangements with not just acquiescence but enthusiasm. This could create a great deal of positive change in an institution often simultaneously applauded for its very existence and derided for its current levels of performance. In fact, robust accountability arrangements implemented with the consent and participation of community colleges could be a way to solve decades-old, seemingly intractable problems such as underfunding and lack of social prestige.

Next, I provide a brief overview of the work of community colleges and the attention they have recently received, particularly from policymakers.

I also describe the contours of their current outcomes. Then, I address a key problem of many accountability systems—their inability to gain the consent and willful participation of their subjects—and explain why I believe this may not be a significant problem in the case of community colleges. My assessment is informed by numerous conversations with community-college leaders over the last five years and a recent survey of forty-one community-college presidents. Together, these shed light on the ways a new accountability regime might effectively develop. Finally, I end by outlining a process through which accountability for community colleges could progress during the next five years.

### Community Colleges: Then and Now

Practically since Joliet Junior College was established in 1901, the very existence of community colleges has been the subject of critique and debate. For decades they have been described as places that enforce “continued dependency, unrealistic aspirations, and wasted ‘general education.’”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the public two-year sector effectively facilitated the nation’s desires for a massive expansion of higher education that brought more than two-thirds of all high-school graduates into some form of postsecondary coursework. Most Latino and low-income students who will ever attend college will enroll in a community college, the most affordable and accessible entryway.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of community colleges tend to focus on their rates of degree production: specifically, the percentage of students transferring to four-year colleges and/or earning credentials. Relative to their sizable population of entrants, the percentage of degree recipients is small; more than one in two beginning community-college students leave empty-handed. This leads many to call community colleges places of access but not success, leading some educational observers to charge that their students are being “cooled out” and “diverted” when channeled into their doors.<sup>4</sup> Notably, their completion rates also make many policymakers hesitant to contribute the additional resources that may be necessary to improve outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

But the last year has seen significant changes to these trends. In a recent speech at Macomb Community College, President Barack Obama called community colleges an “undervalued asset” to the nation, recognizing that they are often treated like a “stepchild” and an “afterthought.” He summoned the “can-do American spirit” of community colleges everywhere to help transform the American economy.<sup>6</sup> His American Graduation Initiative (as of the time of this writing, passed by the House of Representatives in

HR 3221 and pending in the Senate) calls for a substantial investment in the public two-year sector (approximately \$9 billion), coupled with performance targets intended to innovate and transform community colleges into efficient, degree-producing institutions.

Would it work? In particular, are community-college leaders receptive to greater accountability and will they respond to the new forms of federal investment by changing policies and practices in sustainable ways? Some say no. For example, Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute contends that President Obama's initiative will effectively slow efforts to reform community colleges, perpetuating the "subpar community-college status quo" since the colleges and their leaders are not "up to the challenges they face."<sup>7</sup> Accountability (and increased funding), Hess implies, are merely nudges, and likely ineffective nudges at that.

My research leads me to doubt the accuracy of Hess's assertions. Community-college leaders are generally a reform-minded group eager to gain the support needed to change practices, and that serves as motivation to embrace accountability. While I dispute his assessment that the colleges themselves are inherently "subpar," I think that the longstanding treatment of the community-college sector as inferior and not "up to the challenge" spurs its leaders to embrace new ways to attract respect and resources to their colleges. As noted earlier, one reason that accountability often fails is that it is not embraced by those it relies on; it is an external third party often unwelcomed by the main players. If the will of community-college leaders is widespread and reasonably established, the path to progress is illuminated and potentially promising.

The perspectives I present in this chapter draw on two types of data. My primary source of information is an online survey of community-college presidents and other leaders that I conducted between August and November 2009. In that survey I solicited information on presidents' perceptions and attitudes toward accountability with a focus on identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on the measurement of community-college success. I circulated an invitation to participate through multiple channels, asking respondents to draw on their own social networks to gather additional recruits (often called "snowball sampling"). I sent this request to presidents at institutions large and small, urban and rural, and asked the national associations to assist as well. In total, forty-one community-college presidents participated. Since I promised anonymity in exchange for participation, and the survey was intentionally kept short to increase participation, I did not collect demographic information on individuals or institutions.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, I do not claim the survey has demonstrable generalizability; it does not use a nationally representative sample; I cannot calculate rates of participation, nor is it safe to assume

that the broadest array of potential perspectives is represented. Instead, the information gleaned from these results is most appropriately interpreted in conjunction with other surveys and research on the attitudes and actions of community colleges toward accountability. Therefore, whenever possible I note points of convergence or divergence with the results of a 2009 survey of community-college leaders in ten states, conducted by the Community College Research Center, as well as a national interview-based study of college presidents conducted by Public Agenda in 2008.<sup>9</sup> In addition I draw on lessons from the numerous formal and informal conversations with community-college presidents I experienced over the last five years as part of other studies.<sup>10</sup>

