

The Focus is Now on College Performance

By Shaileja Mammen



Congress and the U.S. Department of Education are considering moves that would force colleges to publish information about their performance.

At the same time, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges are advocating a “voluntary system of accountability.” The two public-college groups have been working on their voluntary accountability system for more than a year.

A draft template for the voluntary reporting system requests information on graduation and retention rates, financial aid, tuition and other costs, and student performance based on measures of learning outcomes. The leaders of these groups expect the draft to be approved by the end of November.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges together have close to 600 members. The presidents of both associations are optimistic about the acceptance of the voluntary system of accountability, as officials from a large number of universities participated on the committees that worked to draft the template.

The information that the draft accountability system requires to be made public is already available in various forms. However, the voluntary reporting system would require colleges to adopt one of three standard measures of student learning—the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency. The colleges would have to report their students’ scores on these tests.

The two associations believe it will be more productive and effective to allow colleges to report voluntarily than it would be to impose measures that seek to enforce compliance.

Some argue that attempts to measure student learning through standardized methods will reduce experimentation and hinder the use of learning portfolios. There are also fears that trying to measure all students with the same yardstick may not prove useful.

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities is also working on this issue and has developed a sample accountability template in response to findings from a focus group of students, parents, and lawmakers. The information disclosed in this template would include tuition costs, financial aid, and details about student life.

In light of both private and public colleges' general acceptance of a need for public accountability, the task of standardizing measurements of student learning and college performance seems as if it will be easier than expected.