THE PROJECT ON WORKFORCE

HARVARD Kennedy School
MALCOLM WIENER CENTER
for Social Policy

STAKEHOLDER BRIEF 3

Redesigning Postsecondary Accountability Measures to Promote Student Success

In 2021, the Project on Workforce launched the College-to-Jobs Initiative, a multi-year research effort designed to examine the connections between postsecondary education and the workforce. The initial phase of research culminated in the College-to-Jobs Playbook, a comprehensive review of the evidence and implementation of programs that connect students to meaningful careers. Through our research, we identified six themes that warranted further exploration. This brief explores the third theme: expanding work-based learning. We convened expert discussion groups to dive into each theme and conducted additional research to produce memos detailing actionable recommendations for three main stakeholder groups in the college-to-work ecosystem: educators, employers, and policymakers.

Jump to Recommendations

Students make significant investments in higher education with the expectation that a college degree will lead to economic opportunity. Data show that such an investment generally pays off for students.[1] However, there is growing skepticism among the public about the value of higher education, and pressure is mounting for leaders to hold colleges accountable for the economic returns on their education.

There are several mechanisms that stakeholders can deploy to hold colleges to account for student outcomes.[2] In this memo, we highlight three accountability levers:

Financing
Monetary decisions made by individuals, organizations, or institutions, tied to student outcomes, can incentivize colleges to prioritize economic success.

Performance tracking and reporting
Transparent tracking and reporting of students can create public pressure for colleges to improve outcomes.

Accreditation
The evaluation of institutions by independent accreditation agencies, based on student performance, can ensure that colleges are delivering on their goals.

Leaders can leverage these mechanisms–often in concert–to protect student investments in higher education and ensure learners are getting their money's worth.

Challenges to Designing Quality Accountability Measures

What "works–"and promotes equitable outcomes–is poorly understood

Many accountability policies and structures are still being piloted and researched, so there is little consensus around what "works." While incentives can be designed to promote positive outcomes, they may unintentionally exacerbate existing disparities and lead to unintended consequences, such as reduced admission of students who are seen as "harder to serve."

Lack of consensus around the purpose of college

While the majority of stakeholders in the education ecosystem agree about the need to improve graduates' economic outcomes, there remains debate around the role and responsibility of colleges.[3] Some argue that the primary purpose of college is to teach specific workforce-relevant skills, while others advocate for a focus on personal and intellectual growth. While both perspectives are important–and we argue that college is not an "either, or" proposition–the outcomes of the latter are more difficult to quantify and assess.[4]

Diverse postsecondary landscape

Two- and four-year institutions serve different purposes and populations. Each institution–regardless of designation–is distinct and confronts unique challenges. Given this heterogeneity, developing standardized metrics for measuring academic and labor market success can be difficult.

Varying goals and intended outcomes across programs

Academic programs may be designed with different intended outcomes, which makes it difficult to apply similar evaluative metrics across programs. For instance, assessing the earnings outcomes of STEM graduates is more straightforward than assessing the outcomes of programs that produce societal value, but pay less, like early childcare and political science.

Data lags, alignment, and capacity challenges

Effectively aligning postsecondary incentives with labor market outcomes requires robust data collection and analysis, which may not exist or be developed to their full potential.[5] Labor market outcomes also take time to materialize, which means that it can take substantial time to realize the benefits and downsides of education decisions. Lastly, labor-market alignment requires institutions to access real-time data on job market trends, which can be challenging and expensive to obtain and analyze accurately.[6]

Guiding Principles

Recognize the differences between two- and four-year institutions

When designing accountability measures, it is important to distinguish between two- and four-year institutions, which serve distinct purposes, enroll different types of students, and balance unique challenges.

Account for program-level differences

Focus accountability measures and incentives at the program level to account for the differences across academic disciplines, understanding that certain fields of study lead to jobs with different goals and outcomes.

