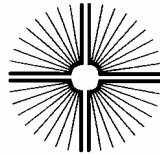

ACCOUNTABILITY: *Issues, Implications, and Action Plan*

CONTENTS:

- **Historical Background**
 - **Where Are We Now?**
 - **Implications**
 - **Action Plan**
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Accountability: Issues, Implications, and Action Plan

In recent years, the word “accountability” has increasingly become part of the language of legislators and the general public as they seek assurance that public institutions – including higher education and community colleges – are using public funds wisely and can determine and explain both what they are doing and whether they are doing it well. This paper will provide historical background on the statutes and regulations which mandate accountability reports, will show how they compare and contrast, and will draw some implications and make some recommendations for California Community Colleges.

Historical Background

The “new era” of accountability for community colleges dawned with passage of AB 3409--Hayden (Chapter 1465, Statutes of 1986) which noted “a pressing need” to provide parents and students with adequate information to evaluate and make informed decisions about enrollment in a community college, increase public awareness and confidence in the colleges; offer community college trustees, administrators, faculty, and students an authoritative and reasonable basis for measuring their performance from year-to-year and against their community college counterparts; and accomplish these goals through annual publication of a detailed accountability report on the educational accomplishments and fiscal condition of all community colleges in CA. In order to meet these goals, AB 3409 required the California Community College Chancellor to conduct a study of the feasibility of developing and implementing a statewide program of educational accountability based on a set of principles and required the examination of the feasibility of collecting, evaluating, and reporting on educational quality indicators and student outcome evaluation criteria.

Following on the heels of AB 3409 was AB 1725 (Vasconcellos; Chapter 978, Statutes 1988), Education Code Section 71020.5 which established legislative intent to “foster the creation, implementation, and phase-in of a comprehensive community college accountability system that describes the performance of community colleges in meeting the postsecondary education needs of students.... and provides performance data on students, programs, and institutions.” The language also specified its intent to “assist all participants in the community college system, including students, faculty, staff, administrators, local governing boards, the chancellors, the state board of governors, the public, and other interested constituencies, in identifying the educational and fiscal strengths and weaknesses of colleges in order to improve educational quality in community colleges.” This is the primary community college statute which requires the Chancellor’s Office to annually “produce a published report of community college accountability” including areas of student access, success, and satisfaction as well as staff composition and fiscal condition.

*** Prepared by Rita M. Mize, Director, State Policy & Research**

In January 1991, the Chancellor’s Office began an accountability pilot program by convening a task force and awarding grants to four community college districts (Mt. San Antonio, San Joaquin

Delta, San Jose-Evergreen, and Santa Barbara). The task force was to consult on developing local prototype accountability reports, a technical assistance guide (entitled *Improving It: Accountability by Design*) to assist colleges, and a systemwide accountability indicators report; as well as implementing accountability programs. The task force completed its assigned tasks in June 1992. The four-district pilot program found that a viable accountability program must address both state and local needs. At the local college level, the need is for measures of institutional effectiveness and continual improvement in student teaching and learning. At the state level, needs are to base policy and funding on objective, defensible information. Since the statewide accountability program relies on information provided by local colleges, the commitment to develop quality information is dependent on whether colleges believe that the program meets valid state needs and has local utility.

To assess the capability of the colleges to move the accountability program forward, the Chancellors' Office commissioned a cost study *California Community College Accountability: State and Local Implementation Costs*, which described four obstacles to implementation:

- (1) great variance in local management information system capabilities;
- (2) uneven local research competence;
- (3) local skepticism regarding accountability; and
- (4) a patchwork of existing statewide reporting requirements.

A second major annual accountability report is the mandatory California Postsecondary Education Commission report on the performance of California higher education required by AB 1808 (Hayden; Chapter 741, Statutes of 1991), Education Code Section 99180. This statute directs CPEC to develop an annual report that provides information to the citizens of California on significant indicators of performance in California's colleges and universities. It instructs the commission to develop the format and content of the report in cooperation with the State's public colleges and universities.

The Commission developed the current set of performance indicators over a two-year period. To date, three annual reports have been delivered to the Legislature. Each annual report presents performance information in five categories of indicators: demographic characteristics of California's population, fiscal support for postsecondary education, students' preparation for college, students' access to college, students' persistence, and the degrees awarded by the State's colleges and universities.

