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A Framework for Incorporating Public Trust Issues in States' Higher Education Accountability Plans

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I. A Framework for Understanding Public Trust in Public Higher Education

Introduction

Public higher education today is challenged by growing competition for state resources at a time when the public's demands on the system are growing – demands to educate increasing numbers of poorly prepared students, to fuel the economic engine of their states, to adapt to a rapidly changing marketplace for postsecondary education, and to become more efficient. With high expectations on the part of an increasingly broad and diverse constituency, it is not surprising that the public has some reservations about aspects of higher education performance.

Adding to the demands being placed on higher education institutions to perform are demands to account publicly for their performance. Fueled in large part by national attention to K-12 accountability, higher education is being called upon to be much more accountable than in past decades. Nearly every state is now developing or implementing accountability systems for public higher education. This paper is part of a larger effort to contribute to a growing national dialogue on how principles of public accountability can help focus attention to improving state and national outcomes in higher education.

We explore the connections between public trust and public accountability. Specifically, in the first section we discuss the historical context of “public trust” in higher education and identify who is meant by “the public” and what specific issues affect their trust in higher education. In the second section we suggest a framework for incorporating the concept of public trust into state accountability initiatives in higher education.

Historical Context of Public Trust in Higher Education

Prior to World War II, higher education was limited to the more elite segments of society, to those who could afford to attend and who were presumed able to benefit from a college education. There was little diversity among student populations, and student values and experiences matched those of higher education faculty and administrators. The traditional autonomy accorded to universities meant that “educational quality” and “student success” were whatever the academy defined them to be. Elected officials and the public trusted academic leaders to guide universities in directions that represented the public interest.¹ As William Massy has described, the result of this homogeneity and autonomy “was a self-fulfilling cycle of success.”²

¹ Zumeta, W. (2001). Public policy and accountability in higher education: Lessons from the past and present for the new millennium. In Heller, D. E. (Ed.), *The States and Public Higher Education Policy: Affordability, Access and Accountability*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

² Massy, W. F. (2003). *Honoring the trust: Quality and cost containment in higher education*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc. (p. 17).

Fueled by the GI Bill and a desire to extend the economic benefits of higher education to a broader share of the population, participation rates increased dramatically after World War II. The federal and state governments provided substantially increased funding to colleges and universities for both education and research. Institutions responded by increasing capacity, but without serious consideration of what the massification of higher education might mean for institutional cultures or educational methods. The social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, especially on college campuses, and powerful events including the Vietnam War, Watergate, an economic depression, and an oil crisis led to an erosion of trust in all social institutions, including higher education.³ In this environment, “universities and professors began a long slide from objects of awe to subjects of accountability.”⁴

By the late 1980s, a basic shift in thinking was well underway, at least in regard to publicly-funded higher education.⁵ Many states began instituting some requirement (not always enforced) that public colleges and universities provide evidence that they were producing desired student outcomes. Despite years of effort to implement structures for accountability in higher education, however, there is a large “gap between promises and performance in these systems.”⁶ Most state efforts continue to be plagued by value conflicts between policymakers and educators, problems of measuring student learning, confusion about the audiences for accountability, a focus on institutional performance that shortchanges critical state issues, and general data overload that impedes, rather than enhances, decision making. Calls for greater accountability in higher education continue, with a recent report by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education⁷ arguing that better accountability systems are required in order to improve performance in an environment where:

- higher education is increasingly required for individual economic success;
- other nations are beginning to surpass our educational attainment levels, threatening our economic competitiveness; and
- groups that have historically been the least successful in higher education represent the fastest-growing segment of the population.

The National Commission report also notes the fiscal challenges facing public higher education today, with other sectors of state budgets taking growing shares of the revenue, leaving institutions to depend more on tuition and other non-state funds. All of these factors are likely affecting public opinion about and trust in higher education. It is in states’ best interests to maintain or restore the public’s trust in higher education. There are national trends toward privatization that could radically diminish states’ ability to provide access to broad sectors of the

³ Massy, 2003; Alfred, R. L. & Weissman, J. (1987). *Higher education and the public trust: Improving stature in colleges and universities*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 6. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education.

⁴ Massy, 2003, p. 20.

⁵ Lucas, C. J. (1996). *Crisis in the academy: Rethinking higher education in America*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

⁶ Wellman, J. (2001). Assessing State Accountability Systems. *Change Magazine*, March/April.

⁷ National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education (2005). *Accountability for better results: A national imperative for higher education*. Denver, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers.

population and address economic needs in a rapidly changing social structure. Public support, defined broadly to include various constituencies, can provide both the resources and the legitimacy for public higher education to continue to provide the foundation for the social mobility and economic competitiveness that Americans have come to expect.