Enforce minimum standards of quality, rather than high-stakes measures

When establishing funding and reporting standards, prioritizing a baseline level of quality that programs and institutions must meet is more effective in guaranteeing sustained student success. Research on accountability measures in K-12 education shows that alternative high-stakes measures can place pressure on colleges to find loopholes or short-term solutions.[7]

Require reporting and disaggregation of data

Funding should be coupled with requirements to report important data and metrics to ensure that they are driving positive action and delivering equitable outcomes. Data should be disaggregated to account for factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Make information transparent and accessible for students and families

The ultimate goal of holding colleges and universities accountable is for degrees to lead more students to employment and economic success. Relevant information and data should be shared with students and families on publicly-accessible websites in user friendly formats so they can make fully informed decisions.

Recommendations

Policymakers

1

Reinvest in public higher education, with quality guardrails.

Over the past few decades, state funding for public two- and four-year institutions has declined,[8] resulting in students and families bearing a greater portion of the costs associated with attending college. States must reinvest in their higher education systems to offset tuition costs, and experiment with models that base funding not just on enrollment, but on student population needs, such as those of first-generation students, and on employment and economic outcomes. Additionally, funding should include mechanisms that reduce the costs for non-degree credentials, with guardrails in place that ensure these credentials lead to quality jobs, including through short-term Pell grants. States should also implement "free college" initiatives at two-year colleges, covering the expenses of tuition down to the last dollar.

EXAMPLE

Virginia's FastForward model funds certificates and credentials that lead to high-demand occupations by requiring students to only pay one-third of tuition costs upon registration. When a student completes training, the state covers an additional third. The final third is covered when a credential is awarded. The reported average wage gain from program completion is $11,626, increasing the taxpayer base in Virginia and leading more Virginians into higher-paying careers.[9]

2

Attach risk-sharing to federal student loans.

Institutions of higher education are currently not held financially liable if and when students default on their student loans. Consequently, students and the federal government are forced to deal with the consequences of such unmanageable debt. The government should introduce risk-sharing agreements, which place partial onus on postsecondary institutions to set graduates up for financial success. Any form of risk-sharing agreement should include financial bonuses tied to the number of Pell-eligible students enrolled at the institution to ensure that colleges continue to enroll low-income students. Both the Center for American Progress and the Brookings Institution have proposed models for what risk-sharing agreements could look like.

3 Introduce a competitive grant that incentivizes collaboration between education and industry.

The federal and state governments should run competitive grants that encourage greater partnership and collaboration between colleges and employers. For instance, the Experiential Learning for Emerging and Novel Technologies (ExLENT) grant administered by the National Science Foundation is a large competitive grant established to create experiential learning opportunities for students to become skilled in emerging science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers. The grant both requires that recipients engage in cross-sector collaboration and address barriers associated with engaging in educational and workforce programs, such as childcare and transportation.[10]

4 Establish data sharing agreements across agencies to enable sharing and reporting of program data.

Federal and state agencies collect detailed data on learners and workers, yet those data are often siloed within the agency that collects them. The government should establish data sharing agreements across agencies that allow data to be linked, with safeguards in place to protect individuals' privacy. By connecting data and reporting aggregated versions of the data, stakeholders can get a better picture of learner outcomes, helping them make policy decisions that will support student success. Students and families can use the data to make informed education and career decisions, while researchers leverage the data to explore the impact of education programs and practices. One longitudinal study used data from the state of Florida to show how this can be done. The study linked unemployment insurance data and secondary education records to reveal employment outcomes for disadvantaged youth, uncovering how learners' choices about field of study contribute to gaps in achievement and compensation later on in a student's career.[11]

5 Expand the College Scorecard and enhance its visibility for students and families.

The College Scorecard includes helpful information on student completion, costs, and earnings across fields of study. However, this data is underutilized by students and families. The Department of Education should focus on improving awareness, accessibility, and engagement with College Scorecard data. Furthermore, the Department should collect additional data to paint a more comprehensive picture of how successfully the institution graduates students into quality, good-paying careers. New metrics could include the economic mobility rate designed by Opportunity Insights,[12] outcomes data for students who leave without completing a credential, wage and loan repayment data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and quartile ranges on income to understand broader distribution of earnings outcomes.[13]

6 **Strengthen accreditation standards.**

Accreditation bodies play an important role in ensuring that postsecondary institutions meet certain standards, but they rarely hold colleges responsible for promoting quality student outcomes. Accreditors should set explicit standards for colleges around student success and economic outcomes, which directly impact their accreditation status.[14]

7 **Require that low-performing colleges create improvement plans.**

Policymakers should require colleges that produce poor student outcomes to first develop and implement improvement plans.[15] This would serve as an alternative to closing the institution, giving the college the opportunity to improve the quality of education. Additionally, it offers a chance for stakeholders such as accreditors, states, and the U.S. Department of Education to work with the institution in a supportive capacity and create transparency around what needs to be improved.