In addition to the requirements listed above, 1995 Supplemental Budget Act language (Item 6870-001-001) requested "the California Community Colleges Office of the Chancellor, in consultation with CPEC, ...[to] prepare a report identifying specific outcome measures and performance standards which can be reliably compiled on an annual basis and which define a level of performance that can reasonably be expected of the community colleges and the system as a whole." The request further noted that the outcome measures considered could include, but were not limited to, those required by AB 1725, and AB 1808.

The Chancellor's Office delivered the required report (entitled *1995 Supplemental Budget Act Language Related to the Reporting of Performance Outcomes for California Community Colleges*) to CPEC, the Legislative Analyst's Office, the Department of Finance, and the Office of Child Development and Education for review and comment in December 1996. The report includes an array of outcome measures, including the definitions, descriptions, and use of each; current performance data which illustrates each measure; standards for the outcome measures which define levels of educational performance and institutional efficiency; and an itemization

and estimate of state and college level costs of implementation. The resulting report shows the performance of the 106 colleges on most of the 54 measures displayed in a separate and earlier report, *The Effectiveness of California Community Colleges on Selected Performance Measures*, (COCCC, Sacramento CA: October 1996). In its cover memo to the report, the CO notes that its data are based on college data aggregated to the statewide level, rather than college level data itself, primarily due to lack of staff and funding for a more comprehensive college-by-college report. The Chancellor's Office, in an earlier communication with legislative staff, indicated the following constraints regarding the setting of standards:

- The time frame and limited staff resources constrained the agency's ability to perform the complex developmental work in an area where little, if any, state or national progress could be documented;
- The establishment of state standards and local benchmarks would require multi-year trends for performance measures which do not exist presently; and
- The setting of college level benchmarks for minimum levels of performance would require a lengthy process involving advice from the Consultation Council and its constituent members as well as extensive local staff work.

In the meantime, a number of additional state and federal accountability reporting requirements which affect community colleges have been established in recent years. The state accountability regulations and statutes include:

- SB 645 – State Job Training, Unemployment Insurance Code Section 15037;
- Staff Diversity -- Title 5, Section 53000, et.seq.
- Student Equity Plans – Title 5, Section 54220;
- Matriculation, -- Title 5, Section 55500, et.seq.;
- Transfer Centers – Title 5, Section 51027
- EOPS – Title 5, Section 56200, et.seq.
- DSPS – Title 5, Section 56000, et.seq.

The federal laws and regulations mandating accountability reporting include:

- Student Right to Know, 34 CFR Part 668, COMIS;
- Vocational Education (Carl Perkins Act), 20 U.S.C. 2301, et. seq. COMIS;
- Higher Education Amendments of 1992 (P.L. 102-325, 106 Stat. 448) 20 U.S.C. 1094 (a) (17) -- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Surveys, as mandated under Section 490.

Attachment A, developed by the Accountability Unit of the Policy Analysis and Development Division of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, groups the requirements for each of these state and federal laws and regulations to indicate similarities and duplication of requirements.

Where are We Now?

With the recent publication and transmittal of the 1995 Budget Language report to the Legislature, community colleges have a strong base from which to calculate their progress toward accountability. The report includes the following items which were mandated by the Supplemental Budget Act language:

- 1) An array of performance measures, with definitions, descriptions, and use;
- 2) An illustration of each performance measure using current data;
- 3) Appropriate performance standards proposed for various measures; and
- 4) State and college level implementation cost estimates.

In tandem with the report, the Chancellor's Office has submitted a 1997-98 Budget Change Proposal (BCP) to the Department of Finance for \$4.735 million in local assistance Proposition 98 funds to enable each individual college to report on specific outcome measures and performance standards. The BCP requests funds to:

- establish a four-person-year Chancellors' Office accountability staff through redirection and centralization of existing resources;
- provide each college with a nominal grant (\$37,120 per college) for completing a specified list of accountability activities;
- provide colleges with \$6,000 each for computing hardware and software support; and
- provide college level information on student satisfaction with instruction and support services, and student socioeconomic data using a classroom administered survey approach, at a cost of \$165,000.

To date, Department of Finance representatives have indicated unofficially that they consider this BCP to be premature, but the system is hopeful that the successful delivery of the report mandated by the 1995 Supplemental Language will encourage funding of this new initiative.