### The Status Quo and the Future

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the current production rates of community colleges and their leaders know this. Even among students with stated degree intentions, dropout is common.<sup>11</sup> In terms of national averages, after three years just 16 percent of first-time community-college students who began college in 2003 had attained a credential of any kind (certificate, associate's degree, and/or bachelor's degree), and another 40 percent were still enrolled. Given six years to complete instead of three, completion rates improve somewhat; for example, 36 percent of students entering community colleges in 1995 attained a credential by 2001. Another 17.5 percent were still enrolled.<sup>12</sup> While this indicates that completion rates need to account for the pace of progress toward completion, the noncompletion rate (no degree; not enrolled) hovers very close to 50 percent, even given longer time horizons. Of course, this number decreases when degree completion is measured over a longer period of time, but in the aggregate it represents a substantial loss of human capital and resources.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, many also acknowledge that inputs driving the system contribute to current rates of completion. Community colleges serve more disadvantaged students but receive far fewer per-student resources from state and federal governments when compared to public four-year institutions. Their resources tend to decline during recessions just as enrollments are at their peak.<sup>14</sup> They are often overcrowded and have too few faculty and counselors to serve students.<sup>15</sup> A significant portion of the community-college population is comprised of older adults from disadvantaged backgrounds who often enter higher education with low levels of literacy. Nationally, 57 percent of two-year institutions rank the academic preparation of their entering students as fair or poor.<sup>16</sup> The faculty workforce is disproportionately comprised of part-time adjuncts

receiving little professional development and having scarce time to spend with students.<sup>17</sup> For all of these reasons, while observers tend to find completion rates of community colleges unacceptable, they also find them unsurprising.<sup>18</sup>

Where should community colleges aim in terms of achieving greater levels of success? Even attaching a descriptor to current levels of performance (e.g., labeling them mediocre or subpar) depends on first establishing some kind of benchmark for comparison, or an absolute target. Since open-access institutions are, by definition, nonselective, students enter with a wide range of goals and expectations, making assessment of their outcomes complicated. For example, if we define “success” based on the outcomes of all entrants, performance will be depressed unless success is very broadly defined. By the same token, if we measure success only for a select group (e.g., those who indicate degree intentions or achieve credit thresholds), we risk producing a falsely positive appearance of success while also encouraging access to diminish (e.g., through creaming). Clearly, results vary depending on how broadly the pool of potential completers is defined and how success is measured.<sup>19</sup> Community-college leaders are highly cognizant of this fact and actively resist performance measures that would seem to have the potential to narrow their focus to a single group of students. Said a community-college president interviewed by Public Agenda: “We are constantly balancing access with quality. Here we are with maybe half of the high school graduates coming to us who are not college ready, and we are being held accountable for producing high-quality graduates. It is a balancing act.” The clear implication, according to a president in my survey, is that “those developing, implementing and measuring accountability in community colleges [must] understand the institutions and their variety of students.”

A related concern is the community college’s long history of having multiple missions. While resources for the workforce development mission are most abundant, the twin emphases on promoting college access generally and access to the baccalaureate in particular (via the transfer function) dominate public perception. In keeping with those emphases, it is common to compare the success of community-college students to the success of two different groups: high-school graduates who do not attend college at all, and students who began at (usually nonselective) four-year institutions. These comparisons facilitate the calculation of a “positive” democratizing effect of bringing students into higher education who otherwise wouldn’t attend college, and a “negative” diversion effect of lowering rates of bachelor’s degree completion among students who otherwise would have attended a four-year college. The most rigorous studies tend to find

relatively small negative differences in the outcomes of students who start at community colleges compared to nonselective, public four-year institutions, but many times those differences are offset by the positive increases in college attainment of those attending community college rather than no college at all.<sup>20</sup> Of course, when the latter part of the “community college” effect is not taken into account, the “penalty” of starting at a community college appears larger.