Higher Education Institutions

1

Invest in and evaluate career services.
Colleges should designate a single school unit to oversee career services across the institution, and set aside substantial funding to ensure that career services work for students. The department should ensure that career exposure and readiness activities are integrated across the institution and built into students' academic journey early on, enabling them to make choices that align with their professional goals and interests.[16] Leadership should implement a system for regularly assessing the efficacy of career services. This may include collecting feedback from students, employers, and alumni to evaluate the impact of career programs on students' success in securing meaningful employment.

2

Design compensation plans for faculty and staff that reward career-connected learning.
Colleges can develop incentives for faculty that include bonuses or monetary incentives for incorporating career-connected learning into their classrooms.

EXAMPLE
At Georgia State University, faculty are offered grants of up to $10,000 to design a new course or reimagine an existing course that integrate career-related activities as part of their College to Career initiative.[17]

3

Assign a team or individual to integrate data into decision-making workflows.
Colleges should create a data science leader or team tasked with making visible indicators of performance for each academic program. Institutions should develop a comprehensive metrics framework for measuring college departments and programs, considering various dimensions of opportunity and achievement, such as graduation rates, employment outcomes, and labor market trends. Colleges should invest in and integrate real-time labor market information (LMI) to help them make decisions about new and existing programs.[18] Additional recommendations for establishing data systems can be found in "Stakeholder Memo #4: Modernizing Data Systems for a Connected Education-Workforce Ecosystem."

EXAMPLE

Texas State Technical College (TSTC) developed a dashboard, known as "Program Compass," that displays performance indicators for each of its programs, operating under a high degree of transparency for students, faculty, and staff. The dashboard reports outcomes related to student completions, job placement rates, and earnings after graduation. It also presents data on the number of students applying and enrolling and revenue attributed to the program. This approach allows for greater accountability and transparency across the community around how programs advance opportunities for students.[19]

4 Track and report student success by collecting data on alumni.

Institutions of higher education should implement a comprehensive alumni tracking and reporting system to monitor and evaluate student success beyond graduation. By collecting and analyzing data on alumni outcomes, including employment status, career advancement, and earnings, institutions can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of their programs and the overall impact on student success. Students will also learn what to expect from their academic programs and gain access to alumni information that will allow them to make better decisions about their academic and career pursuits. This approach enhances accountability by demonstrating the long-term value and outcomes of the education provided.

Employers

1. **Provide financial support for high-performing programs.**
Employers often seek specific skill sets, particularly in emerging fields. To prepare workers with these skills, employers can fund and co-design specific programs with colleges and universities and finance facilities or infrastructure that aid instruction. Employers should commit to offering interviews to a majority of students who meet set criteria. A "guaranteed interview" program helps students identify clear paths to employment while building a direct talent pipeline for employers.

2. **Offer grants to students who enroll in aligned programs.**
Employers can provide scholarships, grants, or financial incentives to students to encourage them to enroll in high-quality programs that are aligned with industry needs.

Additional Resources

Higher Education Accountability

This book presents a background on American accountability measures and evaluates efforts that policymakers and institutions have adopted, with an eye on how these efforts can inform the future design of initiatives.

"Accountability in US Education: Applying Lessons from K-12 Experience to Higher Education," David Deming

This paper discusses how accountability measures in K-12 can inform the design and impact of similar efforts in higher education.

The Brookings Institution

The Brookings Institution publishes reports and policy briefs on accountability mechanisms and related issues in higher education, offering insights and actionable recommendations for policymakers.

InformEd States

InformEd States offers policy analysis, original research, and data that focuses on state higher education funding policies.

Endnotes

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