

## Engaging the Public Policy Agenda: A Conference on Accountability and Financial Support of Public Higher Education

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### Abstract

An institute of higher education charged with the mission of teaching, research, and service (increasingly referred to as outreach and engagement), such as the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, must explore mechanisms for integrating these three broad responsibilities. At the same time, such an institute must initiate specific activities to invigorate and make operational the notion of engagement, which is arguably the least understood and least employed of the three missions. This article describes one such activity of engagement by the Institute of Higher Education: the development and implementation of the conference, "Accountability and Financial Support of Public Higher Education." This forum brought together representatives of the higher education community and some of its sponsoring constituencies in order to examine issues and advance the dialogue surrounding the assessment and funding of state-supported higher education.

Last autumn, a colleague at New College, the University of Oxford, and a keen observer and scholar of higher education, noted in an exchange of correspondence that "I should not be too worried about the apparent chaos: it is reminiscent of the University of Oxford, we appear, and indeed are inefficient, but (I hope) we are effective" (*Palfreyman 2000*). He was referring to the recently completed 2000 American presidential election, but also, in anecdotal fashion, to the widely held notion that an Oxford education, with its individual tutorials and all the trappings of what has become part of the mystique of the oldest of English-speaking universities, results in what is recognized as a substantial education; or what we generally have come to understand as "a quality education," without ever truly defining that phrase. Certainly, the public's and the academy's general understanding includes nuanced romantic anecdotes and imagery (whether of Oxford or good ol' State U.), along with the scholar's focused research and connotations of what "quality" entails. The definition of quality, however, has taken on an ever expanding and important fiscal component. While

steadily escalating college costs have been on the consumer's agenda for years, recent times have seen the call for efficiency, accountability, and economy manifested, with considerable urgency, in the rhetoric of politicians and in the policies of governmental funding agencies (*National Commission of the Cost of Higher Education 1998; Zumeta 2000*). The rub has come when the representatives of higher education have engaged in debate, and sometimes argument, with the public's elected representatives as to what constitutes reasonable accountability and efficiency, and at what cost, while simultaneously pursuing an acceptable, albeit elusive, definition of quality.

The essence of the matter has been captured succinctly by F. King Alexander:

During the last decade dramatic changes have emerged in the way governments interact with colleges and universities. Governmental authorities are no longer as receptive to the traditional self-regulatory processes that have dominated university development for centuries. A new economic motivation is driving states to redefine relationships by pressuring institutions to become more accountable, more efficient, and more productive in the use of publicly generated resources. Earlier attempts by states to measure institutional efficiency and performance have generally been met with passive resistance or benign neglect in academic circles. Although this trend still prevails, an increasing number of educational leaders are now exhibiting an awareness that the status quo is no longer a viable option for higher education. (*Alexander 2000, 1*)

With this understanding of a vitally important public policy issue confronting higher education, faculty in the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education offered a forum for the discussion of the elements apparent in this policy debate. As stated in the pages of this journal by the institute's former director, Professor Ronald Simpson, "One of the major missions of the Institute is to help further integrate the concept of public service, outreach, and what we are now calling 'engagement' into the fabric and culture of the contemporary American university" (*Simpson 2000, 10*). This concept of integrated mission further fueled the desire to create a public forum to advance the finer points of the dialogue about what constituted reasonable accountability for higher education as increasingly demanded by the various elements of its financial sponsors. Or, in the words of the forum's letter of invitation, "The purpose of the

gathering will be to see how the call for accountability in public higher education by citizens and state funding agencies can be balanced against higher education's need for academic autonomy and freedom from unwarranted political interference" (Miller 2000a).

One institute faculty member applied his experience and perceptions to make particularly significant contributions to the forum by helping determine not only its structure and content, but its participants. The conference can credit much of its form and content to the efforts of the first holder of the Philip H. Alston, Jr. Chair and distinguished professor of higher education in the Institute of Higher Education, the Honorable Zell Miller, former governor of Georgia.\*

Professor Miller had begun his career, prior to elected public service, as a history professor. Having seen the debate from the vantage point of an elected official calling for public accountability, as well as from that of a college teacher sensitive to unwarranted external intrusions upon the academic process, Professor

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Miller brought an outlook particularly conducive to an evenhanded review of the myriad dimensions to the policy questions under consideration. (Those involved in the planning of what became an intensive two-day conference always felt that Senator Miller strove for balance between the two perspectives. Indeed, it became a stated objective of the forum's planners to include as many individuals as possible who had experienced the accountability debate as part

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\*Professor Miller, having completed his second term as governor of the state of Georgia in January 1999, had joined the Institute's faculty in July of that year. In October 2000, Georgia's governor, the Honorable Roy Barnes, upon the untimely death of United States Senator Paul Coverdell, appointed Professor Miller to fill the remainder of Senator Coverdell's term until a special election could be held. These circumstances necessitated Miller's resignation from the university's faculty. Subsequently, in November 2000, Professor Miller was elected to complete the remaining portion of Senator Coverdell's term. Senator Miller now serves in the United States Senate as the junior senator from Georgia.

of the higher education environment, either prior or subsequent to holding elected office.)