This paper is intended to help states attend to issues of public trust by clarifying who are relevant publics, what issues they care most about, and how states can best address those issues as they implement public accountability structures for higher education. In the next section, we define three different segments of “the public” and discuss, for each, the principal issues around which they form their opinions of higher education.

Who is “the Public” and What Issues affect their Trust in Higher Education?

In spite of the changing environment in which higher education operates, and the increased calls for accountability, most experts agree that generally favorable perceptions of higher education are broadly held in America.⁸ That broad agreement, however, masks substantial variation in the interests and perceptions of different segments of the population – public officials, business leaders and the general public. The issues related to trust in higher education for each of these “publics,” while somewhat different, reflect several themes:

- access to higher education;
- the cost of higher education;
- the priorities of the academy;
- the quality of postsecondary education; and
- the willingness of colleges and universities to be publicly accountable.

Each of these themes will be discussed as they apply to policymakers, business leaders and the general public.

It is worth noting that we are not including the higher education community itself, (i.e., college and university leaders, faculty, and staff) as a fourth “public” because our focus is on publics external to higher education. This does, however, raise one issue. One of the problems with accountability, as traditionally attempted (and explained below), is that policymakers are left “off the hook” so to speak. Institutions are viewed as accountable to policymakers for results, in a top-down fashion, but policymakers are not generally viewed as accountable to institutions for their huge role in designing and funding effective systems of higher education. We address this important aspect of accountability by including indicators of state support for higher education in both the business community and the general public sections. Both of these publics rightfully expect (or trust) that the state will do its part to enact enlightened policies and budgets as a condition of their own willingness to pay fees and taxes in support of public colleges and universities.

⁸ Newman, F., Couturier, L., & Scurry, J. (2004). *The future of higher education: Rhetoric, reality, and the risks of the market*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Immerwahr, J. (1999). *Doing comparatively well: Why the public loves higher education and criticizes K-12*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership and National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

“Public” #1: Policymakers

As the entities ultimately responsible for the education levels of the public, policymakers at both the federal and state levels have a substantial stake in the performance of higher education.⁹ The federal government provided more than \$20 billion in 2003-04 for higher education, through support of student financial aid, aid for institutional development at colleges and universities serving minority populations, and special student services programs.¹⁰ The federal investment was dwarfed by the more than \$60 billion expended by state governments through direct subsidies to public colleges and universities.¹¹ State spending on merit- and need-based financial aid programs further increases the state investment in higher education.

Access to higher education

Policymakers identify a highly educated and skilled citizenry as critical to the social and economic health of their states.¹² They stress the need to make higher education available to all citizens interested in pursuing it, but are concerned about the ability of states to keep up with the growing demand. Access for the growing numbers of ethnic minorities traditionally underrepresented in higher education is of particular concern in states where those groups make up a large and growing share of the population.

Cost of higher education

Given declining public resources, public officials are perhaps most concerned with rapidly rising costs in higher education.¹³ They want ever-increasing numbers of students to obtain college-level skills to maintain state competitiveness in today's information economy, but without corresponding increases in expenditures of tax dollars.¹⁴ They are convinced that colleges and universities can operate more efficiently, and criticize institutions for such things as “bloated” administrative bureaucracies, program duplication, inefficient use of facilities, and insufficient use of new technologies.¹⁵ They are frustrated by “cookie-cutter” approaches that reflect an unwillingness to set priorities or share programs and facilities with other institutions. Governors and legislators are also concerned about growing competition from the for-profit sector of higher education, fearing that this sector will “cherry-pick” students in some of the more profitable programs like education and business, leaving public institutions with higher-cost, low-volume programs. They believe changes in governance mechanisms are necessary to maintain

⁹ By “policymakers,” we mean both state and federal elected officials as well as bureaucrats within state and federal agencies with some responsibility for higher education.

¹⁰ Examples of special programs include federal TRIO programs and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). The \$20 billion does not include federal dollars awarded to postsecondary institutions for research. Information on federal postsecondary education spending can be found in the summary of the Department of Education budget at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget04/summary/index.html>.

¹¹ Illinois State University, Center for the Study of Education Policy, Grapevine annual report on state tax appropriations for the general operation of higher education, 50-State Summary Table - FY 04, available at <http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/grapevine/50state.htm>.

¹² National Education Association (2004). *Challenges & opportunities: State legislative views on higher education*. Washington, DC: NEA Research.

¹³ Newman et al, 2004

¹⁴ Conklin, K. & Reindl, T. (2004, February 13). To keep America competitive, states and colleges must work together. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

¹⁵ Newman et al, 2004

competitiveness. They exhibit impatience with what they see as unwillingness to change core practices of the academy in an attempt to become more efficient.