As more and different kinds of postsecondary institutions emerge, and the number of missions of community colleges expands, various additional comparisons also become possible. For example, the outcomes of community colleges have recently been compared (negatively) to those of the for-profit, two-year sector.<sup>21</sup> Instead of focusing on credential completion, others argue for measuring incremental milestones marking progress toward a degree. Crediting colleges for helping students make the transition from remedial to credit-bearing coursework is one example.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, many community-college leaders contend that completion of noncredit courses and/or workforce training ought to also count toward measures of success.<sup>23</sup>

But a key question is whether any types of comparisons (even across-state or within-state comparisons *among* community colleges) are fair and effective at motivating agents to change. State community college systems vary in their missions (and their demographics) and also have different outcomes.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, some critics of accountability argue that it is not appropriate to compare community colleges across states. For example, one might have a strong articulation system (said to reflect a stronger transfer mission) with a neighboring state lacking such a system.<sup>25</sup> But that presents a problem in terms of making comparisons only if we believe that differences in policies or missions drive outcomes (in other words, that outcomes might reflect policy choices). Instead, it is also possible that outcomes are driving community-college policies or definitions of mission (in other words, that policy choices reflect past or current levels of performance). It is far from clear that accountability systems should combat “mission restriction” by including measures related to *all* missions. Instead, we should strike a balance by providing additional resources to support certain missions, while avoiding taking explicit actions to compromise others.

In addition to identifying a benchmark against which to compare the *relative* performance of community colleges, we might also consider setting some *absolute* standards. For example, are there any conditions under which a completion rate of less than 10 percent would be deemed acceptable? Right now, according to the federal calculations (in IPEDs), the community college performing at the fiftieth percentile graduates just over 21 percent of its students within three years (this includes certificates

and degrees, not counting those earned at another institution), and helps another 19 percent transfer. Compared to that average rate of 40 percent “success,” the worst-performing community colleges (those at the tenth percentile) achieve success in less than one-fifth of cases (18 percent), while those at the ninetieth percentile see over 80 percent succeed.<sup>26</sup> While using relative criteria serves to emphasize continuous improvement and encourages competition among schools,<sup>27</sup> setting absolute targets might help to improve the colleges’ public standing—images are easily tarnished when one can locate a community college with a dropout rate greater than 85 percent.<sup>28</sup>

The good news is that there is general agreement among both community-college “insiders” and “outsiders” about the need to improve. The majority of presidents in my survey indicated that a clearer focus on “success” and “what matters most” would be a benefit of increased accountability. These results are also broadly consistent with the opinions of community-college presidents who participated in interviews with Public Agenda in 2008.<sup>29</sup> The many caveats about inadequate student preparation and multiple missions do not ameliorate the need to assess success, particularly given a climate of scarce fiscal resources and a push to increase the nation’s stock of human capital.<sup>30</sup> Moving the bar (no matter how far) requires establishing a range of acceptable outcomes and setting some goals. This effort must be a precursor to any new accountability regime because knowing what the regime is meant to achieve will be the only way to assess its success.

### In Search of Respect

Given the potential that focusing on a set of outcomes might narrow their work or compromise valued missions, what accounts for the willingness of community-college leaders to embrace accountability? I put the question to community-college presidents, and their responses indicate a strong belief that the opportunities provided by accountability will outweigh its potential costs. Faced with declining resources, relative invisibility in the eyes of the media and the public, and yet growing expectations for performance, they seek new solutions.

In particular, many community-college presidents spoke of an interest in having the chance to *demonstrate institutional value* in a visible way. This is a sector often frustrated by the lack of attention and knowledge of their work exhibited by the general public. As one community-college president put it, “Accountability provides an opportunity for policy makers and the public to better understand the mission of community colleges and the students they serve.” Another said, “Accountability can defuse the

argument that community colleges are ‘failing.’” Given that a recent report confirmed that community colleges are largely invisible in terms of media coverage, this is an important concern.<sup>31</sup>

Community-college presidents are also interested in leveraging accountability to strengthen the claims of that sector on *public resources*. Competition for resources is stiffer than ever, and community colleges often feel they lose out to universities, K-12 schools, health care, prisons, and more. A president interviewed for the Public Agenda study said, “This is a kind of a bias from a community-college person, but I think that the state has always been willing to provide more funds for four-year colleges and universities than they have for community colleges. I feel that community college has kind of gotten left out.”<sup>32</sup> He is correct; a recent analysis colleagues and I conducted for the Brookings Institution revealed that significant funding disparities between the two- and four-year public sectors exist at the federal level as well (even after netting out disparities in student financial aid and resource funding).<sup>33</sup>

