WASHINGTON — An Education Department committee last week further honed its recommendations for how to overhaul the way the government measures the success of community colleges.

Though there was general agreement among the panel's members on crafting completion measures that, for example, count successful transfers to four-year institutions as well as those who earn associate degrees, there was strong disagreement about whether the government should require community colleges to report their students’ employment outcomes.

This discussion was influenced heavily by the Education Department’s recently released “gainful employment” regulations, which will hold many programs at for-profit colleges and certificate and vocational programs at nonprofit institutions to a new federal standard on student debt and employability.

The Committee on Measures of Student Success, a 15-member group consisting of college officials and policy experts, is charged with helping two-year colleges comply with a new federal requirement that degree-granting institutions report on their completion or graduation rates. The reporting requirement was included in the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act, which also called for the creation of this advisory committee.

Many educators and policy makers acknowledge that traditional measures of completion and graduation do not accurately reflect the work done by many community colleges, given the constant flow of students into and out of them. The committee was also charged with recommending “additional or alternative measures of student success that are comparable alternatives to the completion or graduation rates of entering degree-seeking full-time undergraduate students,” such as measures of student learning and employment.

The committee met for the first time last October and then again in February. Thursday and Friday marked its third meeting. To work toward its initial charge, the committee considered Thursday a set of rough recommendations for how to create a “more ideal reporting framework” for determining “progression and completion measures” at community colleges.

The subcommittee that produced these rough recommendations — led by Patrick Perry, vice chancellor of the California Community Colleges system — suggested using the existing graduation rate survey of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System as “a vehicle for expanded and reframed outcomes reporting.”

For example, the subcommittee suggests that the existing survey include part-time, degree-seeking cohorts of students who attempted six or more credits in their first fall term. It also recommended delineating a new tracking period for this part-time cohort. Currently, 200 percent of normal time (for instance, four years for a two-year degree, eight years for a four-year degree) is used for full-time students. The panel suggested 200 percent normal time be recalculated for someone earning just six credits a semester, which would equate to completion of 20 terms, or 10 years. There was much debate as to whether this time period was too lengthy for consideration.

Perry's subcommittee also suggested strengthening “the reporting of transfer-out students for institutions that have transfer as part of their mission” by, among other ideas, creating standard definitions of what is considered “substantial preparation” for transfer to another institution and “of what constitutes a transfer student for reporting purposes.”
Ultimately, the subcommittee suggested creating “independent and discrete reporting of outcomes for awards and transfers.” The current method of government reporting favors degree outcome over transfer outcome. To many community colleges, however, the two are of equal value. By having these outcomes reported separately, the subcommittee argued, “true graduation and transfer rates can be created and disclosed.”

In addition to the separate reporting measures for graduation and transfer outcome — which, if combined, may include some outcomes duplication for those who both graduate and transfer — the subcommittee suggested creating a “single count/rate of students that earn any of the high-order outcomes of degree/certificate/transfer-prepared/transfer to a four-year institution within or in the first term immediately following the tracking period.” The suggested name for this new outcomes measure is “student progress and achievement rate.” This would be seen as the ultimate measure of community college success.

**Alternative Measures**

On Friday, the committee worked toward its secondary charge and considered a broad set of recommendations on “alternative measures” of success at community colleges. The suggestions put forth by one subcommittee — led by Kevin Carey, policy director at Education Sector — proved more contentious among the group as a whole than did those of the other subcommittee.

For instance, the subcommittee suggested that the federal government call “for institutions to disclose or report results of student learning measures publicly” but that it “should not prescribe a one-size-fits-all measure of student learning.” Still, institutions would be primarily responsible “for determining their programs’ learning outcomes and the appropriate measures of student learning for their students based on their missions.” So, in practice, institutions might submit their Community College Learning Assessment data, for example, to the government to meet such a request and, in essence, the government would “encourage institutions to voluntarily collect, disclose and report through existing or new data collection vehicles results of measures of student learning.”

Committee members had varying responses to this possible mandate. Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, deputy director of MDRC, said she worried there were just not enough common or comparable methods of measuring student learning outcomes to warrant a requirement for submission of such data. Wayne Burton, president of North Shore Community College, concurred, arguing that it should fall to other entities — such as states and accreditors — to collect the outcomes data.

By contrast, Thomas Bailey, chair of the committee and professor of economics and education at Columbia University, argued that his committee needs to “respond to the national discussion of student learning outcomes” and that it “shouldn’t shy away from it because it’s contentious.”

The other contentious suggestion of Carey’s subcommittee was that community colleges demonstrate how well they prepare their “students for employment after completion of their programs for consumer information and accountability purposes.” Committee members, however, admitted that “valid, reliable and comparable data related to students’ employment outcomes are difficult” to collect. Some of the possible metrics proposed included “the number of students who earned career/technical education degrees and certificates and were subsequently employed,” “wage growth of graduates” and “licensure exam pass rates.” (The committee heard a presentation Thursday from an Education Department official who noted that the agency would be producing average-salary data for for-profit and vocational certificate programs in forthcoming years as part of the new gainful employment regulations; some panel members seemed to view as a possible template.)

There was a stark divide among committee members as to whether the government should merely suggest or require community colleges to provide these types of reporting metrics. Harold Levy, former New York City Schools chancellor, expressed the view that “the more data the better” and that if these reporting requirements are too burdensome, “so be it” — the data would be important for consumer protection.

Burton spoke out vehemently against such a requirement, arguing that community colleges should not be held accountable for what their students don’t do in the employment world after graduation. Linda Thor, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District, was more compromising, saying she would be fine with reporting employment data that were already available from other sources, including pass rate statistics from exams like those for nursing licensure.

Most of Thursday and Friday’s discussion of these issues represented a push and pull between policy researchers, who want more complete data on community colleges, and institutional officials, who worry that any new government mandate of them, reporting-wise, would be too burdensome. Still, Perry summed up the opinions of many on the committee by saying that if community colleges are displeased with the current method the government uses to judge their success, they should expect to encounter “more burdensome” requirements to “tell their story properly.”
Education Department officials noted that the committee had, by discussing and revising these two subcommittee reports, essentially produced a preliminary set of recommendations at last week’s meeting. A formal draft of these recommendations is to be written over the summer, and department officials say the committee may vote on a final draft at its September meeting, if there are no further objections or revisions to be made. Still, the committee has until April 2012 to deliver its final report to Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

— David Moltz

© Copyright 2011 Inside Higher Ed