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Accountability Framework for 2-Year Colleges Progresses in Pilot Test

By Jennifer Gonzalez

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Community colleges are generally pleased with an early version of the first national accountability system for them, but collecting reliable work-force data continues to be a struggle for many institutions, officials from the American Association of Community Colleges said Monday at the group’s annual convention here.

In January, 72 colleges began pilot-testing the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, including proposed measures of college readiness, student progress and completion, and job preparation and employment. The association, along with its partners, the Association of Community College Trustees and the College Board, will use the test results to determine how feasible and useful the measures are for community-college accountability and benchmarking purposes.

"We've been unable to tell our story in a meaningful way," said Joe D. May, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System. "We are great at what we do, but we don't have data to tell that story."

Community colleges have been criticized because of their low graduation and transfer rates, and, in turn, they have criticized those commonly used measures of quality. For example, the federal graduation rate does not count what happens to part-time students. Two-year college officials have argued that broader measures are needed to gauge community colleges' success.

At the same time, they've said that developing meaningful sectorwide performance standards would be difficult because students come to their colleges for so many different reasons, including to take a single class, to fulfill specific job-training programs, or to complete an associate degree.

During his remarks at the opening session on Saturday, Walter G. Bumphus, the association's president, praised the concept of the
accountability system. He said the association was building the framework "because we have so often suffered through wrongheaded accountability efforts."

The measures for work-force-development programs have proved to be the greatest challenge for community colleges. The purpose behind collecting such data is to get a better grasp of the outcomes for students participating in those programs.

Specifically, community colleges are being asked to collect completion data (including the number of credits students accumulate along the way) and statistics on whether students get a wage gain or receive a license.

Work-force-development programs at two-year colleges have been more crucial as many people laid off during the recession still struggle to find jobs. With more students entering those types of programs, the association deemed it important to track their outcomes.

Gathering the data is difficult. The way community colleges classify what they call noncredit courses varies. For example, many community colleges offer credit-based certificate programs to become an emergency medical technician, but other institutions offer the same program in a noncredit format.

Mr. May said current accountability systems don't measure noncredit-program outcomes even though those types of programs are part of the mission at most community colleges. "Because they are not measured, policy makers discount their value, and that's a real problem," he said.

The testing is expected to end in May when data and extensive feedback will be submitted by the participating colleges. The community-college association plans to analyze and report on the colleges' outcomes data—but it also plans to use the feedback to modify the framework by late summer. The framework should be available to all community colleges next year.

Creating Paths for Adults

Another session at the conference dealt with a dismal statistic: Only 3 percent of students who start college in adult basic-education classes earn a credential. A new project plans to change that.

Eleven states will receive money to design programs that help more students make the transition to credit-bearing postsecondary programs. Of those states, between four and six will be selected to carry out the pilot program at community colleges.
Jobs for the Future will lead the project, ABE to Credentials, along with three partners: the National Council for Workforce Education, the National College Transition Network, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

The project is financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Other supporters are expected to be announced next month, along with the names of 11 states that will receive money. Presenters announced Monday that Louisiana will be a recipient.

"Too often now, the ABE programs are disconnected from college programs," said Nan Poppe, executive director of Completion by Design, a college-completion project spearheaded by the Gates foundation.

It will be hard for the nation to meet the completion agenda set out by the Obama administration without more adults earning credentials. Right now, over 26 million adults lack a high-school degree, but only a fraction of that population—just over 2.5 million adults—enroll in adult basic-education programs. Many of the students who do enroll in credit-bearing college programs leave after one or two semesters because of personal or family circumstances.

ABE to Credentials draws on strategies used by Washington State to scale up its Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training model, or I-Best, which integrates credit-bearing work-force training into English-as-a-second-language and basic-education programs.

Studies of I-Best indicate that the accelerated, integrated instructional model has had positive results with lower-skilled learners, and that model will be one that states can imitate. Compared with adult basic-education students in other work-force programs, I-Best students were three times more likely to earn college credit and nine times more likely to earn a credential.