### Representation of Constituencies

The forum's planners soon realized that participation in the conference, and resultant meaningful public discussion of its topics, would occur only if the affected communities were truly engaged in a gathering legitimized by the presence of their representatives. To that end, the institute's faculty sought to include constituencies beyond higher education together with those from regulatory boards and elected bodies responsible for directly influencing policy related to assessment and funding. Assisting in the pursuit of these objectives were the executive leaders of two organizations important in the development, study, and leadership of regional and national higher education policy: President Mark Musick of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and Executive Director James Rogers of the Commission on Colleges (COC) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Both men agreed to work with Professor Miller and other institute faculty in designing the forum and in attracting individuals important to a discussion of the issues.

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Those who gathered on the University of Georgia campus in late spring 2000 included elected officials, academic administrators, faculty, graduate students, and agency representatives from the public and independent sectors. For the most part, they came from the southeast and east, representing the territorial jurisdictions of the Southern Regional Education Board and the Commission on Colleges. Over the course of slightly more than twenty-four hours, from May 31 to June 1, the participants heard, in plenary session, the formal remarks of a former governor, who was at the time a college professor; two sitting governors; agency heads; university presidents; faculty; and academic administrators. Each speaker's comments were followed by a facilitated general discussion among the more than sixty participants, and all conference proceedings were videotaped for later reference (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*)<sup>◇</sup>.

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<sup>◇</sup>Anyone wishing a copy of the conference's video recording should contact the author: <egsjr@uga.edu> or (706) 542-0581.

## Defining Quality and Accountability

In his keynote address, Professor Miller described the general environment surrounding the call for accountability, and the dilemma of balancing academic independence against the need for external assessment. He observed that “We are entering a time of profound debate about higher education, a time when we need to rethink its role and its structure. For the thousand years of its existence, higher education has allowed change to evolve gradually at its own pace and in its own time, but today that luxury is no longer ours. If we do not take the initiative to change ourselves pretty quickly, the marketplace will do the job for us. And if you want a feel for what it would be like when the market takes control, look at what has been happening in health care” (2000a,1).

But, as noted earlier, threaded into the accountability discussion is the matter of establishing quality. Charged with providing some measure of assurance that standards, or quality, exist at a college or university are the regional accrediting associations. “Accreditation . . . serves as a type of ‘seal of approval’ attesting to the quality and integrity of all public and private institutions throughout our nation,” observed James Rogers (2000, 2), executive director of the eleven south-eastern states’ regional accrediting association, the Commission on Colleges. However, to illustrate the difficulty of defining quality within the accountability context, he continued: “Too often, when we talk about accountability, we only mean saving money, but we should also regard accountability as a means of ensuring quality. In other words, does the perceived quality of an institution and its credentials remain viable in the marketplace? . . . But, as you all know, quality can be an elusive concept” (3). (In most discussions about quality, the term is almost universally used without a modifier, but with the understanding that excellence is implied.)

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Charles Nash, the University of Alabama System’s vice chancellor for academic affairs, made clear in his remarks to the conferees that definitions of that “elusive concept” needed to include perceptions from a variety of constituencies: students and parents; citizens without children in college; representatives of business and industry;

special interest group members; foundation representatives; college faculty and administrators; and, of course, members of the legislative and policy sectors at both state and federal levels. Further, to these groups should be posed, in addition to what constitutes quality, such questions as: How can we reach agreement? Who should develop the accountability criteria? Should funding be tied to performance? What are the problems of linking accountability measures to the quality of higher education? (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*).

Adding to the accountability and quality mix is an increasingly urgent call by several of Nash's constituencies, particularly funding agencies, for higher education curricula to reflect the pragmatism of the workplace; that is, for curricula to be vocationally centered. This phenomenon is not confined to governmental boards and public funding bodies in the United States. Indeed, the president of Kellogg College at the University of Oxford, Geoffrey Thomas, described to the conference's participants the growing demands of the United

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Kingdom's Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), a government agency which answers to Parliament, that higher education be active in sustaining vocationally oriented curricula. Annually, the secretary of DfEE provides "guidance" to the Higher Education Funding Council for England as to

what is expected from the higher education sector in return for the funding provided. Among the "guiding elements" has been strong emphasis on building a robust and employed workforce, as exemplified by this language: "The Secretary of State invites the Funding Council to enhance the contribution it makes to meeting the critical skill shortages, especially IT skills; promoting other measures to encourage other institutions to meet the needs of industry and commerce, such as work experience opportunities, developments of links with small and medium sized enterprises; measures to encourage the transfer and application of knowledge" (*Thomas 2000, 3*).