Institutional priorities

Public officials stress the importance of higher education for state economic development. They want to see a greater level of responsiveness within higher education to state priorities. They sense an absence of any planning or overall consideration of state needs in the process through which institutions identify their own priorities. In particular, they want higher education to be more deeply involved in efforts to better align elementary and secondary education with postsecondary education to build seamless K-16 systems, a key goal of many in the policy community.¹⁶ Policymakers feel strongly that the higher education community must become far more involved in helping the K-12 sector better prepare students for college, and they are frustrated by higher education's lack of involvement in school reform, including reform of their own teacher training programs.

Public officials are also critical of faculty that appear to spend too much time and attention on obscure scholarship and too little on educating students. The incentives for faculty and administrators are not weighted in favor of teaching and education. Reward for administrators comes from improving the prestige of their institutions, which is related to the research reputation of their faculties. Faculty reward systems center on contributions faculty make to their academic discipline and not to their institution and its mission.

Policymakers want higher education to emulate changes taking place in business, and in state government itself, and become more flexible, consumer-friendly, innovative, technologically advanced, and performance driven,¹⁷ expectations that do not always match well with traditional academic values and priorities.

Quality of education

While most policymakers continue to believe that American higher education is the best in the world, they have concerns about quality focused largely on persistent achievement gaps among student populations and overall low rates of student retention and graduation.¹⁸ They also recognize that the United States no longer leads the world in college graduates, particularly in the fields of science and technology that are so critical to the economic competitiveness of the states and the nation.¹⁹ Public officials are very sensitive to comments from the business community about the poor skills of graduates entering the workforce, and about low graduation rates that make it unlikely that the higher education system will produce an adequate number of graduates to meet future workforce needs. They also believe that higher education adheres too strongly to traditional academic lectures as the only way to teach, without considering more innovative ways of conveying knowledge that might work better with some students.

¹⁶ National Education Association, 2004

¹⁷ National Governor's Association (2001). *Influencing the future of higher education*. Proceedings of the closing plenary session of the NGA Annual Meeting, August 7, 2001.

¹⁸ Huang, G., Reiser, M., Parker, A., Muniec, J., & Salvucci, S. (2003). *Institute of Education Sciences findings from interviews with education policymakers*. Arlington, VA: Synectics for Management Decisions, Inc.

¹⁹ National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, 2005

Finally, policymakers are highly suspicious of the value of regional accreditation in ensuring quality. They view the process as completely self-referential within the higher education community and they know how rarely public institutions lose accreditation. Their suspicions have only grown as attention has shifted to student learning outcomes.²⁰ Accreditation has historically been focused on resources and other inputs, and policymakers are not convinced that educators have reliable measures of student learning and, by extension, educational quality. Policymakers are also aware of public calls for more transparency in the outcomes of accreditation reviews. As currently practiced, the public generally learns only of the “up” or “down” result and gains no information that can help them judge the quality of institutions.²¹

Accountability

No longer willing to exempt higher education from the kind of oversight given other program areas, policymakers at both the federal and state levels are asserting new demands for accountability. The federal government is becoming more active in proposing measures of accountability for controlling costs and evaluating student learning. Some state policymakers are supporting greater institutional autonomy in return for measures of accountability. In all cases, the rising cost of college for both students and taxpayers is the most potent galvanizing force behind calls for accountability. The academy’s response to calls for accountability is often to point out issues of nuance and complexity in the education enterprise, a response that frustrates policymakers who want to see direct and unambiguous answers to questions about higher education performance.

“Public” #2: Business Leaders

In the new information age, businesses increasingly rely on college-educated workers to remain competitive in the global economy. The proportion of American jobs classified as unskilled has dropped precipitously in recent decades, and it is expected that a majority of new jobs created will require some postsecondary education. Business leaders have long been involved in higher education, serving on boards of trustees, participating in capital campaigns, and helping community colleges develop new curricula and employee training programs. Business leaders are concerned, however, that such efforts have not alleviated workforce shortages.²² They are becoming more vocal critics of the academy and its ability to adapt to the changing economic environment.

Access to higher education

Business leaders are concerned about access to higher education as the system they look to for training their workers. They are particularly concerned about access for the low-income and minority students that represent a large and growing share of the workforce. Access for working adult students is of particular concern, as workers in future years will likely return to higher education repeatedly for additional training to keep up with the changing economy. A concern

²⁰ Ewell, P. (1998). *Examining a brave new world: How accreditation might be different*. Council for Higher Education Accreditation, www.chea.org/Events/Usefulness/98May/98_05Ewell.html.

²¹ Leef, G. (2003). Accreditation is no guarantee of academic quality, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49(30).

