



# Facing Up and Moving Forward

Mobilizing a National  
Policy Capacity to  
Address Student Learning  
in Higher Education

October 6 – 7, 2004  
Conference Report  
Wingspread Conference Center  
Racine, Wisconsin



THE BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

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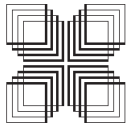
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# Background

This document summarizes the conclusions from an October 6-7, 2004, meeting on public accountability for student learning in higher education. Sponsored by the Business-Higher Education Forum with the support of the Johnson Foundation, the discussion was held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. It was designed to bring together a group of selected individuals with experience in some aspect of the broader topic, including experts in learning assessment, curriculum design, institutional reform, public policy research and advocacy, accreditation, and state and federal policy.

The goal of the meeting was to test the level of consensus among these experts about the efficacy of existing efforts to improve student learning across higher education in the United States. The conversation was informed by a series of recent reports on aspects of the topic that cumulatively sound an alarm about the growing challenges of the uneven performance of and weakened public support for U.S. higher education. The key facts documented in these works include the following:

- Despite differences in mission, size, and affiliations, there is considerable consistency among four-year degree-granting institutions in their broadly stated goals for general education for undergraduate students, such as critical thinking, communication, numeracy, and appreciation for multiculturalism and fine arts. (*AAC&U*

*Greater Expectations; Passmore/Langenberg UMD survey)*

- However, only a fraction of institutions translates these goals into operational measures of learning expected of all students. In addition, after 20 years of intense efforts to increase institutional attention to assessment of student learning, most institutions remain unable (or perhaps unwilling) to answer questions about what students have learned in their institutions. (*AAC&U, Our Students' Best Work; University of Maryland /Passmore/Langenberg Survey)*
- The nation's gaps in college participation between affluent and poor students are growing. The still modest but real progress of K-12 reform in improving academic preparation for college-level work has been stalled at the college door, and access is threatened by rollbacks in admissions, increasing tuition, and inadequate attention to K-12 and college transitions. (*Measuring Up 2004*)
- Far too many students who enter college fail to get a degree. Among full-time students in four-year colleges only six out of ten obtain a bachelor's degree within six years. Graduation rates for African American and Latino students are twenty points below those of white students. Only 54 percent of low-income students obtain degrees, compared to 77 percent of high-income students.

### *A Sample of Pertinent National Reports on the Topic*

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2002). *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U.

Association of American Colleges and Universities (2004). *Our students' best work: A framework for accountability worthy of our mission*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U.

Business-Higher Education Forum. (2004). *Public accountability for student learning in higher education*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum.

Carey, Kevin. (2004). *A matter of degrees: Improving graduation rates in four-year colleges and universities*. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust.

Hersh, Richard H. and Benjamin, Roger. (2003). *Measuring quality in higher education: Reconciling assessment and accountability through value-added assessment*. New York: RAND/Council for Aid to Education.

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2004). *Measuring up 2004: The national report card on higher education*. San Jose: NCPPHE.

Passmore, Benjamin, Passmore, Susan, and Langenberg, Donald. (2004). *Characteristics of statements of learning goals from accredited degree-granting colleges and universities*, unpublished draft, College Park, Maryland.

State Higher Education Executive Officers. (2004, August). *Accountability in higher education discussion paper*. National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, discussion draft. Denver, Colorado: SHEEO.

Furthermore, the majority of low-income and minority students who enroll in higher education do so in community colleges, and they enroll part-time, resulting in even lower aggregate rates when all students from across postsecondary education are factored in. Across the entire K-20 educational pipeline, the overall picture is one of stark differences in access and achievement, which begin early in the K-12 pipeline and grow increasingly large along the way. (*Education Trust, a Matter of Degrees*)

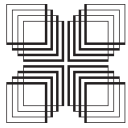
- The public perceives higher education quite favorably. It understands the importance of having a college degree, and parents want and expect their children to be able to go to college. However, they worry about being able to afford college and fear that it is becoming less available now than in the past. (*Immewahr, Public Agenda*)
- Skirmishes over measures of public accountability and struggles over tuition have left

public policy makers at both the state and federal levels skeptical about higher education's willingness to be held publicly accountable to any meaningful standard of performance. Among public universities, the trend toward institutional privatization continues, caused by erosion of state funding and higher tuitions. The response among the leading public research universities in many states has been to redefine their public institutional status, potentially fragmenting the community of interest within higher education, and changing historic understandings of the responsibilities of these institutions to serve the publics within their states. (*SHEEO Commission on Accountability*)

