

**TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS:**



J. Noah Brown, president of the Association of Community College Trustees: "We must find a way to convince policy makers to stand with us and not cut budgets right now." (Photograph from Association of Community College Trustees)

## **Community Colleges, Eager to Prove Their Worth, Develop Voluntary Standards of Performance**

By PAUL BASKEN

The federal government's recent focus on making institutions prove their academic quality has left community colleges feeling highly vulnerable, uncertain about how to demonstrate their value to students and therefore worried about losing crucial taxpayer support — especially as their enrollments rise in a sagging economy.

Community-college leaders are now setting out to fix that, and hoping they haven't waited too long. In the past few weeks, the heads of the nation's major community-college associations began what they expect may be a yearlong process of developing voluntary standards in such areas as course-completion rates, transfer readiness, and employer satisfaction.

The idea, said J. Noah Brown, president of the Association of Community College Trustees, is to build a body of statistical evidence to show why federal, state, and local governments — at a time of economic stress — should increase support for community colleges rather than reduce it.

"We must find a way to convince policy makers to stand with us and not cut budgets right now, because I believe that would only deepen and lengthen our economic recession," Mr. Brown said. "But without an accountability system, without the ability to stand firm on results and the ability to show that, it's going to be hard to convince policy makers to do what is essentially counterintuitive."

## **Hard to Assess**

The trustees group is embarking on the mission, in partnership with the American Association of Community Colleges and the College Board, after another year of battles over accountability sparked by the final report of the Bush administration's Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

The commission, in that report in September 2006, said the American system of higher education was hamstrung by a widespread lack of data that can help both students and policy makers understand which institutions do the best job of teaching and of producing successful graduates.

Community colleges feel especially at risk because the most traditional measure of success, graduation rates, doesn't fit a body of students many of whom intend to transfer to a four-year college, acquire a vocational skill, obtain remedial assistance, or just learn for the sake of learning.

"The community college does an amazing job of serving all of those goals," said Diane Auer Jones, a former U.S. assistant secretary for postsecondary education, who is now president of the Washington Campus, a consortium of university business schools. But because of that wide mission, she said, "it probably is the hardest to assess a community college."

The answer will probably involve a combination of factors, including measures of course completion, student engagement, transfer readiness, graduation, certification, and employer satisfaction, said George R. Boggs, president and chief executive of the American Association of Community Colleges.

One of the project's first steps in developing recommended measures will involve surveying states to learn what student-performance data their community colleges already collect, he said.

Those organizing the project feel some urgency because governments at all levels are likely to quickly begin cutting budgets now that the economy has turned downward, said Mr. Brown, of the trustees association. Community colleges face that environment without "a set of accountability measures that really reflect the diversity and breadth of our institutions," he said. "We're looking to try to correct that."

## **Definitions of Success**

One initiative that has already begun, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, has been tracking community-college students in Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia over a six-year period. The study, which is supported by grants from the Lumina Foundation for Education and other organizations, includes both part-time and full-time students. It counts success as involving not only graduation rates but also progress toward degrees or transfers to four-year institutions.

On the basis of measures defined in the Achieving the Dream study, growth in the number of students considered to have succeeded over the six-year measuring period ranged from 50 percent, in Ohio, to 3.6 times as large, in Texas.

In another effort, the University of Alaska at Anchorage has begun outlining plans for a new accountability system, based heavily on grades, to rate the performance of the state's community colleges.

The system makes use of the realization that while many community-college students may attend for only short periods of time, they all receive grades that can be tracked. Even if the students are headed in multiple directions, their grades give researchers useful information about where each one is headed and with what degree of success, said Gary Rice, associate vice provost for institutional research.

"I know people can argue about the weaknesses of grades and all that — and believe me, I'm in research, I'm more sensitive to that than anybody else," Mr. Rice said. "But the bottom line is, that is what is the coin of the realm right now."

Many students attend a community college with no intention of graduating, said Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Grades therefore serve as "the primary tool of faculty everywhere" in making judgments of student achievement, said Ms. Eaton, who is a former president of both the Community College of Philadelphia and what was then called the Community College of Southern Nevada.

Skeptics of a grades-based approach for evaluating colleges include Ms. Jones, the former Education Department official, who was an associate professor at the Community College of Baltimore County. She recalls working under a previous administration there that responded to budget worries by pressing instructors to increase student retention by giving better grades.

The leadership of the college "didn't have any malicious intent" but was simply doing what it thought was necessary to protect an institution where many low-income students were trying to juggle many things in their lives, Ms. Jones said. "There was clear pressure to inflate grades."

### **Individual Progress**

Some experts believe that community colleges will never find a fair system of proving their worth without a "unit record" system for tracking students as they move from college to college and into the workplace.

Current information on student performance focuses largely on full-time students who complete a four-year degree program at a single institution. Advocates of a unit-record system, which would track individual students' educational progress across various institutions and into the workplace, say it would be a better measure for community-college students, who often either find jobs closely related to their training or attend multiple institutions before graduating.

"Community colleges really need this, in particular, because it's the only way that they'll ever get credit for the job that they're doing," said Mark S. Schneider, who ran the Education Department's data-collection systems until his departure, in October, as commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics.

Congress barred the Bush administration from pursuing a unit-record tracking system after colleges, led by private four-year institutions, warned that it would represent an unwarranted intrusion into student privacy.

Such a system would "create unprecedented cradle-to-grave tracking of American citizens," wrote Katherine Haley Will, at the time president of Gettysburg College and chairwoman of the Annapolis Group, which represents 124 liberal-arts colleges.

Mr. Schneider and Grover J. Whitehurst, who this month leaves his position as director of the Institute of Education Sciences, the Education Department's main research arm, tried for several years to convince Congress otherwise. Now they have turned to more than two dozen statewide efforts to create such tracking systems. Such efforts might produce useful information because most community-college students who transfer do so within their own state, Mr. Whitehurst said.

But a single nationwide system could have produced more data at less cost and bother for colleges and governments, he said. "The interest of community colleges in this is obvious, since so many of their students end up in other institutions," Mr. Whitehurst said. "And without knowing that, it's very difficult to be able to assess the job that community colleges are doing."

The defeat of unit-record tracking, Ms. Jones said, represented a victory by the nation's most elite institutions, "who were concerned that perhaps a unit-record system would reveal that the more-expensive institutions provide a different social network but potentially not a better educational product."

Any changes in evaluation systems for community colleges also could affect for-profit institutions, which often compete for many of the same students, including those who are trade-oriented or from lower-income backgrounds.

Changes in performance measures, therefore, should be made uniformly throughout higher education, said Arthur Keiser, chancellor of Keiser University, a for-profit institution. "If every form of education created their own set of standards in order for them to look successful, whether they are or not, that to me seems to be manipulative," he said.

The accountability project led by the community-college groups is designed to do more than just help the colleges compete or validate their budget requests, said Ronald Williams, vice president of the College Board.

The goal isn't "to measure the end of something only," he said. The College Board, he said, instead is trying primarily to help community colleges "look and see where they are strong, where they need to improve, and use that data in a formative fashion to keep improving."

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