



Toward Valuable and Effective Measures of Accountability

The American Council on Education (ACE) has played a major role in national reform and innovation efforts in higher education for nearly 100 years. This work has included initiatives to improve federal student aid, enhance opportunities for veterans, strengthen diversity, and demonstrate the value of the educational and research programs on our campuses.

America is home to more than 4,000 colleges and universities, and they are incredibly diverse. Some are public, others are independent; some are large urban universities, some are two-year community colleges, and still others are small, rural campuses. Some offer graduate and professional programs, others focus primarily on undergraduate education. Each has its own specific and distinct mission. This collective diversity among institutions is one of the great strengths of America's higher education system, and has helped make it the best in the world. We are extremely proud of this strength and diversity and more than ready to demonstrate its worth to the public and policymakers.

Public accountability about the performance of colleges and universities is increasingly significant and an important way for institutions of higher education to demonstrate their value and effectiveness. The best systems for providing such accountability are transparent, and provide accurate data for consumers and the public.

A number of colleges and universities, public and independent, have developed outstanding systems to meet this need. An example from the public sector is the University of Wisconsin System, which since 1995 has released comprehensive accountability reports highlighting areas such as student retention, operational spending, and the economic impact of campuses in the system. In the independent sector, New York University has developed its annual "Life Beyond the Square" report that considers data on student earnings, job placement and graduate school acceptance. These are only two examples of hundreds of similar programs.

National higher education organizations have also implemented promising and information-rich efforts to address the growing demand for accountability. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) has developed its broadly supported University and College Accountability Network (UCAN) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) have developed the effective Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). Additional efforts will soon be introduced by organizations such as the Association of American Universities (AAU), which will be designing an accountability measure based on alumni satisfaction, and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC), which has implemented a new data resource, the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA).

An especially promising initiative is the Student Achievement Measure (SAM), developed and coordinated by APLU, which more effectively calculates retention and graduation rates for all full-time students than does the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Given the rich diversity in the missions of institutions in American higher education, no single accountability system will work equally well for all our colleges and universities. The value of multiple state, institutional and association efforts is that accountability systems are designed to address the needs of particular types of institutions. The ACE Board of Directors supports the examination of these and other accountability measures and the adoption of those that are best aligned with individual institutions.

ACE Executive Committee, Acting for the Board of Directors, April 2014