Introduction to Testimony on the Topic of Accountability to the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Peter T. Ewell

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)

April 7, 2006

In introducing testimony on the topic of accountability, I would like to make a few points in three areas—a) the need for credible national (and state) benchmarks of collegiate learning; b) institutional responsibility for gathering, acting on, and publicly reporting evidence of student learning and; c) the technical progress we have made in gathering this kind of evidence.

It is critical for the Commission to be mindful in these deliberations of what "accountability" should ultimately be for. For many years in higher education, the term was applied simply to describe regulatory compliance: colleges and universities needed to spend money in the ways those appropriating it intended, and to abide by the law. During the 1980s, in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, accountability for collegiate results began to emerge as important for colleges and universities. And in the two decades since, we have made some—but not nearly enough—progress on that front. But my engagement with *Measuring Up*—the fifty-state "report card" for higher education prepared by Pat Callan's Center for Public Policy in Higher Education—and our work at NCHEMS with many states on developing credible "public agendas" for higher education, impels me to begin by emphasizing a more collective notion of accountability for performance: what we as a *nation* need to hold ourselves accountable for with respect to collegiate learning.

As this Commission has heard many times, there are reasons to be worried here. We are already being surpassed by half a dozen countries in the proportion of our young adults who have earned a college-level credential. And what little we know about student progress through the "educational pipeline" suggests performance shortfalls at every stage: completing high school, entering college, and earning a degree. Furthermore, the data we have from international assessments suggests only middling levels of performance with respect to learning for the students who do earn a credential. The much- publicized recent results of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), meanwhile, indicate essentially no progress in literacy over a decade as well as a surprisingly high proportion (over a third) of college graduates who are unable to successfully complete all but the simplest literacy tasks. When the Pew Charitable Trusts underwrote a parallel administration of the NAAL to a national sample of college students, these students at least performed somewhat better than their non-college counterparts. But more than 20% of today's currently enrolled four-year college students and more than 30% of currently enrolled two-year college students failed to perform at more than the "basic proficiency" level in the quantitative domain. This body of evidence suggests about the current level of "educational capital" that the nation has to work with to compete in a global economy is increasingly deficient in both quantity and quality. But the simple fact remains that we do not at the moment *know* anything systematic and comparable about either the level of collegiate learning in the nation and its constituent states or, for that matter, about national rates of collegiate attainment.

This is a situation that we can and should remedy. Two years ago Peg Miller's Pew-supported five-state demonstration project on student learning established the feasibility of creating just such a set of measures at the state level using multiple methods and data sources—some of which will be described more fully later in this session. But this was only a one-time demonstration with limited funds, using available data and ready-to-hand assessment technology. To meet the demonstrable demand for national and state-level indicators of collegiate learning—equivalent in scope to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at the collegiate level—we need a more systematic investment. One step might be to establish a federal matching fund for states willing to continue the experiment started by the Pew Project. Another, longer term, step might be to invest in extending the "ceiling" of the NAAL to embrace more advanced internationally-competitive skills areas and to expand its sample size sufficiently to obtain state-level results. Furthermore, both of these steps to benchmark learning need to be reinforced by better data on the "educational pipeline" that might enable us identify and remedy current gaps in student progression. A national longitudinal student tracking capability involving both the federal government and the states is thus a critical adjunct to assessing learning.

Graduating more citizens with both a college credential *and* appropriate collegiate abilities should be the collective goal of any new accountability system for higher education. And it is a goal that all our institutions ought to be contributing to. But it is important to recognize that they will *not* all be doing so in the same way. Our colleges and universities differ deliberately on many dimensions with respect to mission, programmatic emphasis, and in the kinds of students they serve. These differences will, in turn, affect the particular levels and kinds of contribution to our collective goal that each is able to make. Without question, all of them ought to be held accountable for the learning they occasion. But I have watched (and hopefully spurred) the assessment of student learning at hundreds of colleges and universities for almost 25 years now, and I think I have learned a few things about what will and won't work. Let me mention three of them.

First, there is no single "silver bullet" assessment solution that fits all colleges and universities. Multiple sources of evidence of student learning need to be tapped and different modes of collecting it suited to particular missions and student clienteles must be employed. Second, institutions themselves need to be part of the solution. We could without question at this point build a one-size-fits-all national accountability system for student learning, and institutions could be compelled to comply with it. But faculty and staff would not change what they do and, as a consequence, student progression and the quality of student learning would not change either. We need instead to create conditions that engage institutions proactively in these efforts because they find it beneficial to do so and because their leaders see the ultimate goal as a cause that is worth pursuing. Which leads to my third major lesson: there are plenty of examples out there of colleges and universities that have done something important in assessment and student success, but they are rarely recognized or rewarded for it. Institutional pecking orders are firmly established around other incentive systems about which you have been fully briefed. Unlike selectivity and reputation, there are few institutions that aspire to be “the best” in these arenas. There are no rewards for it and punishments will not work.

