

A Fundamentally New Approach to Accountability:
Putting State Policy Issues First

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**The Public Policy Problem: Lack of Successful Approaches
to Statewide Accountability**

Despite years of effort to implement structures for accountability in higher education, there is a large “gap between promises and performance in these systems” (Wellman, 2001). Most state efforts continue to be plagued by value conflicts between policymakers and educators, problems of measuring student learning, unrealistic performance budgeting schemes, 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.

The lack of workable approaches to accountability is a major national concern. Over the last few decades, education beyond high school has become ever more important to individual well-being and to the economic health of the states. A combination of factors now poses challenges for higher education and for state policymakers who ultimately are responsible for the education of their people. Enrollment is growing in most states, the student body is changing dramatically, costs are rising, state support for higher education is generally declining, student fees are increasing, and there is growing public demand to ensure that states are making proper investments in public higher education.

Policymakers across the nation are in dire need of reliable, useful information about higher education outcomes. Whole segments of the population nationwide are in danger of being excluded from the opportunities afforded by postsecondary education. State policy issues of access, capacity, affordability, achievement gaps, and state economic development are simply not being addressed adequately in the kinds of accountability systems that are in place in most states.

Purpose and Design of the Research

In 2002 the California Senate commissioned the California State University, Sacramento Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy to study higher education accountability trends around the country and provide guidance in developing a statewide accountability structure for California. As a relative latecomer to statewide accountability efforts for postsecondary education, California was poised to benefit from experiences in other states. Specifically, the Senate asked us to “begin development of an over-arching accountability system for higher education that measures progress made in addressing clear and definable state policy goals.” With this charge, the Senate set forth the challenge to address accountability from a statewide policy perspective. We hope that California’s work can help re-frame national discussions of accountability to put state policy issues at the center of the agenda.

Our report to the Senate, entitled *An Accountability Framework for California Higher Education: Informing Public Policy and Improving Outcomes*, produced a set of recommendations which in turn led the Legislature to convene an advisory group to develop a specific framework and structure for statewide accountability. The advisory group includes representatives of the three public higher education segments, the independent college sector, legislative staff, and outside accountability experts. Our Institute was asked to coordinate the effort. Starting from a rough set of policy goals endorsed by legislative leaders, the advisory group developed a framework of goals, indicators, processes, and principles. This work is nearing completion and will be presented to the Legislature in November, 2003 with the expectation that implementing legislation will be introduced in 2004.

In conducting the research for the original report, we reviewed the literature on accountability in the public sector, generally, and in higher education, specifically. We reviewed experiences of other states and several national accountability initiatives. Most importantly we interviewed legislators, legislative staff, executive staff, representatives of higher education institutions, faculty, and national experts. Talking to those who work in the higher education policy arena and whose efforts are key to the success of accountability proved an indispensable source of learning for this project. We attribute the positive response that this report received from all stakeholders to the fact that the recommendations reflected the complexity of the educational enterprise and the care with which state-level accountability must be developed in this arena.

This follow-up policy paper has the benefit of nearly a year of hands-on work with the original framework proposed in the earlier report. We have presented the ideas to a number of state and national audiences and we have put flesh on the bones, so to speak, through the development of the performance indicators that would be used to guide state-level policymaking. We have struggled with how a complex undertaking such as this can best be described and presented concisely to policymakers and educators, both of whom have predispositions about, and legitimate interests in, accountability. In short, this “field research” has helped to hone the original ideas and to clarify the ways in which the California approach may be able to improve upon existing state accountability systems. In this paper we analyze the status of current state accountability efforts—focusing on the chief obstacles they have encountered, describe the elements of the proposed California framework that aim to overcome these obstacles, and discuss the prospects for success.