²² National Alliance of Business (2003). *The business leader’s guide to ‘Measuring Up 2002.’* Washington, DC: Author.

about higher education access points to a focus on the priorities of the state budget. Business leaders expect policymakers to invest appropriately in the future workforce.

Cost of higher education

The cost of higher education is of concern to business leaders as it affects access. Business leaders are extremely critical of the way colleges and universities are operated, believing that inflexible bureaucracies, outmoded teaching methods, and insufficient use of new technologies reduce productivity.²³ While some business leaders have supported recent state tax initiatives to increase higher education funding, others want to see evidence of increased efficiency before supporting additional taxes.²⁴ The business community also expects policymakers to design educational policies that promote efficient and productive use of resources by institutions.

Institutional priorities

Like public officials, business leaders are concerned about the ways education leaders cling to notions of the academy that business sees as outdated. They believe that faculty members do not spend enough of their time and attention on teaching, and that their methods have failed to keep pace with advancing understandings about how to teach effectively. The concept of faculty tenure is abhorrent to business leaders used to the notion of “pay for performance,” and much of university research is viewed as resume padding for faculty.²⁵ Also like policymakers, the business community is critical of higher education’s seemingly aloof attitude toward elementary and secondary education reform, believing colleges and universities should be fully engaged in those efforts.²⁶

Quality of education

Education quality represents perhaps the largest area of concern for business leaders. While the demand for high-level skills has made postsecondary education an economic necessity for workers and their employers, business leaders believe that the production of skilled workers from higher education is not keeping pace with current and future needs.²⁷ The business community is alarmed that the number of college graduates in the high-demand fields of science and engineering are lagging in the United States as compared to other nations. Employers expect higher education to deliver workers with more than a degree – they want a combination of skills and knowledge that includes skills in critical thinking, problem solving and analysis, proficiency in leadership and teamwork, and excellent writing and communication skills. They also want students to “learn how to learn” in order to be prepared to continuously upgrade their skills.

²³ Immerwahr, 1999

²⁴ For example, some large corporations like Microsoft and Starbucks supported Washington’s proposed initiative to increase the state sales tax to create an “education trust fund” [Armey, D. & Pappas, M. (2005, March 18). Higher taxes and higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*]. Our own research involving interviews with leaders in the policy, education and business communities, however, suggests that other Washington business leaders insist that efficiencies should be instituted before any tax increase [Shulock, N. & Moore, C. (2004). *Facing reality: California needs a statewide agenda to improve higher education outcomes*. Sacramento, CA: Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy].

²⁵ Immerwahr, 1999

²⁶ Newman et al, 2004

²⁷ Business-Higher Education Forum (2004). *Public accountability for student learning in higher education: Issues and options*. Washington, DC: Author.

Business leaders are also looking to higher education to help them make progress on workforce diversity, but are dismayed at disparities in retention and degree completion.

Accountability

According to the Business - Higher Education Forum, the business community “is convinced that improved performance on student learning - including closing gaps among ethnic groups in different dimensions of learning - is central to the national imperative to maintain economic growth, improve worker skills, enhance the diversity of the workforce, and increase educational productivity within higher education.”²⁸ They believe transparency about student learning is needed to maintain public credibility about quality and performance in America’s higher education institutions, and are frustrated by higher education’s unwillingness or inability to measure competency in meaningful ways. They want higher education to stop trying to escape the kinds of accountability imposed on most other public organizations, and to institute accountability mechanisms that measure the efficiency of institutions and the effectiveness of results.

“Public” #3: The General Public

Higher education has rarely been a major focus of public attention, due largely to widespread satisfaction with the quality of higher education institutions and their programs.²⁹ Recently, however, concerns about higher education have increased among the general public due to the tough economic climate and the fierce competition for public dollars that have taken their toll on higher education budgets and led to escalating tuition. Concern is particularly intense among populations most affected by recent events, including parents of high school students, young adults and underserved minority populations.

Access to higher education

A recent survey by Public Agenda suggests that the public is becoming more troubled about access to higher education.³⁰ The share of adults who indicated that many people in their state are qualified to go to college but do not have the opportunity to do so, increased from 47 percent to 57 percent between 2000 and 2003. The share is even higher for African Americans (76%) and Latinos (67%). Public concerns about access are related to the perceived importance and necessity of a postsecondary education. The share of the public that believes a college education is *necessary* for success in today’s job market is growing at the same time that more people are sensing that college is becoming less accessible. African Americans and Hispanics are even more likely than other groups to believe that college is necessary, and also more likely to feel that this path to success in the workplace is closing. This concern about access is more likely to

²⁸ Business-Higher Education Forum, 2004, p. 27

²⁹ See, for example, Immerwahr, 1999; Immerwahr, J. (2000). *Great expectations: How the public and parents – white, African American, and Hispanic – view higher education*. Washington, DC: Public Agenda; Hart, P. D. & Teeter, R. M. (2003). *Quality, affordability & access: Americans speak on higher education*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service; and Selingo, J. (2003, May 2). What Americans think about higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

³⁰ Immerwahr, J. (2004). *Public attitudes on higher education: A trend analysis, 1993 to 2003*. Washington, DC: Public Agenda.

be directed at policymakers, in view of their responsibility to finance higher education, than at the institutions themselves.

