Truth in Learning

Accountability project nears completion

By John Hammang

After more than a year of discussion and work by dozens of higher-education leaders, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)—a joint project of AASCU and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges—is beginning to produce recommendations for dissemination of better student-related data. The recommendations are expected to be presented to the respective boards of the two associations for their consideration during the groups’ annual meetings in November.

The project was designed as a response to criticisms about accountability in higher education, particularly those of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education last fall. Although institutions collect and publish a wealth of information related to accountability, the information is not always easy to find and often is difficult for students and families to use to make comparisons among institutions, particularly on the issue of costs.

Eighty-two people drawn from the two associations, formed into a presidential-advisory commission and several task forces and technical working groups (see www.aascu.org/accountability/chronology.htm), have labored to produce recommendations about compilation and dissemination of data in the following areas:

- Information for students and families, including a tuition calculator.
- Data regarding core educational outcomes, measuring such things as students’ skill in critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication.
- Measures of students’ engagement on their campuses related to student learning.

Key to the project is that the recommendations rely heavily on existing sources of information and methods of reporting that institutions already typically employ. This includes using conventions of the Common Data Set, a collaborative effort among data providers for higher education that include the College Board, Peterson’s and U.S. News & World Report. Some conventions from the Education Department’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System also are used.

The working groups are recommending use of a standardized Excel format to ensure that even small or under-resourced institutional-research offices will be able to readily collect and record the needed information and report it in exactly the same way that much larger institutions do. The identical look and approach to reporting will directly address criticisms about the difficulty of comparing similar information across many different kinds of institutions. Institutions participating in the project will be encouraged to place a standard graphic link on their Web pages to lead users to information compiled for the VSA project.

Concerning specific recommendations, the Task Force on Student and Family Information developed a template for the reporting of general data about institutions. It also is recommending use of a tuition calculator to help
The recommendations rely heavily on existing sources of information and methods of reporting that institutions already typically employ. Prospective students get a more accurate sense of what their actual costs will be, rather than having to rely on published "sticker" prices. The group recommended development of a financial-aid estimator based on one used by the University of Texas System, with modifications to take into account state-based entitlement awards such as the Georgia Hope Scholarship program.

The panel also recommends using information from the National Student Clearinghouse, a non-organization that collects and verifies information about student enrollment and degrees earned, to calculate a "student success and progress" measure. While institutions would continue to report federally mandated information on Learning Outcomes, the information from the clearinghouse would be used, for example, to report the progress of students who graduate from institutions other than the one in which they originally enrolled.

To help institutions better demonstrate the value they add to students' learning during their undergraduate experience, the Core Educational Outcomes Task Force is recommending testing first-semester freshmen and seniors within one semester of graduation using tests measuring critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication. After review of a broad range of standardized-testing instruments by a technical work group, the outcomes panel is recommending that an institution use either the College Learning Assessment (CLA), the Motivational Appraisal of Personal Potential (MAPP), or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP).

The understanding is that the gains reported are an institutional-level assessment and can be used in conjunction with other assessment efforts already underway throughout higher education. The reporting emphasis is on value added, and scores are reported for the subject university's students relative to the mean scores of students at universities of comparable selectivity. This approach presents an important opportunity for institutions without a high-profile reputation to convincingly show the public the value of attending their campuses.

A number of educational outcomes that reflect student growth in areas such as leadership have been assembled, and work is under way to identify reliable methods to measure such growth. This area is less developed than measuring learning outcomes, so universities participating in the VSA will not be required to measure student growth in these areas. Planners hope, however, to provide an option that will allow assessment in some meaningful manner.

In a vein similar to that of the Core Outcomes Task Force, the Campus Engagement Task Force is recommending use of a pre- and post-undergraduate survey to enable institutions to report changes in student attitudes and experiences concerning such matters as the value of collaborative learning and experience with diversity.

After an extensive review of available instruments, the task force found that four of them address all of the desired variables. Thus institutions participating in VSA may use either the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (U-CUES); the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Your First College Year (YCFY) survey and its College Senior Survey (CSS); the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); or the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ).

The task force has identified comparable items in each of those instruments that will allow consistent reporting regardless of the instrument used.

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