Two-year college leaders also embrace the potential for accountability in order to help *organize the work* of their colleges and motivate their staffs. For example, one president told me that he hopes accountability will “lead to honest discussion of issues and the ability to manage organizational change.” Another added that by facilitating the discovery of “what works” and what does not, the use of data can help leaders “to direct time and funding away from initiatives we cannot show that work and toward new ventures.” Such an approach to establishing the effectiveness, and particularly the cost-effectiveness, of programs and practices in higher education is long overdue.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it is the explicit focus of the Lumina Foundation’s Making Opportunity Affordable initiative.

Admittedly, these are high expectations for any set of policies—perhaps too high. For when data is collected and shared, it does not always match with projections. But hope reigns eternal, as clearly evident in the words of the president who told me that accountability provides “a chance to demonstrate that community colleges far exceed every other educational entity in return on the dollar, and that the “delta” (that is, the magnitude of change) in educational outcomes is tremendous.”

It is also worth noting that, in one sense, faith among leaders that accountability will bring status and recognition to the sector is paradoxical. As many presidents noted, accountability for community college is not new (though it may come to take new forms at a new scale) but it has not done much thus far to enhance status and recognition. One said:

Community colleges have always been held accountable by our students and the communities we serve to fulfill our stated missions. For example, we have always been accountable to grant funders, financial aid



providers, state agencies, foundations, donors, and more for being responsible stewards of our resources. We have always been accountable to local employers and transfer institutions for the quality and preparation levels of our graduates. We have always been accountable to our students, first and foremost, to ensure that they have every opportunity to achieve their educational goals whether they are to successfully complete a single class, a degree or something in between. So accountability is not coming to community colleges; it has always been here.

Despite the presence of accountability in the past, community colleges have sunk even lower on the higher-education totem pole as evidenced, for example, by growing disparities in their funding relative to other sectors. This is true even though community college administrators feel they are already operating in an environment in which their information and outcomes are very public and already perceive that they are held responsible by local communities and boards. They “believe in the story” they have to tell, yet their outcomes have not improved, and their position in higher education has not grown stronger.

Of course, presidents may only appear to embrace “accountability”; the term itself is vague and therefore easily interpreted in different ways. This was difficult to get a sense of using the online survey, but the results suggest that to some community-college presidents accountability means little more than “reporting information.” To others, who speak in more concrete terms about specific standards for achievement, it implies both reporting and responsiveness to demands for improvement. Friendliness toward accountability could vary, then, by how it is defined.

It is also important to note that most leaders express the idea that accountability *alone* will not work; it is simply insufficient. The financial constraints under which community colleges currently operate both contribute to and reflect their status. Their meager levels of funding complicate how and under what conditions they respond to demands for improvement. They watch their enrollment and graduation rates carefully, but struggle with how to make the investments needed to improve. And in some cases, when money is not available to make improvements, it is probably easier to ignore the numbers entirely.

### The Opportunity and the Challenges

At the time of this writing, there is mounting evidence that the political will to move an accountability movement forward in the two-year sector is present. The number of states tying at least some community college funding to outcomes has grown. For example, South Florida Community College uses sixteen core indicators of effectiveness that are used in

tandem with the state-level accountability measures.<sup>35</sup> The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges has implemented a performance incentive funding system based on key momentum points that evidence student success.<sup>36</sup>

The Achieving the Dream initiative, which promotes the use of data and benchmarking as part of regular community-college practice, is now widely respected and community colleges actively seek to join in. Its focus on effective use of data to improve student success, common measurement of core achievement indicators, and disaggregation of data to pinpoint gaps in student achievement are good examples of community colleges willingly embracing accountability. This may be attributable to the approach of the initiative, in particular its emphasis on using outcomes to promote learning. This is critically important to leaders; as one president told *Public Agenda*, “Accountability needs to be used to help us improve and learn from one another and get better. It doesn’t need to be used as a club, or a stick, or an excuse not to fund schools.”

Another positive sign is that nearly all community colleges are participating in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and they allow institutional-level survey results to be released to the public. This stands in sharp contrast to the unwillingness of four-year colleges in the National Survey of Student Engagement to make their institution-level data widely available.<sup>37</sup> Recently, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation announced a \$1 million effort to support a new voluntary accountability system being developed by the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees, and the College Board. Eight community colleges in eight states (AZ, CA, IN, LA, OH, OK, SC, and TX) have agreed to participate in a pilot test of the system with the intention to next ramp up to include twenty colleges in the next two years.

