What’s AHEAD Poll # 2: Accountability and the Obama College Scorecard

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Recommended Citation

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Additional commentary is available at https://ahead-penn.org/whats-ahead/scorecard-commentary

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Keywords
college accountability, college leader perceptions, college scorecard

Comments
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In August 2013 the Obama administration announced plans for a "College Scorecard" that would rate the accessibility, affordability, and outcomes of individual higher education institutions. The White House intends for this new rating system to be used initially to provide information to students and their families and then used to inform the distribution of federal financial aid. Although the details have not yet been finalized, this initiative raises (once again) questions about the accountability of higher education, where accountability is generally understood to mean the demonstration of responsible actions to external constituents.

The results of our poll suggest that although “accountability” is a more common topic of conversation now than a year ago on many campuses, there is less discussion specifically about the Obama scorecard. Responding higher education leaders perceive accrediting agencies to be an important source of accountability demands, even though many believe that the measures used by these agencies do not sufficiently indicate institutional quality. Some leaders are optimistic that an accountability scorecard will meet the informational needs of various stakeholders, especially the federal government. But many leaders believe that a scorecard will have no impact or even negative consequences. Leaders worry that selected indicators will not capture institutional diversity and mission or measure important outcomes.

There is more talk about accountability now than a year ago.

Three-fourths (74%) of responding higher education leaders report more discussion on campus about accountability now than a year ago. Just 2% report less discussion.
Higher education leaders perceive accrediting agencies and other regulatory agencies to be the most influential source of accountability demands.

The most influential sources of accountability demands, in the order ranked by responding higher education leaders, are: accrediting and other regulatory agencies, the federal government, students and parents, and state and local governments. Alumni and donors, the media, and employers and the workforce are perceived to be less influential. Responses contributed for the “other” category include board of trustees, system office, faculty and internal demands, creditors, and religious sponsors.

Many higher education leaders disagree that accrediting agencies have sufficient indicators of institutional quality.

Only 34% of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that the measures of higher education performance that are collected by accrediting agencies sufficiently indicate the quality of their institutions.
There is limited attention to the Obama scorecard on many campuses.

Only 9% of respondents reported that their campuses are talking about the Obama scorecard a great deal. About half (46%) report either not knowing of these discussions or that there is no discussion on their campus.

Higher education leaders have several concerns about an accountability scorecard.

When asked for their top concern about a potential scorecard, respondents were divided. The most commonly reported concerns pertain to recognition of institutional diversity, measurement of student outcomes, and unintended consequences of selected measures.
Respondents offered comments that shed additional insight into the concerns some have about a potential scorecard. Articulating the perceived challenges associated with accounting for institutional diversity and the suitability of available measures, one respondent stated:

*Value in higher education is a very nuanced activity. You can receive high value at a low-cost community college if your goal is to learn a trade or prepare to transfer to a university or state college. Or, you can receive high value from a high-cost, highly-selective school if that is indeed your goal. The scorecard doesn’t factor in these aspirational aspects of our students, nor does it take into account regional economic factors that may influence employability scores. The socio-economics of education are not fully accounted for in these measures.*

**Many higher education leaders believe that a scorecard will have a limited or negative impact.**

Half of responding higher education leaders report that a scorecard will have no effect, an unknown effect, or largely be ignored. About a third believe that there will be negative or harmful implications. Just a fifth (18%) believe that there could be positive or useful implications.

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A small number of respondents believe that a scorecard may have value because it creates a framework that “applies to all institutions, irrespective of the sector in which they are classified.” Nonetheless, more leaders report skepticism of a “one-size-fits-all approach,” with one leader explaining:

The scorecard effort is well intentioned and perhaps even laudable but I do not believe it will have the desired impact because it is a blunt instrument.

Higher education leaders perceive that the information provided by a scorecard will best meet the information needs of the federal government.

Of potential audiences, higher education leaders perceive that some version of the Obama scorecard may be most effective for providing information to the federal government, as well as students and parents. One respondent suggested the potential value of a scorecard to these groups, stating:

Higher education needs to become more accountable for graduating students. A scorecard will also rein in for-profit institutions that create financial burdens for first-generation and low-income students.

Leaders indicating “other” include those reporting some version of: “This institution does not believe [a scorecard] to be an effective mechanism for any group.” One respondent articulated the skepticism of many respondents:

Concerns exist about how to deal with incoming student quality and how to create a measure that is useful for all types of institutions. All here agree that we need to acknowledge and hold accountable those institutions who have poor graduation rates, default rates, performance, etc., but a uniform set of measures that fails to appropriately address the diversity of institutional type/mission/program could backfire and risks further confusing an already overwhelmed area of inquiry. The apparent desire of the White House to proceed in the face of a fair bit of questioning by higher education advocacy groups begs the question (for me personally, not necessarily institutionally) about the intended outcomes.
About This Poll

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Suggested citation


About AHEAD

The Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) is dedicated to promoting the public purposes of higher education in fostering open, equitable, and democratic societies. Located within the Graduate School of Education of the University of Pennsylvania, AHEAD applies what is known from our research and others to improve institutional practice and public policy through technical assistance and professional development activities. For more information see: www.ahead-penn.org