Findings: The Trends and Challenges for State Accountability

General Trends

Until fairly recently, states largely delegated accountability to higher education institutions and their governing boards. Universities’ claims to academic freedom and autonomy were respected, with governments’ interest largely confined to matters of budgetary allocations, location of campuses, and tuition rates. Elected officials trusted academic leaders to guide universities in directions that were of mutual interest and

benefit (Zumeta, 2001). This hands-off approach to oversight of higher education continued until the public sector accountability movement was well entrenched in the early 1990s. A shift has occurred over the past decade in the balance between autonomy and accountability for public higher education. With accountability for K-12 education in full drive, policymakers are no longer willing to exempt higher education from this kind of oversight. Higher education institutions are struggling to respond in ways that preserve valued principles and honor institutional missions.

Separate surveys conducted by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the Rockefeller Institute of Government over a period of years have documented a growth trend in state accountability systems as well as a variety of approaches. Nearly all states now have some form of mandated accountability program for higher education (Burke & Minassians, 2002). Some of the earlier programs resulted from unilateral imposition of performance systems by policymakers. Not surprisingly, these approaches encountered great resistance in the academy and spurred educators to participate in the design of accountability programs.

Studies have also documented a growing interest in linking performance to funding. Many observers suggest that this interest will grow as state coffers shrink. However, the link between performance and budgets is fraught with difficulties, as we will detail below. Early attempts tended to use direct, formulaic linkages. More recently, the preference is for looser, “macro-level” linkages. In fact, the most recent finding by those who have chronicled the performance budgeting movement in higher education is that many states have abandoned or suspended their performance budgeting or performance funding programs and have opted instead for reporting performance with no explicit connection to budget decisions (Burke and Minassians, 2003). It is clear that the search for effective budget linkages continues.

The search also continues for appropriate and valid performance indicators. Early efforts relied too heavily on indicators that were readily available, which tended to be traditional input and process measures. Most states are seeking a balance among measures of quality, equity, and efficiency to satisfy all stakeholders. Debates continue about the value of quantitative versus qualitative measures, the need for mission-specific measures in addition to common measures, and the advantages of providing campus-level, system-level, or state-level data. While consensus has been reached that a short list of measures is best, most states still employ too many measures.

Researchers have offered their views on which aspects of accountability systems are most promising (Nettles & Cole, 1999; Atkinson-Grosjean & Grosjean, 2000). Likewise, higher education experts have suggested various principles for effective accountability, based on their practical experiences (Ewell, Wellman & Paulson, 1997; Ruppert, 1995, 1998a; Burke, 1998; Zumeta, 2001). The problem with drawing any real conclusions from these findings is that there are no common criteria for success or even a common definition of accountability. For example, most of this work begins with the assumption that a state accountability system necessarily monitors performance of each individual campus. We believe that an institutional focus does not serve the main purpose of state-

level accountability, which is to inform state policy decisions in the interest of improving statewide educational outcomes. Consequently, many of the suggestions from the literature are not applicable to the kind of system we are recommending.

With the publication of its report card called “Measuring Up” for 2000 and again for 2002, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education encouraged states to view accountability from a state policy perspective. The report card’s grades for six categories of performance reflect state aggregate data. Most of the states that have taken up the National Center’s challenge to create their own state plans for improving performance have done so from the more traditional viewpoint of evaluating the individual colleges and universities in their states. The traditional approach to accountability, however, has not been satisfactory. The next section analyzes the main obstacles that have plagued these state systems.

Key Issues Affecting Accountability

The central findings of our analysis are that (1) there is a huge “culture gap” between policymakers and educators that must be bridged if accountability is to be implemented successfully and (2) the gap can be bridged only by making careful distinctions among key concepts that have, unfortunately, become blurred in many accountability systems.

The Culture Gap

The worlds of policy making and academia are fundamentally different and the accountability movement, as it has been pursued, exacerbates these differences.

Policymakers want accountability to be unambiguous, concise, and quick. In our interviews, we heard calls for “digestible pieces” and “factoids” that “fit on a business card.” Policymakers and staff want to know, in no uncertain terms, whether goals are reached, whether students graduate, whether transfer rates are up or down, whether students are prepared to take their places in the 21st century workforce. They do not want explanations, caveats, or excuses. They want to know the state’s return on investment and don’t mind applying business-oriented techniques. They have no time for lengthy or complicated reports.