So what to do? First, despite its many flaws as a national approach to quality assurance more generally, regional accreditation has in my view made a lot of progress in focusing institutional attention on these issues over the last decade. Most accreditors have significantly revamped their review approaches to place more emphasis on evidence of student learning. A far greater proportion of colleges and universities are seriously engaged in generating and interpreting assessment evidence now than was the case five years ago—and they are now beginning to include “name brand” institutions. This increased level of engagement is due in no small measure to accreditation. But accreditation is extraordinarily undercapitalized to do this job at the moment. Peer review teams lack the technical training needed to either judge institutional assessment efforts or to help institutions improve them. If the federal government is going to depend upon accreditors to perform the gatekeeping function effectively with respect to student learning, it may have to make some significant investments in capacity.

One approach here might be a public-private partnership or a FIPSE-like federal grant program to help build capacity. The clear gains that were made in transforming accreditation standards and review processes in several regions over the last decade were a direct result of foundation investments beyond their modest membership dues. But further investment should come at a price—one that I believe both accreditors and the majority of institutions are at this point willing to accept. First, while continuing to allow (and even encourage) institutions to use multiple assessment methods tailored to their own missions and clienteles, accreditors should ask institutions to benchmark their assessment results against external standards. There are many ways to do this in addition to the use of standardized national assessments including establishing consortia comprising similar institutions, using external assessors drawn from employers and community leaders, and using external examiners. But all colleges and universities ought to be able to demonstrate to prospective students and stakeholders that the levels of achievement typical of their graduates are at or above a visible standard.

Second, accreditors should require that the results of assessment—together with other evidence of institutional effectiveness such as program completion—be readily available to the public and the institution’s stakeholders. Again, there are many ways to do this including the vehicle of a common “consumer guide” template that you are considering. At minimum, prospective students should be able to determine from such a source a) the chances that someone *like themselves* (defined in terms of demographic and educational background) will earn a degree in a reasonable period of time and, b) the value of the resulting credential in terms of both defined abilities and associated job prospects. We need both of these measures because it is all too easy for institutions to ensure "quality" in their learning outcomes simply by ensuring that entering students are smart enough to succeed no matter what they experience.

Finally, I want to point out that we are getting steadily better at the technical side of assessing high levels of learning meaningfully, and we are probably on the verge of some very big breakthroughs indeed. We will have two presentations later that will describe some particularly promising approaches—the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). But there are other good examples out there. Perhaps more importantly, none of our first-line instruments have evolved to the point that we should use just one. The Pew-funded state-level benchmarking project I mentioned earlier used many sources of evidence—NAAL results for the nation's college graduates, indirect measures of readiness for advanced practice using the many licensure and graduate school admissions tests that graduating students already take, and results of a special administration of the CLA and ACT's Work Keys assessment to samples of college students. It was only through a *combination* of such measures, we felt, that an appropriate "profile of learning" could be constructed responsibly for a given polity. The same will be true for meaningful institutional assessment.

The CLA and the NSSE are especially good vehicles for communicating how assessment technology has evolved in the last decade, but they are not alone. The CLA is in my view the best current example of an "authentic" performance-based approach, administered using steadily-improving test delivery technology, with results analyzed creatively through a "value-added" methodology to take into account differences in entering student ability. But as Roger Benjamin and Steve Klein will be the first to admit, it could and will be made better, and it will undoubtedly stimulate others to follow. NSSE, meanwhile, is as good as it gets at the moment as a tool for examining institutional and student behaviors related to learning—practices that point directly to things that faculty and institutional leaders can *do* something about. Like CLA, it is increasingly harnessing Web-based administration technology (the use of which considerably increases both efficiency and accuracy) and it is now the center of a family of instruments including surveys administered to faculty to provoke useful conversations about differences in student and faculty perceptions and expectations, and to community college students. It has also been proven effective in identifying campus practices and cultures that enable *all* students to progress and learn. But NSSE too is being continuously improved and its features and methods will undoubtedly stimulate similar efforts elsewhere. The key point for the Commission, I think, is to focus less on instruments and more on the uses to which they are put.

Tools like these are powerful implements for both internal improvement and to demonstrate appropriate accountability, *if* institutional leaders will let them be. And I conclude with this point because as far back as I can remember in assessment we have always had more information on student success and student outcomes than we have had the institutional or political will to use. This remains true today, despite the impressive advances in both assessment and longitudinal student tracking technology that we have made. We desperately need institutional leaders who are willing to make accountability for student success and student learning a core responsibility of their offices. Taking on this responsibility is something I hope Peter McPherson will talk to you about this afternoon, at least on behalf of NSLGC. Finding ways to raise this matter to at least the level of presidential attention now commanded by fundraising or football would be a considerable step forward. Echoing Derek Bok in a recent Op. Ed. in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Boards may have a role to play here. I hope the Commission can as well.