The Commission on Colleges's James Rogers acknowledged the corresponding United States perspective with the anecdotal

observation that “overwhelmingly, [students] say they attend college in hopes of landing a better job, or getting a leg up on a career. It seems that their ‘philosophy of life’ may have more than a few dollar signs attached to it” (2000, 1). In a similar vein, President Mark Musick of the Southern Regional Education Board in his remarks to the conference made clear his belief that one of the primary elements of accountability does, indeed, have to do with jobs, citing a 1995 article in the *Economist* that described the American South as the engine that drove the nation’s economy (*Accountability and Financial Support* 2000).

It seems the higher education community ignores this external environment—one apparently rife with pragmatic concerns about the employment of its college graduates—at considerable risk to its public approval ratings and, by extension, its funding base. Where the public treasury is involved, that funding base provides the common theme or touchstone for all deliberations on accountability and, by implication, the practice of good stewardship. As a distinguished attorney and negotiator once observed about the give-and-take of all negotiations on whatever topic, grand or small: “Remember, when anyone says, ‘it’s not the money’—it’s the money!”

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Tongue-in-cheek cynicism aside, the widely held belief is that accountability should be and is being defined by those who hold the purse strings. Almost a year after the University of Georgia conference, Ran Coble, writing in *Spectrum: The Journal of State Government*, cited one of the four key trends in higher education as accountability, which he sees as linking additional funding support to “important state goals” (2001, 16). In a strong economy, such as that of the late 1990s, there is enough money to support many educational initiatives, whether at the K–12 level or in postsecondary education, and the squabbling over priorities loses a bit of its edge. A downturn in the economy, on the other hand, makes for more difficult choices and a clearer ordering of priorities.

## Funding and Accountability

As Professor Miller observed, “state budgets are weighty tomes . . . , but what they boil down to is an expression of how the state will carry out three basic responsibilities: education, public safety, and federally mandated human services, primarily welfare and health care. . . . K–12 is a requirement for all citizens. . . . By comparison higher education is viewed as a discretionary expenditure, and for virtually every state, it is the largest discretionary category in the budget. Most state budgets must be balanced, and they are often balanced on the back of higher education” (2000a, 2).

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That observation by the former governor is supported in the work of the late Harold Hovey. In a 1999 study prepared for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Hovey predicted that the states’ unwillingness to deal with the politics of tax in-

creases as a strategy to curb deficits would increase scrutiny of higher education spending while also likely resulting in reductions of budgetary support, already lower as a percentage of the total budget than ten years earlier. Hovey also predicted structural fiscal deficits over the next eight years for a great majority of states, at a time when many citizens were enjoying the greatest economic expansion in the history of the United States. Nevertheless, what seems apparent from a historical perspective is the discretionary character of higher education appropriations as perceived by legislators when state budgets are tight. In such constricted economic times, the call for accountability in higher education takes on an even stronger vocational hue, as elected officials seek recovery through strategies to increase employment.

Having the independence or autonomy to escape what some in the higher education community view, at best, as the whims or misguided good intentions of legislators and other “outsiders” can have a marked downside in actual practice. Indeed, according to Merle Hackbart, professor of finance and public administration at the University of Kentucky and that state’s former budget director, many believe that autonomy of the higher education enterprise gives that group the flexibility to absorb budget cuts more readily. He also observed in his remarks at the conference that such autonomy makes overall state policy more difficult to coordinate and thus more



expensive. Consequently, the bureaucracy of state government feels it can benefit fiscally by closer control or better accountability of higher education's many and varied activities (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*).

Although not in attendance at the conference, Clara Lovett, former president of Northern Arizona University, summed up nicely, and perhaps painfully, many legislators' view of the higher education community's attitude about funding being tied to accountability: "'You must support us because we are intrinsically deserving'" (2001, 3). As Alexander previously observed, and Lovett certainly agrees, this attitude is "no longer a viable option for higher education," and it further opens the door for what Professor Miller describes as "political meddling" by elected officials who increasingly are becoming advocates for the institutions in their electoral districts, often at the expense of the state as a whole (2000a, 3).