The academic community finds bottom line approaches to accountability to be threatening and inappropriate. Faculty and administrators alike fear that such an approach can be punitive and can narrow society’s concerns to those aspects of higher education that can be readily measured, at the expense of dearly held values. They fear legislative intrusion into matters of educational expertise. They fear micromanagement. They question how educational quality and equity can be quantified and assessed in a neat and tidy way and worry that quantitative measures create perverse incentives. They fear one-size-fits-all measures that ignore different missions, demographics, student bodies, resources, and factors outside their control. Most importantly, they resist legislative involvement in the measurement, or assessment, of student learning, which they believe to be a faculty responsibility.

One faculty leader passionately stated the faculty case against accountability as faculty typically understand it:

“Nobody is opposed to measuring student outcomes. But the accountability movement has become an ideology that virtually dismisses other outcomes and focuses only on the immediate mastery of concrete subject matter. It’s an attempt to vocationalize all of higher education. We have a basic objection to learning as something that can be or must be measured. Legislators seem to have forgotten about all the important things they learned in college that relate to life and are not testable.”

Three Key Distinctions

Although the culture gap is indeed vast, our analysis suggests that by making careful distinctions and designing an accountability system accordingly, it is possible to build bridges and establish a workable consensus.

State-level accountability v. institution-level accountability. Accountability for state-level outcomes is not the same as accountability for institutional performance. It is possible to have high performing institutions that *collectively* do not meet the educational needs of the state. A state accountability system should be designed to focus on state-level goals such as accommodating enrollment demand, making college affordable, easing transitions from two-year to four-year institutions, and producing an educated citizenry and workforce to meet state needs. Monitoring the performance of individual colleges and universities is a very different kind of activity that is the responsibility of institutional governing boards. The state has an interest in ensuring that institutional goals are aligned with state goals, but should not regularly engage in direct monitoring of institutional effectiveness.

Accountability v. assessment of student learning. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to achieving consensus about the state’s role in accountability is the fact that accountability and assessment of learning have become erroneously equated in the minds of many. In our interviews, faculty assumed that our inquiries about accountability were about measuring student learning. When we explained that our focus was on state-level policy outcomes, such as economic development, affordability, and degree completion, they acknowledged a legitimate state role in monitoring those kinds of outcomes. While student learning is without a doubt a critical outcome of higher education, it is one that is best assessed at the campus level. State policymakers have little capacity to review and act on the kinds of qualitative outcomes assessment data that faculty collect and review on an ongoing basis. With no standard learning outcomes across higher education programs, as in K-12, there are currently no good measures that are useful at the state level. A number of national initiatives are aimed at developing state-level measures of college learning but any fruits of this work are a long way off.

Accountability v. performance budgeting. Performance budgeting is often assumed to go hand-in-hand with accountability. In fact, performance budgeting is but one possible

way to attempt to implement accountability, and one that has not met with much success. Appealing in theory, performance budgeting has encountered insurmountable barriers to implementation. The designation of targets, weights, and formulas by which institutions will be judged and funded feeds the fear of the academic community that important aspects of the educational process will be ignored. The real challenge is to find a way to use data on performance and outcomes to identify priorities and influence budget decisions accordingly. Using data to improve budget decisions is a goal that both sides of the culture divide can agree on; using performance budgeting formulas to accomplish that goal perpetuates the divide.

We came to see the importance of these three key distinctions in our original research for our report to the state Senate. A year later we are even more convinced that successful state accountability in higher education requires coalescence around these themes. Not only are these distinctions necessary to gain the support of the academic community, but they are critical to designing effective state accountability systems. By neglecting these important distinctions, states have encountered a consistent set of obstacles in the implementation of accountability systems.

Obstacles to State Accountability Efforts

We can characterize the obstacles that states have faced in terms of the three distinctions we drew in the previous section.