- The United States, long internationally preeminent for the quality and diversity of its structure of higher education, is slipping behind other countries in college access, degree completion, and investment in research. (*BHEF Student Learning*)

Against this disturbing backdrop, there are many bright spots. Institutional work to focus on improving student learning is deep-seated and is reinforced through the standards of regional accrediting agencies. In several states, policy makers and institutional leaders have developed broad agreement on performance goals and measures that underpin multi-year funding commitments. New measures of cross-institutional learning outcomes are being developed in a number of venues, including the RAND/Collegiate Learning Assessment Project and the National Forum on College-Level Learning.





# The Wingspread Questions

## The key questions posed at the Wingspread conference were as follows:

**1) Problem definition:** What is the problem we are trying to solve? What do we mean when we talk about public accountability for student learning? Is this a performance problem, a measurement problem, or a communication problem? What are the obstacles that are getting in the way of progress?

**2) Vehicles/venues:** What are the different loci of responsibility for tackling this problem? What work is being done now? Will efforts already under way be adequate to solve the problem we have defined?

**3) Principles:** What broad principles should guide any effort to improve performance in student learning?

**4) Next steps:** What will an action agenda look like?

The Wingspread sessions were brief, and much more could have been said about this complicated and important topic. However, in the short space of time available, the group reached a substantial degree of consensus about many aspects of this issue. The group also honed in on some of the key sticking points that should be the focus of more extensive national attention. This summary captures the essence of the day's conversation. Organized around the four

topics that framed the discussion, it has been prepared to extend the debate beyond the Wingspread group.

### 1. Problem:

The group agreed that there are several dimensions to the problem, beginning with the core issue of performance and the accumulating evidence from the research described above. Nationwide, we have attended to the topic of student learning primarily through efforts to improve teaching and learning within individual institutions, in a conversation dominated by insiders and poorly linked to public audiences. Most institutions still do not set goals for student learning, and as a result are unable to assess progress against goals or clearly communicate their results. Accrediting agencies have remained focused on assessment processes and do not require institutions to translate learning goals into operational measures that can be regularly evaluated. And public policy makers have avoided coming to terms with their responsibility for setting broad cross-sector goals for student achievement. To address the broader issues of public policy and national performance, the institutional work needs to be complemented by parallel work at the national public policy level.

• **Performance.** The performance challenge is a broad, national one, transcending individual institutions and stretching across all postsecondary education. It exists despite the essential wisdom of the system design for American post-

secondary education, which encompasses diverse sectors and recognizes different modes of achievement. However, incomplete as they are, the national data indicate indisputable deep-seated, persistent, and growing weaknesses in performance, exacerbated by an eroding base of public financial support for public higher education. Moreover, the international data shows the United States is lagging behind several other countries in access and achievement and in investment in science and technology.

- **Goals.** Improving public accountability for learning will require engagement with the deeper question of national goals for higher education. The problem of public accountability for performance can no longer be addressed through the venue of individual institutional assessments, detached from broader questions of purpose and goals. We do not have public clarity about national goals for higher education or about what levels of learning and achievement our society needs from higher education in order to sustain our democracy, expand our economy, and maintain economic opportunity for all citizens. To be sure, there are some general goals for higher education, embedded within Goal 6 of the 1994 National Education Goals legislation. These state:

- 1) the proportion of the qualified students, especially minorities, who enter college, who complete at least two years, and who complete their degree programs will increase substantially;
- 2) the proportion of college graduates who demonstrate an advanced ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems will increase substantially; and
- 3) by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

These general goals need to be refreshed with a serious discussion about their adequacy and about how they should be measured. Higher

education leaders have traditionally resisted having such a conversation, out of fear that national learning goals might end up turning into mandatory federal standards, which would impose a regulatory straight jacket damaging to institutional diversity and autonomy and harmful to quality.