If we accept that interest among educational leaders is alive and well, what are the main tasks which need to be dealt with in creating new accountability frameworks for community colleges? My sense is that there are at least three: (a) reaching agreement on appropriate measurable outcomes, (b) developing (or reinforcing) systems capable of producing data on those measures, and (c) determining the extent to which accountability will be tied to funding, governance, and strategic planning.

### *Defining the Measures*

The first, defining the accountability measures, is the most critical. As Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation, recently stated, “The first step will be to get everyone speaking the same language.”<sup>38</sup> The

measures used must reflect on long-standing debates over institutional missions, and student and faculty goals. For example, if the measures place disproportionate weight on the transfer function of community colleges, those who value and work on the workforce side will object and vice versa. If the measures do not capture outcomes that college administrators can use (and ideally that faculty and students can use too), they will not last. And finally, the process through which definitions are constructed will serve to define how community colleges relate to the accountability system. This is a sector accustomed to being told what to do, rather than being given the tools and rights with which to set their own terms. Great surprises could result if that typical approach were upended.

To be clear, this *does not mean* allowing each college to develop their own accountability measures using their own data. Such an approach will greatly diminish any potential for establishing standards and setting goals that go beyond a single institution. Instead, there are several potential ways to identify appropriate accountability measures, including (a) drawing on performance outcomes used in other settings or systems, (b) considering the use measures already in place in state accountability systems for community colleges, and/or (c) identifying measures community college leaders prefer.

In the first case the likely result would involve importing measures used for four-year colleges. The greatest fear of community-college leaders appears to be that policymakers will simply seek to transform them into four-year colleges. Their unique functions, particularly their ability to enroll students who otherwise would not attend college, and their relationships to business leaders and local citizens, are very important to them. When they speak of inappropriate measures, then, they refer to those “based upon an outmoded understanding of our colleges and their students” or those that employ “metrics calibrated to four-year colleges, and metrics that do not assess impact on community.” To be more specific, one community-college president told me that “our community colleges are too often judged by measures that are more appropriate to liberal arts colleges with residence halls and homogeneous student bodies.” Similar fears were expressed by community-college leaders in interviews conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in 2006.<sup>39</sup>

In a recent study assessing performance measures already used in ten states to calculate outcomes for community colleges, researchers at the Community College Research Center identified 140 specific indicators already used, including those related to inputs, process, and outputs. Notably missing from existing indicators, those researchers pointed out, are measures of student learning.<sup>40</sup>

The current measures of institutional success used in IPEDs, known as the student-right-to-know graduation rates, are good examples of what most community-college presidents would deem inappropriate. These calculations are done only for first-time, full-time, degree- or certificate-seeking students. Clearly, as analysts at the Community Colleges Research Center have put it, the SRK isn't "all you need to know" to measure community-college student success.<sup>41</sup>

A failure to involve community-college leaders in the process of grappling with the problem of crafting appropriate measures could lead to several additional problems, some quite unintentional. One president was quite blunt when he said, "without the freedom to choose the measures and targets that are appropriate for their students and programs, community colleges may feel forced to resort to other ways to meet inappropriate targets, such as limiting access for students who are least likely to succeed. Obviously that would be counter to the overarching goal of improving college graduation and reducing inequities at the national level." Several leaders also expressed concern that the fear of negative press may inhibit colleges from trying new programs that might result in inadequate outcomes.<sup>42</sup> This is consistent with the responses of community-college presidents (and often four-year college presidents as well) in interviews about accountability conducted by Public Agenda. In that study, researchers found that "the presidents were nearly unanimous in saying that their institutions should be accountable; at the same time, however, they felt that many of the current approaches to accountability are more harmful than helpful."<sup>43</sup>

In an effort to assess what community-college presidents would embrace, I asked survey participants to name five outcome measures they would be comfortable with using in an accountability system to which their colleges should be subjected. The most common responses from community-college presidents were indicators of attainment, employment, and access (see figure 9.1). They are broadly consistent with those identified by CCRC's survey, though they focus more heavily on outputs and less on process. This is important since the process indicators could include measures of the relative resources colleges have to achieve outcomes such as tuition and fees, and funding per full-time employee. Yet, even though assessments of performance without consideration of these measures are more likely to feel "unfair" to presidents, they were notably absent from the presidents' suggestions. This suggests a need to carefully explain their purpose and then include them.