Cost of higher education

Public concerns about access are largely related to the rising cost of college. Concerns are particularly strong about the opportunities for students from middle-class families—those who cannot qualify for much of the need-based financial aid, but who cannot afford the rising college costs. The general public increasingly sees a college education as essential, and is fearful that it may be priced out of reach.

Institutional priorities

The public believes higher education's primary role is one of educating students and opening doors to the middle class.³¹ They want institutions to focus on undergraduate education, preparing adults for jobs, and helping train more effective K-12 teachers. The public is skeptical about many institutional priorities, including affirmative action, faculty autonomy and tenure, legacy admissions, and major college athletics programs.³² They want colleges to focus more of their time and attention on preparing undergraduates for careers, and less on the research and economic development missions that are prized by college presidents and state officials. The public is critical of colleges and universities for being unresponsive, aloof, and elitist.³³ They increasingly see higher education as valuable for its private benefits, with its more public benefits for society, democracy, and culture no longer commanding a top priority for the public purse.³⁴

Quality of education

The public generally trusts the quality of education provided at American colleges and universities. Its concerns focus on other areas as discussed earlier, including access, affordability and the priorities of higher education institutions. One area of growing public concern, however, is the lack of public transparency of the accreditation process. As higher education becomes more competitive and more necessary to individual economic security, the public wants as much information as possible about individual colleges and universities that they might be considering. Particularly among the better informed public, there is interest in opening up the accreditation process so that consumers can have more information than is currently available from *U.S. News and World Report* and other published rankings.³⁵

Accountability

The public is about evenly divided between those who believe colleges and universities should be held more accountable and those who feel the institutions are already accountable enough.³⁶ Political ideology distinguishes one group from the other, with conservatives favoring more accountability and moderates and liberals feeling that there is already enough accountability.

³¹ Newman et al, 2004; Selingo, 2003; Selingo, J. (2004, May 7). U.S. public's confidence in colleges remains high. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

³² Selingo, 2003; 2004

³³ Lucas, 1996; Kennedy, D. (1997). *Academic duty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³⁴ Massy, 2003

³⁵ Ewell, p.6; Vaughn, J. (2002). Accreditation, commercial rankings, and new approaches to assessing the quality of university research and education programmes in the United States, *Higher Education in Europe*, XXVII(4), p. 435.

³⁶ Hart & Teeter, 2003

Level of education is also determinative, with college graduates generally believing that higher education institutions are accountable enough already, while those with a high school diploma or less would like to see more accountability. Psychological distance from higher education may explain these divisions—conservatives lament the “liberal citadels” of academia, and those with no more than a high school education have no experience with a college classroom.³⁷ Among those who do favor more accountability, there is little clarity about who is to be accountable, to whom and for what, as there are no clearly defined standards at the college level comparable to those in elementary and secondary education. It seems clear, however, that the public cares more about the quality of education than fiscal restraint. The public is more than twice as likely to think it is more important to hold institutions accountable for the quality of education they provide than for how they spend the tax dollars they receive.³⁸

II. Incorporating Public Trust in Accountability Systems

The premise of this paper, and the larger project of which it is a part, is that public trust is an important theme in higher education accountability. If public higher education is to flourish in the competition for public resources, it will have to maintain the trust of citizens, lawmakers, and the business community which serves both as a consumer of the products of higher education and a political resource for colleges and universities in the competition for taxpayers’ dollars. This section considers the relationship of public trust to state efforts to devise and implement systems of accountability for their higher education enterprises.

Our review of the literature on public trust, presented above, indicates that public trust issues are indeed core issues of public accountability in higher education. The three different publics whose views we discussed form their opinions of higher education performance around many of the core themes that are typically addressed in state accountability systems: access, cost and affordability, quality and learning, and responsiveness to public priorities. It would seem, therefore, that the issue of the public’s trust in higher education can best be addressed not as a separate topic of accountability (i.e., a separate goal to maintain public trust) but by incorporating public trust concerns throughout the structure of the accountability plan.

