

Monday

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Will 'Voluntary' Accountability Work?

As the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education wrapped up [its fourth meeting](#) last week, higher education's representatives on the panel and college officials who have followed its work closely flashed a few more smiles than they had at past meetings. That's largely because Friday's session of the commission featured significant praise from panel members for a draft proposal by two state-college associations to create a voluntary system of accountability, in which the institutions would collect and make public a broad range of information about their performance.

The college officials argued, and several members of the panel seemed to agree, that [the proposal](#) would go a long way toward satisfying the pressure that has clearly emanated from the commission and its chairman, Charles Miller, for much more transparency and rigor in how colleges prove to the public that they are educating their students and otherwise fulfilling their obligations. And that sense seemed to bring a feeling of relief to the college officials who have dreaded the possible creation of a federal accountability system of some sort.

But college officials shouldn't necessarily exhale yet. The commission also heard during the meeting from witnesses who warned the panel's members that a voluntary system is unlikely to do the trick. And Miller, the chairman, and other panel members signaled, as [they have along the way](#), that such a system will suffice only if it involves all institutions and allows for at least some comparability among different types of institutions.

Compared to previous meetings, the two-day session in Indianapolis left many of those who've watched the commission's work with a sense of progress. Thursday, the panel reached tentative consensus on a set of overarching goals for its work. And Friday, Peter McPherson, three months into his presidency of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, [laid out a plan](#)

in which his group and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities would explore the creation of a "voluntary system of accountability and related issues."

McPherson said he and other officials in the two groups are "strongly against a federally mandated system." But he said the plan, which he emphasized was in the early stages, acknowledged the intensifying pressure from the commission and state legislatures for better measures of institutional and student performance.

"We should consider a voluntary system, by type or mission of colleges and universities, based on outcomes. There should be a serious discussion on how to do this within the higher education community and not just in the public policy/political community," McPherson said in the discussion paper. "A successful voluntary system would likely contain a small bundle of concepts. It probably would allow for measurement through both student surveys and measures of some key competencies."

McPherson's statement won kudos from several members of the commission, including Miller, who has been an outspoken advocate for greater accountability for higher education, and who said as recently as Thursday evening that he planned to push for significantly better assessment by colleges of how they improve their students' learning and significantly more reporting by colleges to improve taxpayers' understanding of what they're getting in exchange for the significant public investment in higher education.

"I commend you for taking leadership just three months into the job," Miller told McPherson Friday, though he did not weigh in on the merits of the groups' proposal.

Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, who moderated the panel on accountability during which McPherson spoke, noted that college officials have done a lot more talking than acting over the years about efforts to be more accountable to the public. "What would make us believe this one is serious and is going to go forward?" he asked McPherson.

McPherson said he hoped his seriousness was reflected in the fact that he had taken this issue on just three months into his time at NASULGC, and implied that the move was a potentially risky one for him and for his association. "It is true that some people may think we're leading with our chin," he said. But "I'm very serious as the leader of NASULGC about getting this issue within the academy."

Robert M. Zemsky, a University of Pennsylvania professor of education who often defends colleges during the panel's discussions, but never in a knee-jerk way, said that NASULGC might be leading with its chin — but could also be seen by skeptics as engaging in a "grand filibuster." He urged McPherson to try to move quickly and forcefully to turn the tentative proposal into something more solid, noting that the commission's report was due in August. "We're going to have an answer in August; when are you going to have an answer?" Zemsky asked.

"The draft you circulated changed the discussion in all sorts of ways," Zemsky told McPherson. The next step, he said, would be to make clear in as public a way as possible that "this isn't an issue of whether or not but how and when," adding: "That would help us, that we could have some faith that this train was leaving the station." James Hunt, the former North Carolina governor, chimed in: "We've got to change, and I want to indicate to you how urgent I think this is."

McPherson promised to push as hard as he could, but warned that there were limits on how fast he could push his members and others in higher education: "I don't think you can have decision on a voluntary process in just a few months."