The measures suggested by presidents also somewhat overlap with the measures proposed in the American Graduation initiative as well as those

*Question: If funding for your college was going to be tied to 5 measures of outcomes, what would those measures be?*

Educational Outcomes

1. Continued Enrollment (fall to spring, fall-fall, and growth over time)
2. Course completion rates (% attempted and passed)
3. Transfer rates
4. Degree or certificate completion rates

Workforce Outcomes (1, 3, and 5 years after graduation)

5. Job placement
6. Earnings after enrollment (not merely after completion of credential)

Promoting Access

7. Unduplicated headcount
8. Enrollment of low-income students (e.g. percent receiving Pell grants)
9. Completion of developmental coursework

Serving the Community

10. Satisfaction rates (as measured by survey of employers and students)

**Figure 9.1** Acceptable Accountability Measures (as reported in a survey of forty-one community-college presidents).

developed in the Achieving the Dream initiative. Some are “milestone” measures; those that occur prior to final outcomes. There is controversy in the community-college community over whether employing such measures in an accountability framework will be productive (e.g., by rewarding colleges for their incremental achievements) or instead serve to narrow the ways in which colleges attempt to achieve the same outcomes. Since innovation is usually worth encouraging, it might be unwise to dictate the ways in which colleges should increase graduation rates (e.g., by increasing rates of full-time enrollment versus increasing the financial-aid budget).

While presidents might be strategic to include milestone or other non-traditional measures in their lists as a way to garner credit for every aspect of their work, only a handful did so. For example, despite widespread recognition that colleges do not receive “credit” for noncredit courses—by definition, it is near impossible to measure outcomes of those unless credit is granted—using rates of noncredit course completion as an accountability measure was mentioned by only two survey respondents.

It is also notable that presidents in my survey did not mention two of the key modifications to the current federal method of assessing community-college performance proposed by the Achieving the Dream initiative. These include tracking outcomes over six rather than three years, and measuring success among part-time students.<sup>44</sup> However, this may reflect concerns that the latter change would likely reduce performance rates. And as noted earlier, the presidents do want a measure of transfer included (consistent with Achieving the Dream). Overall, most agreed with the sentiments of one president who said, just “tie accountability to what we most want for our students and bring it on!”

### *Collecting Data*

The second obstacle, developing the data systems needed for measuring outcomes, is widely recognized and efforts are already underway to make improvements. The federal government has made a substantial investment via the State Longitudinal Data Systems Grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences. This grant program awarded over \$52 million in FY06 to fourteen state educational agencies (SEAs); in FY07, thirteen SEAs were awarded over \$62 million; and in FY09, twenty-seven SEAs were awarded over \$150 million. Additionally, for a FY09 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) competition, \$245 million is available as a one-time opportunity, and it is expected that \$10 million will be the average grant.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to federal efforts to spur the establishment of state longitudinal data systems, philanthropies such as the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have invested significant resources in creating “cultures of evidence” on community-college campuses by teaching administrators how to use data. In the last five years, state longitudinal data systems have improved substantially in terms of having a unique statewide student identifier in place, collecting enrollment, demographic and program participation information and test score data, and recording graduation and dropout data. At this time, six states have all ten elements the Data Quality Campaign considers essential, and forty-eight states have at least five elements in place. Areas that the Data Quality Campaign has identified as in need of further improvement include data on course taking, grades, and college-readiness test scores.<sup>46</sup> These are steps in the right direction, and they are necessary. The main goal should be to link academic transcripts and wage records, enabling an analysis of what kinds of wage premiums are generated by what number and type of courses.

*Uses of Information*

Again drawing on lessons from the Achieving the Dream initiative, colleges should be encouraged to develop organizational cultures of assessment, committing to data-based decision making, and openly sharing data results. By helping community-college administrators analyze their own data on student achievement and identify disparities in student success, theory indicates that they will in turn work to develop new effective strategies to improve their institutions. To date, surveys indicate that colleges participating in the initiative are more likely to use and discuss data on student outcomes, though there remains widespread variation among Achieving the Dream colleges in these practices. Moreover, while establishing a culture of evidence may be a necessary condition to improving student success, it is unlikely to be sufficient because adoption of new practices by administrators do not always follow.<sup>47</sup>