New Directions Needed for Accountability

Any effort to address public trust issues in state accountability plans must be undertaken in full awareness of the need to reinvent state accountability models, generally. As noted in the introduction, there is a growing acknowledgement that current state accountability models are ineffective despite years of development and evolution. States should not simply incorporate public trust issues into accountability plans that are not proving effective. Policymakers across the nation are in dire need of reliable, useful information about higher education performance. Lawmakers want assurance that their investments in higher education are paying off. They want to understand the links between higher education and state economic health and demonstrate these links to the business community. They want to assure their constituencies that students are,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 12

³⁸ Hart & Teeter, 2003

in fact, learning, that the future workforce will be well-educated, and that future generations will continue to have the opportunity to attend college. State accountability systems have proven to be of little help in offering these assurances.

Researchers and observers have identified a number of shortcomings in current state approaches to accountability, including the following:³⁹

- state accountability systems are not sufficiently organized around state goals, but instead are focused on the performance of individual institutions;
- there is confusion of purposes and audiences and a failure to differentiate among the kinds of information that is useful to consumers, governing boards, and lawmakers;
- partly as a result of this confusion, there is far too much data to be useful;
- most state accountability systems reflect a punitive, top-down definition of accountability and thereby discourage the cooperation among institutions and policymakers that is needed to make them work;
- states focus too much on comparing institutions that may not be comparable, and too little on how all institutions, *collectively*, are meeting state goals;
- the respective roles of governing boards and state lawmakers are not clarified, leading to micromanagement of institutional governance by state lawmakers.

These shortcomings persist despite efforts by a number of national organizations to help states reorient accountability around state goals and limit data to that which is useful for the decisions that lawmakers make. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, in its national report card, has put forth a framework for understanding state educational performance in six areas: preparation, affordability, participation, completion, benefits, and learning.⁴⁰ The National Center for Education Management Systems has developed a corresponding website that allows state to compare statewide performance on these measures.⁴¹ Many states have begun organizing their own state goals roughly according to this framework.

But state rhetoric about organizing accountability efforts around statewide goals for purposes of improvement is far stronger than the reality. Our recent review of accountability approaches in a number of states led us to recommend that states should:

- de-emphasize the search for “common core” indicators for comparing institutions;
- increase attention to analyzing bona fide statewide outcomes rather than viewing state outcomes as merely the sum of institutional outcomes;
- devise accountability structures that reinforce institutional governing board responsibility for managing effective institutions and that help the public understand how institutions support current state priorities;

³⁹ Wellman (2001), Shulock (2003), Shulock and Moore (2002), National Commission (2005).

⁴⁰ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Measuring Up*, 2000, 2002, 2004 reports available at www.highereducation.org

⁴¹ See www.higheredinfo.org

- establish stronger links between statewide planning for higher education, accountability systems that focus on statewide goals, and resource allocation.⁴²

The shortcomings of current accountability efforts were most recently detailed in a report released March, 2005 by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education which concluded that:

“...more accountability of the kinds generally practiced will not help improve performance. Our current system of accountability can best be described as cumbersome, over-designed, confusing, and inefficient. It fails to answer key questions, it overburdens policymakers with excessive, misleading data, and it overburdens institutions by requiring them to report it.”

The National Commission emphasized that better systems of accountability will:

- focus attention on state and national priorities;
- recognize legitimate boundaries between, and shared responsibilities of, institutional governing boards and lawmakers; and
- decrease the role of superficial comparisons and rankings.

The Commission’s attention to shared responsibilities, which it refers to also as a “division of responsibility,” is aimed at helping states sort out the purposes of accountability, which, in turn, will help them determine what kinds of information need to be reported by whom and to whom. These kinds of clarifications will be critical to any effort to address public trust issues because of the different “publics.” Issues of concern to lawmakers and the business community are likely to be more within the purview of state-level accountability reporting, which should be focused on meeting broad public priorities. By contrast, the general public develops its sense of higher education in part around personal experiences with specific institutions. It seeks consumer-oriented information for comparing teaching practices and student experiences at different campuses. Much of this detailed information is not appropriate for state reporting systems.

Gaining Public Trust through Accountability

Efforts to design effective accountability get derailed right at the outset because of unclear or unhelpful definitions of accountability. Most systems cling to a traditional top-down, punitive model in which there are “accountability holders” and “accountability holdees.”⁴³ This definition places the focus directly on individual institutions instead of on statewide performance or the connections between educational segments. We believe the best definition is that provided by the Business-Higher Education Forum which defines accountability very simply as:

⁴² Shulock, N. (forthcoming issue of *Policy Alert* published by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education).

⁴³ Behn, R. (2001). *Rethinking democratic accountability*. Washington, DC: Brookings Press.