- **Data.** We have no capacity to document in any systematic or consistent way where we stand as *a nation* in student learning achievement. We see fault lines suggesting we are lagging internationally, but we really have not done the homework to document the extent of the disparities. For several reasons, this problem cannot be solved by aggregating institutional data into broad national categories: Most institutions still do not publish results of their student learning assessments; the assessments that do exist are not comparable; and the policy problem is at a broad national, not institutional, level. Without the data and the language to lift the conversation to one of purpose and performance, the national policy debate defaults back to examples from individual institutions and to anecdote.

- **Institutional Assessment Paradigm.** After two decades of work to improve teaching and learning, we continue to approach this issue predominantly by focusing on assessment processes within individual institutions, insufficiently linked to explicit goals for achievement. The transition from assessment to accountability will not work if institutions remain unable to translate their learning goals into standards that can be regularly assessed and readily understood. However, there is considerable reluctance among many institutions about turning this into a public conversation. Much of the public policy debate about “accountability” has seemed punitive in nature, designed to isolate and punish low-performing institutions. The paradigm of institutional distinctiveness is very strong in our country, and institutions want to position themselves favorably in order to sustain and improve their market position.

Public accountability for student learning in higher education has to be framed by national consensus about broad goals for student



learning that can be something deeper than credit hour accumulation. We believe there is more latent consensus about general educational learning goals across all of higher education than has generally been acknowledged. However, this consensus has not been translated into broad public terms that encompass all of higher education, and institutions continue to perceive their goals as unique or distinctive, unaware of — and perhaps resistant to learning about — the broader community of which they are a part.

## 2. Vehicles/Venues:

There are multiple actors involved with this agenda, both inside higher education and outside of it. The participants at the Wingspread session spent some time mapping the variety of venues where work is under way in order to identify where the predominant energy seems to be and to imagine the future trajectory for this work and whether it will converge to address the national performance problems they believe exist. They identified several points of potential leverage in this matrix. The preponderance of work continues to be done within individual institutions, and that work needs to continue and improve. However, the grassroots approach to change needs to be sustained and energized by some top-down efforts at a national level. Work within the academy needs to be framed — and motivated, and ventilated — by external stakeholder groups’ actively participating in the conversation in order to ensure that expectations are appropriate and are not exclusively institutionally self-fulfilling. The group suggests four areas for work:

- **Institutions.** Public and private non-profit higher education institutions serve broad social and economic purposes in this country. To reconnect with public policy makers, institutional leaders need to embrace and step up to their responsibilities as members of a larger community. They must lead their institutions to be clearer about learning goals and measurable outcomes for all programs. To do this, they need to translate what are too often broad categories of learning into student learning achievement standards they are prepared to warrant for

degree-level work. Assessments have to document how goals are being met. Individual institutions need to be recruited into a conversation about broader national purposes for higher education, to recognize that performance responsibilities do not stop at the level of the institutional mission. To do this, they need to understand the legitimacy of public policy attention to student learning in higher education, and they need to be capable of joining in the discussions in thoughtful and constructive ways.

- **Accreditation.** Regional accreditation has played an important role in extending the national discussion about learning and goals into each institution. But although accreditors require institutions to assess learning, they still do not enforce standards that require assessments to be linked to clear learning goals or standards. Accreditation remains an essentially private and institutionally defined process, unrelated to community standards or public communication of performance against clearly defined goals and performance measures for all degree programs. Accreditors need to help expand the conversations about assessment to connect to institutional standards and public communication of results.

- **State policy makers.** The active participation of the state policy community is essential to the success of the work. State policy capacity is better defined than national capacity; however, the audience for state policy is ambiguous or weak in many states as well. Improved accountability will require active cultivation of multiple stakeholders to strengthen the audience for state public policy. Governors in particular are uniquely well positioned to lead discussions within their states, involving the business community and civic leaders in these discussions as appropriate.

- **National work on broad goals.** National work is needed to provide an overarching context for different activities, to allow them to converge in a productive way, rather than running along parallel tracks as is now the case. It is important here to understand that “national” does not mean “federal.”