Insufficient Focus on State Goals and Priorities

Most state accountability regimens are focused too much on the performance of individual institutions and too little on the achievement of state goals.

There are three different purposes that could be served by the collection and reporting of data, each with a different primary audience:

- State policy achievement, with the primary audience being policymakers interested in ensuring that the large state investment in higher education is yielding the desired results for the state and its people;
- Institutional improvement, with the primary audience being the higher education institutions and their faculty and staff who can use performance data to make improvements in local policy and practice;
- Consumer information, with the primary audience being students and their families who can use information about individual college characteristics to make personal decisions.

Most accountability systems purport to meet at least the first two purposes and some try to address all three. However important it is to assist consumers with personal choices and to improve institutional effectiveness, these two activities are peripheral to the purpose of state-level accountability and should be handled through other processes.

Policymakers need information about how well residents of the state are being educated, relative to the needs of the state. Some of this information has very little to do with the performance of individual colleges and universities. For example, the state needs to know the extent to which high school graduates are prepared for the rigors of a college education and whether these educational opportunities are equitable across the regions of the state and subgroups of the population. Data on the extent of these educational opportunities may influence state policies governing the K-12 system or the role of its universities in outreach to prospective students or in preparing the teachers who teach in the K-12 schools.

As another example, policymakers need information on how well students move through two-year institutions and into four-year institutions in pursuit of the baccalaureate, and how well the state's system of higher education educates students who begin with remedial needs. These are cross-cutting issues that transcend any monitoring of individual institutional performance. They raise questions about the state's policies governing admissions, articulation, transfer, remediation, financial aid, and funding.

An accountability system focused on state-level concerns is designed to answer questions to inform state policy decisions about system design, governance, articulation, and finance. It asks how are we, *collectively* as a state, doing in achieving our goals. An accountability system designed principally to collect and review data on institutional performance asks a totally different question: how well is an individual college or university accomplishing its unique mission? This institutional focus has several problems: it diverts state policymakers from the issues that they can influence through their responsibility to make public policy; it leads to micromanagement over institutions, whose own governing boards are responsible to monitor and manage institutional effectiveness; and it overloads state accountability systems with far more data than users can possibly digest and use. Finally, by reflecting a top-down "we (policymakers) are holding you (college) accountable for your performance" approach, it invites arguments about the adequacy of funding, factors outside the college's control, and the overall fairness of the top-down assessment.

A common complaint among policymakers and staff is that there is too much data and too little information. Most state accountability reports are organized with some state-level data followed by pages and pages, or chapters and chapters, of data about individual institutions. This kind of data excess, however useful it may be for other purposes, is not useful for state-level decision making aimed at improving collective educational outcomes for the state's residents. In the absence of a statewide focus, policymakers have limited access to meaningful data about how the state is performing in key areas and must make important fiscal and policy decisions without this knowledge.

State accountability systems also suffer from a tendency to be indicator-driven rather than goal-driven. This is another consequence of the institutional focus. There are numerous listings and guides that provide advice about the most commonly used indicators. In most cases, these are the most readily available indicators, which are also mostly institution-focused. A framework built to answer questions about how well the state is

meeting its educational goals will likely require new kinds of measures, but such measures must be developed if the framework is to be useful for policymaking.

Excessive State-level Focus on Assessment of Student Learning

It is understandable that legislators and other state policymakers want to know whether students in their colleges and universities are learning. It is difficult to argue that there are any outcomes more important than student learning. However, state accountability systems have struggled to develop meaningful, acceptable, and useful measures of student learning. Unlike in K-12 education, there are no standard learning outcomes in higher education that can be applied to all institutions. There is emerging consensus that general education learning outcomes include effective communication, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, but even these outcomes have proven elusive to measure. There is nothing approaching consensus about the learning outcomes for the wide range of degree and certificate programs offered across a state's higher education system.

State officials responsible for designing accountability systems seem unwilling to delegate the hard work of student learning assessment to the campuses, where assessment is already a faculty priority under the watchful eyes of academic administrators and regional accrediting agencies. Some states have tried to incorporate direct measures of student learning into state-level accountability systems and others are working toward this goal. None of it is proving satisfying either to policymakers or educators.