“the public presentation and communication of evidence about performance in relation to goals.”⁴⁴

This definition raises appropriate follow-up questions about who is presenting evidence to whom about which set of goals, and what is then done with the information. Data could be presented about performance with respect to state goals or institutional goals or the public’s goals. It could be presented to lawmakers, to governing boards, to consumers, or to a variety of stakeholders like business leaders. The first section of this paper defined three different publics whose trust in higher education is critical to the vitality of the enterprise – policymakers, the business community, and the general public. Each of these publics has its own set of concerns (or goals) that shape the degree of trust it has in higher education. Therefore, building trust in higher education among these three publics, through public accountability, will require that:

- information be made available to each public in the *appropriate* forum; and
- steps be taken *at the appropriate level* to address outcomes that fall short of public expectations.

We have written elsewhere about the importance of identifying the relevant audience for state accountability systems, concluding that “a system that is focused on state level educational outcomes and generates information aimed at guiding state public policy has the best chance of success.”⁴⁵ Such a system would include performance data on statewide educational outcomes, supplemented by performance data on outcomes for individual segments of the state’s higher education system. The review of campus-level comparative data should be the responsibility of governing boards for purposes of institutional improvement. Private or independent institutions make substantial contributions toward overall state educational outcomes, and states often make substantial contributions to private institutions through financial aid programs, tax exemptions, etc. To the extent possible, states should include data on the private sector in aggregate statewide performance indicators.

In the next section we suggest the kind of evidence about performance that would be responsive to the trust concerns of each of the three “publics.” Only some of the information would be appropriate to include in a state performance report. Other information would be appropriately reported and reviewed by governing boards for purposes of assessing and improving institutional effectiveness. Still other data might be included in the kinds of “fact sheets” that consumers increasingly expect to use to help them make their own choices about attending college. State lawmakers have an interest in ensuring that institutions are accountable to the public for their performance, even when state officials do not play a direct role in the collection, analysis, and public reporting of this information. Therefore, states should devise policies or incentives that encourage institutions to collect and communicate this information in public forums.

⁴⁴ Business-Higher Education Forum (2004). *Public accountability for student learning in higher education: issues and options*.

⁴⁵ Shulock, N. & Moore, C. (2002). *An accountability framework for California higher education: Informing public policy and improving outcomes*. Sacramento, CA: California State University, Sacramento Center for California Studies, p. 92.

Performance Indicators for Public Trust

Each of the three tables below includes the five categories that correspond to the discussion in Part I of this paper. For each issue listed, we include at least one performance indicator that reflects the public's concern. We are not limiting our list of performance indicators to readily available data. Nor do we specify precisely how each item would be defined. Our purpose is to indicate the kinds of data that would be needed to address issues that are salient to public trust.

We present all of the issues and corresponding performance indicators, irrespective of their suitability for a state-level accountability report. Following these three tables, we suggest which of the data would be appropriate for state-level reporting.

Table 1
Public Trust Issues and Performance Indicators of Interest to Policymakers

	Issues	Performance Indicators
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting growing demand • Ethnic and socio-economic opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollment and participation rates in relation to demand • Participation rates by ethnic and socio-economic subgroup
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapidly rising costs • Need for efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost increases compared to cost of living increases • Evidence of efficiencies
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of undergraduate teaching • State economic development • K-12 preparation • Responsiveness to state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of institutional focus on learning outcomes to improve student learning; new approaches to teaching • Degree production in key fields • Collaborative work with K-12; reforms to teacher education • Institutional priorities linked to state priorities; evidence of program additions and deletions;
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement gaps • Teaching practices • Accreditation process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion rates by subgroup • Evidence of innovation in teaching • Evidence that regional accreditation process assesses educational quality
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More transparency in outcomes • Greater willingness of institutions to measure student learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that effective institutional accountability processes are in place • Evidence that student learning assessment processes are in place and are used

Table 2
Public Trust Issues and Performance Indicators of Interest to Business Leaders

	Issues	Performance Indicators
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access for future workforce, especially low income and minority populations • Opportunities for adults to gain workplace skills and retrain for changing workforce • Appropriate state investment in future workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation rates by ethnic and socio-economic subgroup • Adult proficiency levels; programs and enrollments for working adults in high growth sectors • Higher education priority (higher education's share of budget); state and local appropriations for higher education per \$1000 of personal income
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional commitment to efficiency before supporting tax increases • State policy incentives for efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of efficiencies; use of business practices; % of operating budget spent for administration • State appropriations per student
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional commitment to teaching • K-12 reform needs • Responsiveness to changing market forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portion of faculty workload devoted to teaching • Collaborative work with K-12; reforms to teacher education • New program development in key areas; partnerships with industry; evidence of innovation in teaching
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College graduates without requisite workplace skills • Poor US competitive position in science and engineering • Gaps in graduation rates for minority populations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer satisfaction with graduates (surveys) • Enrollments and degrees awarded in science and engineering fields • Completion rates by subgroup
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater willingness of institutions to measure student learning • Accountability for efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicized learning goals, outcomes, and plans for addressing deficiencies; • Instructional and administrative costs per degree produced