### 3. Principles to Guide the Engagement of Learning Accountability:

Any new national activity to address student learning performance needs to build on, and not replicate, what has gone before. Broad principles are needed to guide the focus of the work. Chief among these principles are:

- The goal of the effort is to improve performance in student learning by building analytical capacity to connect assessment of student learning with public policy goals for higher education.
- Strengthened national capacity to account for student learning need not come at the expense of individual diversity or academic autonomy.
- Access and accountability are both achievable. To accomplish both, we need to move from a conversation dominated by the metrics and processes of assessment, to one that conducts assessments in a larger context of goals — within individual institutions and at the state and national levels. Individual institutions cannot realistically be “accountable” for contributions to national goals if the national goals are not defined.
- Multiple measures, different tools. There is room for multiple approaches to assessment of student learning, such as statistically valid samples of students or institutions; comparative evaluation of value-added across sectors; and institutional- and student-based direct assessments.
- National is not federal. A national effort would aim at creating broadly construed, voluntary goals for student achievement and learning. It would set the framework for state-level, accreditation, and institutional work and also to set a benchmark for periodic national assessments.
- Improved public measures of student learning are just one facet of a larger agenda of public accountability for higher education. Other measures of institutional performance — notably transitions from high school to college, affordability, and resource use — are also legitimately part of the conversation.

### Sticking Points

There was substantial consensus about the need to frame the institutional work on learning assessments within a larger conversation about goals and public accountability structures. This transition alone will be difficult and will generate controversy among institutions and accreditors. But the group believes there are greater ambiguities and controversies at the public policy levels, particularly about the appropriate aim for broadly construed national policy for student learning in higher education. Some in the group believe that it is possible to reach consensus about national learning goals for general education at the baccalaureate level. These broad standards could then provide the basis for national assessments of cross-sector student learning achievements and could support state- and regional work to improve student learning across institutions. However, it is not clear how that would work as a practical matter, specifically, how broad goals might be translated into standards and how standards would affect individual institutions. One concern is that standards would end up being set at a minimum level and would end up degrading rather than improving education.

The group did not try to resolve these issues in its short session but tried to highlight this topic as a central one that requires more systematic debate. The group does believe the conversation will require capacities at the national level that are different from those that are now in place, capacities that will come from an organization that will put this work at the center of its agenda. Although there are a number of national groups that have an interest in this — many were represented at the Wingspread meeting — none of them has the credibility or the resources to do the work unilaterally.

### 4. Strategies/Next Steps:

The group feels it is urgent to move forward with this conversation, with specific concrete steps to bring greater clarity to the national discussion. The participants do not believe there is need for more research or position papers. Several

reports — the Business-Higher Education report, the SHEEO Accountability Commission, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education “Measuring Up” reports — have already stated the case clearly and convincingly. What is needed is a systematic national strategy to move the topic to a different venue, to support institutional work with greater policy-level attention to broad goals and purposes. This work needs to involve national educational organizations, presidentially based groups, regional compacts, and state-based groups, as well as regional accrediting agencies. In addition, the group believes that some new organizational capacity is needed at a national level from an entity not beholden to any sector or interest group, working collaboratively with others and having the resources to maintain attention to this topic. Its purpose would be to clarify the appropriate aim for national policy work on higher education goals and (potentially) learning standards, including the types of assessments needed to evaluate success in meeting them. This entity would also need to manage a strategic communication strategy about the transition from institutional assessment to public accountability, directed simultaneously to leaders — including faculty — within institutions and to public policy audiences. The language of this discussion requires attention. Both within institutions and among public policy audiences, there is too much emotionally charged rhetoric about this topic, a circumstance that breeds great suspiciousness on both sides about the depth of commitment to serious change. Particular care needs to go to ensuring substantive participation and buy-in from institutions that serve the largest proportion of low-income and minority students.

### **Postscript**

This meeting summary is obviously not the last word about this topic. This conference was only one point in what needs to be a larger conversation. The Wingspread group was not designed to be representative of all of postsecondary education, and this summary of the meeting does not represent a position paper from any of the organ-

izations represented around the table. To move this conversation forward, the Business-Higher Education Forum invites dialogue about the premises and conclusions that are set forth in this document. It will use the feedback from those discussions to inform Forum decisions on plans for subsequent work.





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