It would be more productive, we suggest, if state-level accountability systems would focus on broader measures of student *success*, such as graduation rates, length of time to earn degrees, and degrees earned in fields where good jobs are available. Accountability for student learning could be *monitored*, not directly measured, through a requirement that higher education institutions account for their assessment *processes*, including how they use the results of assessment to improve student learning. The failure to distinguish adequately between the role of policymakers and that of governing boards in the accountability for student learning has become a major obstacle to the implementation of effective state-level systems.

Reliance on Formulaic Linkages of Data to Budgets

Another major reason for lack of success in other states is their failure to implement performance budgeting effectively. Joseph Burke of the Rockefeller Institute, one of the nation's foremost experts on performance budgeting in higher education, has chronicled the evolution towards, and lately away from, performance budgeting. His latest finding is that states prefer the reporting of performance information without systematic linkages to budgets. He lists numerous states that have either terminated or suspended their systems of performance budgeting (Burke and Minassians, 2003).

The shortcomings of performance budgeting have been disappointing to many because the theory is compelling. But in practice it has encountered insurmountable barriers to implementation. The designation of largely-arbitrary targets, weights, and formulas by which institutions will be judged and funded is inherently controversial because higher education is such a varied and complex enterprise. Assigning such automatic consequence to a set of mostly imperfect performance indicators limits the willingness of the academic community to work with policymakers to examine important indicators of performance. When formulas are adopted, they are often nullified by budget cuts, to the consternation of the institutions that have met or exceeded performance goals. Most states that have terminated or suspended their performance budgeting programs have cited lack of funding as the reason. But what message does this send? That performance is only important when coffers are full?

Most performance budgeting schemes identify a small percentage of the budget (2-5%) to be used to reward performance. This serves only to marginalize the importance of performance by placing performance expectations on a small portion of the budget instead of demanding results from the state's entire budgetary investment. Performance budgeting gets derailed as well by the quandary faced when institutions under-perform. Does it really serve any purpose to reduce funding to colleges where performance is lagging? Policymakers have generally been unwilling to accept this "remedy." It makes more sense to direct funds to where data reveals the needs and priorities to be. Additionally, at the end of the day, legislators resist the loss of discretion that accompanies performance funding formulas and often lack the political will to implement them when the political costs of doing so come into focus.

The real question, we suggest, is how best can accountability data be used in making budget decisions. Protecting large general fund investments is one of the major motivators of state accountability systems and it is essential that these systems influence state budgets. But by attempting to replace existing democratic processes with flawed new formulaic processes, states have not yet found the answer to this question.

California's Proposed Framework

California has not had a comprehensive accountability system. Instead, each of the three segments of higher education (University of California, California State University, and the California Community Colleges) has negotiated its own formal accountability structure. For the two four-year university systems, these have been partnership agreements with the Governor, in which the Legislature has had no part. For the Community Colleges, there is a statutory program which designates a pot of funds to be allocated for specific performance objectives.

None of these agreements constitutes true accountability as they were developed for purposes of budgetary stability, not accountability. Moreover, these segment-specific accountability efforts do not combine to reflect a coherent and agreed-upon statewide public agenda for higher education in California. Ironically, the differentiation of

mission among the three public segments that has been the strength of the California Master Plan for Higher Education for four decades has become a serious obstacle to effective state-level accountability because policymakers view each segment in isolation. As a result, the state lacks a comprehensive view of how the state is performing in key areas. There is much data but little information. It is clear that most important fiscal and policy decisions made in California are made devoid of analytical data.

In designing the new framework for California, we are drawing lessons from the experiences of other states. In particular we are trying to overcome the obstacles described above. The features of the framework, described below, are designed to put state policy concerns front and center while ensuring that institutional accountability is also maintained in a way that is aligned with the state's goals. We do this by linking a state-level reporting system to an institution-level system. In addition, we propose that the assessment of student learning be handled at the institution level. Finally, we eschew new formulaic approaches to linking outcomes data to budget and we structure the system to inform *existing* decision processes.