In its third annual AB 1808 report (*Performance Indicators of California Higher Education*, 1996) CPEC notes that although the information presented is useful for assisting in public policy analyses, "the mechanisms for identifying and measuring demonstrable improvements in students' knowledge, capacities, and skills are not readily available or even clearly defined." CPEC also recognized that benchmarks for marking the assessment of student progress are important and committed itself to consult with its AB 1808 Advisory Committee to review the current set of indicators in light of legislative intent to monitor the performance of all three segments of higher education.

Currently, CPEC is working with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) to survey other states as a means of developing a compendium of state-by-state accountability practices. These data are not expected from SHEEO until late Spring and it is unlikely that CPEC will have its report ready for public review until May 1997.

Also, CPEC sponsored an accountability measure, SB 1074 (Killea), during the 1995-96 legislative session. This bill was vetoed, according to the Governor's message, due to a reference to current law. With the Commission's interest in accountability, a similar or related accountability bill may be introduced during the 1997 legislative session, although this issue has not been decided to date.

Recently, the Rand Corporation announced that Dr. David Mertes, former California Community College Chancellor, will serve as a consultant on a new national project which will seek to develop a comprehensive community college accountability model with emphasis on performance outcomes and their effects upon students. The first phase of the Rand project, which is currently in its formative stages, is scheduled for completion in May 1997. This phase will be followed by a second – test—phase in which several colleges will pilot-test the model.

Implications

- 1) It is essential for community colleges to frame the research/accountability/outcome questions – or others will do it for us.

- 2) IPEDS data likely will drive the Higher Education Reauthorization and could lead to possible reintroduction of SPRE or other accreditation/accountability measures in the upcoming Congressional session.
- 3) Community colleges must use planning committees on their individual campuses and at the system level to find commonalties and seek universal outcome measures that meet the requirements of multiple statutes and regulations, or the colleges will be unable to meet reporting requirements and data requests.
- 4) It is and will become ever more essential for each local campus to have adequate, reliable research capabilities in order to meet all the continuing accountability requests and needs.

The AB 1725 Accountability Task Force best summed up the importance of accountability when, in its final report, it stated that “accountability is more than just a legal requirement.” The task force noted that since “every society measures and protects that to which it accords the greatest value, the embrace of accountability exhibits a deep moral” commitment to the welfare of the community colleges – “It is all too easy and expedience to evade or fail” in this obligation, which means “taking the wrong path, disappointing the public trust”, and missing the “opportunity to better serve all of California students who now, more than ever, need a good education.”

Action Plan

The CEOCCC and CCCT boards of the League have adopted the following accountability action plan:

- 1) The system should continue to argue strenuously for funding the 1997-98 BCP for local implementation funds. The system’s request is before the Department of Finance at present, and the system, through the Chancellor’s Office, must be prepared to present extensive and serious backup material to the Department of Finance and the Governor if this request is denied in the Governor’s Budget Proposal.
- 2) Legislative changes should be sought over the next few years to eliminate costly duplication of accountability mandates and requirements. Changes should also be sought which would be compatible with the existing State system, thus making the data more useful for college strategic planning and educational improvement.
- 3) The Chancellor’s Office should work with the joint RP Group/CISOA task force on MIS to clarify definitions and assure accuracy of data by college as well as comparability between colleges.
- 4) Discussions should occur with the Chancellor’s Office or in consultation to encourage that office to provide districts with access to the modified version of each district’s MIS submittal data that the Chancellor’s Office uses as the source for a wide variety of reports. This would enable colleges, for the first time, to validate the accuracy of the numbers reported by the State Chancellor’s Office MIS unit and significantly improve each college’s ability to respond to accountability needs and requirements, both at the State and local college levels. It also would improve significantly each college’s ability to compile and compare (one college or district to another) consistently defined student outcome measures, and increase districts’ ability to track transfer students between colleges and between segments . (The RP Group and CISOA hope to develop free or

low-cost systems that colleges will be able to use to generate outcome and accountability measures from Chancellor's Office data files and develop "dissemination" systems for interested colleges to compare consistently defined outcomes and accountability measures.)

5) Community colleges should be prepared to work closely with CPEC as it develops its survey of accountability practices throughout the nation.

6) Community colleges should be prepared to work collaboratively with WASC as it prepares to use accountability more in future accreditation studies.

7) Community colleges should be prepared to use accountability measures as important planning tools. Organizations such as the RP Group are planning to issue reports to assist with this activity. Other organizations (such as the League) should compile district reports available to date (e.g., Santa Barbara Community College District has a full accountability report, including student satisfaction data which is not available at the state level) and have them available to assist other colleges in developing similar materials.

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