Table 3
Public Trust Issues and Performance Indicators of Interest to the General Public

	Issues	Performance Indicators
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairness of admissions policies • Ability to get classes • Policymaker commitment to access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applications and admissions by various categories • # students who get the classes they need in a timely manner • Higher education priority (higher education's share of budget)
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising costs, especially for those who do not qualify for student aid • Length of time to get a degree before earnings begin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year-to-year costs, net of financial aid, compared to peer institutions • Average time-to-degree by program
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of undergraduate education • Job-relevant education • Higher education as elitist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portion of undergraduate courses taught by full-time faculty • Job placement rates by campus and program • Enrollments by major; income distribution of students
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability • Accreditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status and rankings • Amount of public information generated by accreditation process
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional responsiveness to consumer queries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a comprehensive fact sheet; user-friendly website

Table 4 sorts the performance indicators presented in Tables 1-3 into those which are appropriate for inclusion in a state-level report and those that are too detailed or institution-specific to be a useful addition to a state report. Institutions would be well-advised to find the appropriate forums for publicly communicating the kinds of data listed in the right-hand column. Colleges and universities compete for students and for public trust. To the extent that they can demonstrate acceptable performance to their attentive publics, they will advance their own competitive prospects in the higher education marketplace.

Table 4
Performance Indicators for State v Institution Reporting

	Suitable for Aggregate State-level Reporting	Suitable for Institution Reporting
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollment & participation rates in relation to demand • Participation rates by ethnic and socio-economic subgroup • Adult proficiency levels • Programs and enrollments for working adults in high growth sectors • Higher education priority (share of state budget) • State and local appropriations for higher education per \$1000 of personal income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applications and admissions by various categories • # students who get the classes they need in a timely manner
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost increases compared to cost of living increases • Evidence of efficiencies • Use of business practices • Percent of operating budget spent for administration • State appropriations per student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year-to-year costs, net of financial aid, compared to peer institutions • Average time-to-degree by program
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of institutional focus on learning outcomes to improve student learning • New approaches to teaching • Degree production in key fields • Collaborative work with K-12 • Reforms to teacher education • Institutional priorities linked to state priorities • Evidence of program additions and deletions • Portion of faculty workload devoted to teaching • New program development in key areas • Partnerships with industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portion of undergraduate courses taught by full-time faculty • Job placement rates by campus and program • Enrollments by major • Income distribution of students
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion rates by subgroup • Evidence of innovation in teaching • Employer satisfaction with graduates • Enrollments and degrees awarded in science and engineering fields • Evidence that regional accreditation process assesses educational quality • Amount of public information generated by accreditation process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status and rankings of colleges and programs • Employment data on graduates
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that effective institutional accountability processes are in place • Evidence that student learning assessment occurs and is used • Publicized learning goals, outcomes, and plans for addressing deficiencies • Instructional and administrative costs per degree produced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a comprehensive fact sheet • User-friendly website

Summary and Recommendations: Building Public Trust through State Accountability Initiatives

Building and maintaining the public's trust in public higher education is vital to the continued health and legitimacy of the enterprise. Issues of public trust are central to issues of public accountability generally and can readily be addressed in a state's accountability system. However, as states move to build public trust through public accountability, they should heed the mounting advice to replace traditional, ineffective models with new models that stress shared but divided responsibility to account publicly for outcomes. In so doing, they should recognize the differences among three segments of the public – lawmakers, business leaders, and the general public. Each has a distinct basis for forming its opinions about higher education. Each will require a different set of evidence to become convinced that higher education deserves its trust. The key for state officials who are developing accountability systems is to understand that not all of this evidence should be incorporated in a state-level report.

State reports should include evidence about how well a state's colleges and universities, collectively, and through their interactions, are meeting the state's educational goals. This information will respond to most of the public trust issues of concern to policymakers and business leaders. But the task of building public trust does not end with the compilation of evidence. State officials must actively engage their publics in the interpretation and use of these data to make informed policy and resource decisions. This can occur through the usual mechanisms of governance as well as through special structures by which stakeholders are brought together to address particular issues. The key is to provide limited but meaningful data to these forums that highlight performance issues that matter to the public, and to use these data to promote improvement where indicated.

It is particularly noteworthy that the *priorities* of higher education are of apparent great concern to the public. We can see this from the many different topics raised in the discussion of this category and the accompanying long list of performance indicators. With all of the focus on cost and access, state officials and educators would be wise to pay at least as much attention to the issues raised in this paper about the tendency of the public to question whether the priorities of higher education reflect public priorities and whether colleges and universities are committed and able to respond to public priorities.

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