New Directions in the Proposed California Framework

The proposed framework is designed to measure progress toward four broad public policy goals for higher education that have been endorsed by the Legislature in the areas of (1) educational opportunity, (2) participation, (3) student success, and (4) public benefits. Based on these goals, the framework calls for a statewide reporting system that identifies a select number of key indicators to measure progress toward the state goals. The state-level reporting is accompanied by reporting within each segment to ensure that their goals and priorities are aligned with those of the state. The key features described below are designed to overcome the barriers that have impeded efforts in other states.

1. Promote *collective* accountability for state-level outcomes: the state reporting system

California's accountability framework is designed to answer questions about how well the state is meeting its goals for educating its people. The outcomes data examined through this effort reflect a variety of factors, including economic conditions and policies, inter-state migration patterns, and the *collective* efforts of the institutions that serve California's students throughout P-16, and the policymakers who design, maintain, and fund California's education systems. Information collected about outcomes will be used to set more effective public policy at the state level, including funding policy. The framework is not designed to measure the performance of individual institutions at the campus level. Information about the effectiveness of each segment in helping meet state goals through its unique mission will be produced through a related, but separate process.

2. Establish accountability for effective institutions: institution-level reporting

A second, related set of reporting consists of each segment's institutional accountability structures and their alignment with the state reporting system and goals. This connection recognizes that (a) monitoring campus performance is the responsibility of each segment governing board and (b) each segment has a unique mission that is reflected in its distinct priorities by which it contributes to the state's goals. To maintain this linkage between segment and state goals, each segment will submit a short (5-10 pages) annual report to the Legislature and Governor that includes the following information:

- the segment's main priorities for each of the state's goal areas;
- the major activities underway to address each priority;
- the performance indicators used to track progress toward each goal (not the data);
- major highlights or issues from the data that have state-level significance; and
- how the segment assesses student learning and uses the results to improve learning.

3. Measure student success and monitor student learning

The state reporting system focuses on broad measures of student success rather than direct measures of student learning. While student learning is critically important, the responsibility for developing qualitative and quantitative assessments for learning outcomes is appropriately placed at the institutional level. The measurement of student learning is a complex undertaking given higher education's diversity of mission and the absence of standard learning outcomes across programs and institutions. The segments should be accountable to policymakers for having effective mechanisms in place to assess and improve student learning but not for reporting the actual student learning data. California will revisit this issue at a later time when learning outcome assessments are further developed. In the meantime, it is most useful for state policymakers to monitor indicators of student success such as: Are students graduating within a reasonable time? Do students who begin with shortfalls in academic preparation get through remediation and succeed at college-level work? Is the transfer mechanism working successfully to provide baccalaureate education to students who begin at two-year institutions? Are students receiving degrees in fields where good jobs are available?

4. Focus on policy-relevant data

In order to keep the state reporting system simple yet meaningful, data will be provided at three levels that are most useful for state policy decisions: (a) statewide aggregate information about educational outcomes, (b) regional breakdowns to show outcomes across all institutions serving a specified region, and (c) aggregate totals for each segment of higher education. Data comparing individual campus performance will not be included in the state reporting system. The governing boards and central administrations of each segment are responsible for monitoring campus performance

as part of their institutional accountability, and for modifying institutional policy and practice as warranted by the data in the pursuit of system priorities and state goals.

5. Provide better information for budget and policy development

Policymakers want assurance that their investments in public higher education are well-founded. A key purpose of this framework is to bring better information into *existing* decision processes rather than to create new layers of process such as those that come with performance budgeting. Skeptics of accountability argue that institutions cannot be held accountable for results unless they have sufficient funds. Policymakers hear this and wonder how much is “sufficient.” They ask for increased cost-effectiveness. And on it goes. This framework is designed to produce the analytical data to show that funding levels have real and discernable consequences. If we identify and track the outcomes that are important for the state, we can ask questions about the data. One of those questions should be whether funding levels and allocation mechanisms are adequate. Such data-driven discussions about budget sufficiency should become a routine part of the policy and budget processes.