The Community College Research Center recently issued several recommendations for how to encourage wider use of performance data, including providing additional assistance to facilitate regular analysis of that data, and providing professional development and training to help both college and state officials figure out ways to integrate data into their decision making.<sup>48</sup>

For an example of how community colleges respond to accountability regimes that do not provide adequate support in terms of data systems and reporting, we only need to look back to the implementation of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA). In my coauthored book, *Putting Poor People to Work: How Work-First Policies Eroded College Access for the Poor*, my colleagues and I documented the effects of WIA's inadequate accountability system on the participation rates of community-college in-job training, a function they have long served. WIA set unrealistic standards for reporting; for example, by requiring colleges to report on the outcomes for all students in a class, if even one student was receiving WIA funding, and not providing resources for colleges to revamp their data systems to collect those outcomes. As reported both in our research and by the Government Accountability Office, this led some colleges to conclude it was more efficient to opt out of the system entirely. This sharply reduced the number of training providers in the public two-year sector, and while it is difficult to know for certain, likely reduced access to training for certain disadvantaged populations as well.<sup>49</sup> It is therefore imperative that any new accountability system include realistic supports for compliance costs and a period of training for colleges to learn precisely how it is supposed to operate and to begin to improve performance.

Another concern has to do with whether and how accountability is tied to funding. The nation's history of funding-based higher-education policy has moved from a focus on adequacy funding, in which state governments gave institutions what they needed to continue programs, to progressively aggressive state interventions into the performance of higher-education institutions, shifting from emphasis on quality and value to assessment and accountability.<sup>50</sup> In some cases accountability has been tied to base funding, while in others it is linked to small amounts of incentive funding. In neither case has it been particularly effective, possibly because the amount of incentive funding provided was too small, or because institutions do not respond to accountability not tied to their base funding. In fact, an assessment of the reasons why ten of the twenty-six states that have used performance funding for higher education since the 1970s have subsequently done away with it reveals that one main challenge is stalled or insufficient funding.<sup>51</sup> Keeping funding stable so that colleges can plan on it is essential to maintaining political support and therefore effectiveness.

Washington State is leading an effort to introduce accountability to community colleges through the use of incentive funding rather than straight performance funding, and I think this is a promising approach.<sup>52</sup> Resources should not decline (at least not immediately) under a new regime, and therefore measures should not be tied to base funding, at least not immediately. We need to take into account the existing levels of funding (underfunding) at the baseline of accountability implementation, otherwise we simply set up colleges to fail. Moreover, while accountability has the potential to create communities among colleges that are working toward similar goals and encourage sharing of successes and failures to the benefit of all, if they perceive a strong likelihood that accountability will rapidly result in decreases in resources, they will likely act against it.

It would be best if accountability were tied to collaboration among key partners, requiring K-12 and higher education to work together to improve college completion rates, and for partnerships among community colleges to benefit the entire sector within a state. One community-college president raised this issue in my survey, saying that "more emphasis on accountability could create unfair competition between community colleges, and unhealthy finger-pointing at K-12 partners that will not improve opportunity and success for our students." This would be an unfortunate outcome and one likely to emerge if states do not reward productive partnerships. We could encourage collaboration as part of the performance plan; the activities of the community colleges (at least within regions) are



intertwined. Resources could be leveraged. In Kentucky and Virginia, accountability goals are set for the entire community-college system; this could effectively help colleges work together rather than in competition, though it does rely on a centralized community-college governance structure, which many states lack.<sup>53</sup>

### Moving Forward

The purposes of new accountability frameworks must be made clear from the start, and they should rest on establishing goals for performance, high standards for data and the measurement of results, and meaningful evaluation of programs and practices. Virginia is an example of a state that has adopted, in coordination with institutional leadership, a set of student-success metrics that will serve as the basis for the system's strategic plan. There is inherent accountability in the state's approach, but the colleges were involved in developing the measures.

In the end the hope is that, given a fair opportunity to succeed, community colleges will easily demonstrate their accountability and show that they are deserving of a much greater share of federal and state funding than they currently receive. This would indeed be transformative.

### Notes

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8. Given this "snowball" approach I cannot calculate a response rate (since I do not know precisely how many leaders were invited by friends to participate), and given that demographic information was not collected, I cannot assess the profile of these leaders compared to their counterparts. This survey was intended as a pilot one, a precursor to a larger, more rigorous survey of presidents' perspectives on accountability.
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