David Ward, the commission member who, as president of the American Council on Education, might be most in the hot seat in terms of balancing the needs of higher education and the panel's efforts to reform the industry, said he, like other college leaders, were following "behind [McPherson's] broad shoulders on this" accountability plan. Time is of the essence, he acknowledged, in having higher education itself frame a response — and speediness is not typically a strength of American college leaders.

"Both of us have a responsibility to talk about a different metabolism of discussion," Ward said. "We have to try to move faster, though it's fraught with problems."

Two people who testified alongside McPherson urged the commission not to depend on college leaders themselves to get the job done adequately. Anne Neal, president of the [American Council of Trustees and Alumni](#), and Kevin Carey, research and policy manager at [Education Sector](#), a new education think tank, both argued that colleges had a less-than-stellar track record in sharing information with the public.

"These are rational, self-interested institutions, and we cannot expect them to release information that puts them in a less than flattering light," said Carey. He cited the fight in the late 1980s in which colleges and universities had to be arm-twisted, by the Student-Athlete Right to Know Act enacted by Congress, into making public the graduation rates of their students. "The higher education system is slow to embrace this kind of reporting, because the right incentives aren't in place to make people seek them out," said Carey, who said that "it's instructive to note that nobody is suggesting now that those requirements be rolled back."

Carey, who compared the accountability system the commission might compel to the information public companies must reveal at the end of each quarter, said that the "commission is in a position to catalyze a new era of greatly expanded higher education information" about how well colleges are educating their students and how effectively and efficiently they are doing so. "That kind of public information and exposure" can help unleash a "dynamic and competitive market" in which colleges "voluntarily change their policies" to avoid looking bad among their peers.

Historically, and recently, the strongest opposition to the idea of additional public reporting and efforts to find uniform ways of comparing the performance of colleges has come from private institutions, and David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, said the NASULGC proposal would undoubtedly turn up the pressure on his members to get with the accountability program. But he cautiously welcomed the public universities' plan, too, he said.

"It is consistent with their history, and we will look at it with great interest," Warren said at the commission's Indianapolis meeting. "We will have some greater pressure because of it, but it will also provide some demonstration" for the rest of the higher education community, and help us figure out "what are the appropriate accountability data" for different sorts of institutions.

George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges, said he too was “encouraged to see a segment like NASULGC” step out in front. “Community colleges are going to be very open to seeing other measures of accountability that will work for our institutions.”

Most of the rest of Friday’s meeting of the commission focused on the sorts of information that might be released as part of the accountability system, be it voluntary or compelled in some way.

Jay Pfeiffer, assistant deputy commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, discussed [the data reporting system](#) that his state has developed for tracking students throughout their educational careers and into the workplace, which allows for significantly improved, publicly available data about the educational success of students and institutions alike.

Florida’s system is possible because it tracks individual students using a so-called “unit records” process, which many members of the federal commission have advocated at the national level, despite significant opposition from Congressional Republicans and some college officials who cite privacy concerns.

George D. Kuh, an education professor at Indiana University who oversees the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#), and Roger Benjamin and Steve Klein of the Council for Aid to Education, which sponsors the [Collegiate Learning Assessment](#), a test some commission leaders favor as a potential way of measuring how effectively colleges have taught their students, described how colleges have rushed to embrace their methods of measuring their performance.

Arthur J. Rothkopf, a commission member who was president of Lafayette College and is now a top official with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said the fact that many colleges use the student engagement survey and are experimenting with the CLA shows that they care deeply about student learning and bettering themselves, “without anyone telling them they need to do it.” But he and others noted that relatively few institutions publish their scores on the student engagement survey (though more two-year colleges report their scores on the companion [Community College Survey of Student Engagement](#)), partly out of fear of “being hammered” by local reporters or others for poor scores.

“But if you don’t report results,” Klein of the Council for Aid to Education said about the various measures of performance, “you’re not going to have an impact.”

The same could be said, many of the participants in Friday’s discussion suggested, for the entire fledgling higher education accountability effort as it moves forward.

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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