Prospects for the Future

Higher education in this country is at a crossroads. The impact of state budget shortfalls on higher education is well chronicled. Less discussed is the fact that higher education is losing public dollars not only because the total budget is stressed but because the value of higher education in the public eye is declining. The public and their representatives seem to view higher education as more of a private good and less of a public good than in the past. Accompanying what many see as the increasing vocationalism of higher education is the attitude that students and families should bear a larger share of the cost because they are the ultimate beneficiaries. This is ironic because higher education is also ever more critical to state economic health. Effective state-level accountability systems that can demonstrate the connections between state investments in higher education and civic and economic health may hold a key to restoring the public stature of higher education.

Traditional approaches to accountability, committed as they are to the evaluation of individual institutions, cannot serve this purpose. The California project has the potential to re-focus accountability on the *public purposes* of higher education rather than on institutional activity. If we can convince policymakers that it is more important to monitor statewide educational outcomes than to review campus data and perform “top-down” accountability activities, we can demonstrate the usefulness of this approach.

This appears to be an opportune time to implement the proposal. Previous methods of “accountability” are defunct in California. The Governor’s partnerships with the four-year segments expired with the new fiscal year and the performance program for the community colleges has largely been de-funded. There is a vacuum to be filled. With a newly elected Governor, there is less chance that the older approach to accountability will simply be reinstated. In addition, legislation is pending to rebuild a functional higher

education coordinating agency. The California Postsecondary Education Commission has been virtually dismantled due to concerns about its ineffectiveness. Yet a strong, competent, and independent coordinating agency is needed to develop, maintain, and provide stewardship for the accountability system. This framework can help provide the justification and the specifications for the recreated entity.

Despite these favorable conditions, the prospects for implementing these new directions hinge on some key issues. One of these is term limits. Two of the key legislative leaders in this project are completing their final terms. While this increases their commitment to seeing this through, it raises the need to cultivate new champions—a task made more difficult by the reduction in policy expertise that has accompanied term limits. On the other hand, term limits may work in our favor. The frequent turnover of legislators has made it more difficult to maintain a consistent public policy agenda for higher education in California. Both legislators and higher education leaders should benefit from the stability that this framework can provide—predicated as it is on a set of four durable policy goals. The higher education segments have acknowledged these benefits and have worked cooperatively in developing the proposed accountability structure.

A second potential challenge is to convince legislators that they should not monitor individual campus performance. They are undoubtedly more familiar with the traditional top-down meaning of accountability and may see it as their job to monitor at this micro level—particularly when it involves institutions within their own districts.

A third challenge stems from a governance issue. Community college governance in California is widely perceived as dysfunctional, with a Board of Governors overseeing a “system” of 72 local districts each with a locally-elected board. The state Chancellor has limited authority over local districts yet is held accountable for system performance—particularly under our proposed model that relies on the segmental structure to ensure institutional accountability. Changes to the governance structure are under discussion but meaningful reform will be difficult to achieve.

Developing the linkages between the segmental reporting systems and the state-level reporting system will also be difficult. While all parties agree in concept that each segment should develop its own goals and priorities within the structure of the state’s goals and accountability framework, traditions of autonomy in academic governance suggest that we cannot simply mandate a set structure for segmental reporting.

Finally, we need to develop new measures because existing data do not generate answers to some key questions. For example, we cannot report the baccalaureate completion rate of students who begin in community colleges because longitudinal tracking across segments does not occur. Nor can we report the success of remediation until the community colleges adopt a consistent method to assess college readiness. As we work to develop better measures, we can live with imperfect measures because we have agreed that data will be used with reason and discretion, and not by formula. Nevertheless, it will be imperative to move quickly to provide the best possible data to answer the important policy questions that have been raised.

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