On the conference's second day, John Casteen, president of the University of Virginia, in remarks titled "Public Accountability in American Universities," observed that universities live in historical and cultural time, not the economic moment of political time. This difference in perspective complicates any conversation about accountability between state officials and those who work for or protect universities. In reference to the writing of [Hector Saint John de] Crèvecoeur, Casteen also noted his strong belief that agreements on accountability guidelines and

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similar issues were attributable to collaborative associations of individuals involved in the give-and-take of negotiations that were ultimately intended to further the common good. Such voluntary reform efforts include the arrangements developed by regional accreditation and, very importantly, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which serves as the "primary national voice for voluntary accreditation and quality assurance to U.S. Congress and U.S. Department of Education . . . [and] the general public . . ." (CHEA 2001). From Casteen's perspective, accountability measures unilaterally imposed by federal and state authorities have rarely proven successful. Indeed, in discussing just such an approach by the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Oxford's Geoffrey Thomas quoted language from

that agency to say: “In recent evidence to Parliament, and without a hint of irony . . . [the QAA said] ‘It would be naive to expect that external scrutiny of academic activities would be welcomed universally by those subject to it’”(Thomas 2000, 6).

President Casteen continued by offering insight as to the danger in accountability measures poorly conceived. Such circumstances can lead to embarrassing and counterproductive efforts to accommodate the measures. To illustrate, he explained some of the difficulties surrounding the Commonwealth of Virginia’s efforts to build accountability in its public schools by using a system of statewide examinations to determine who will be permitted to graduate, and to allocate state funding. Teachers have been told to teach the material found on the tests and, as a consequence, have jeopardized the teaching of advanced placement courses. Further, certain areas of the state have been unable to pass the exams, which has led to calls for exceptions in the rules and has complicated the University of Virginia’s efforts to draw from across the state in its admissions. The results described by President Casteen give further credence to his observation that successful accountability systems require a collaborative approach, rather than a ministerial unilateralism. Indeed, accountability benefits from the public’s assertion of expectations for both higher education and government; as Casteen notes, “When political accountability works . . . it works in part because it holds government to account, also. It rationalizes what happens on both sides of the transaction” (*Accountability and Financial Support* 2000).

As the morning of the forum’s second day drew to a close, the conferees had the opportunity to hear the Honorable James F. Hunt, Jr., governor of the State of North Carolina, and the Honorable Roy E. Barnes, governor of the State of Georgia, explain their ideas about accountability and funding in higher education, and their relationship to K–12. Speaking first, Governor Barnes strongly emphasized the importance of education at all levels to drive Georgia’s economic engine, pointedly observing, “that’s where the rubber hits the road in education. It’s in economic development, not just to learn matters for the sake of learning” (*Accountability and Financial Support* 2000). He cited statistics which revealed that only one native Georgia child in ten would graduate from college, only six in ten complete high school, and of those six, just three continue with postsecondary education to produce the single graduate. Georgia’s economic growth has come from importing educated people, 145,000 with bachelor’s degrees in the last ten years. The governor continued by observing that there were only so many educated

people available to move into the state; consequently, the challenge is for Georgia to better educate its native sons and daughters. For Governor Barnes, accountability thus has a decidedly economic or workforce preparation slant, much as Geoffrey Thomas demonstrated is present in the United Kingdom.

Governor Barnes chose to ask, “What is accountability?” and then to define it as basically an accent on performance rather than process. He explained that traditionally in public education the emphasis has been on the design of schools and on class size, whereas now there must be a focus on outcomes that will be validated by testing. Continuing, Governor Barnes cautioned the audience to be aware that, with the setting of standards and the measurement of pupils against those standards, the “great attack” in the next few years would be the charge that testing is unfair. The governor’s observation about fault-finding with testing was seemingly borne out by Casteen’s description of the testing approach and its results

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in Virginia. This, of course, does not speak to whether the tests are valid in either Georgia or Virginia, or whether President Casteen’s criticism was justified in the Virginia example, any more than it speaks to whether Barnes’s endorsement is warranted in the Georgia situation. It did serve to illustrate for those in attendance, however, one type of accountability measure and some of the differences that exist, at least in this instance, between education’s position and the state’s, along with the firmness of each position.

Governor Hunt’s remarks to the conference once again sounded an economic theme as a measure of accountability for higher education. He noted that a Public Agenda survey revealed the belief among 77 percent of the respondents that a college education was more important today than ten years ago in helping to ensure well-being. The governor believes that higher education is increasingly seen as the “ticket to the middle class,” but that its accountability measures leave much to be desired, having fallen far behind the efforts in K–12. As part of an initiative to improve this shortcoming, Governor Hunt explained his efforts with the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education to design a state-by-state “report

card” for higher education. Included in the report’s measurement areas are: participation, which speaks to the opportunities for enrollment; affordability, which addresses costs for students and parents; persistence and completion rates, which looks at student success in finishing the certificate or degree; and educational gains and returns to society, which examines whether quality of life and citizenship are improved. Even with this accountability endeavor, the governor expressed his concern that, particularly in higher education, there are those who remain defensive and resistant, an attitude that must change, so ways can be found to make higher education function more effectively (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*).

Both governors, in their remarks to the conference, exhibited a clear predisposition toward linking higher education accountability to the efforts under way in K–12. They seek to create a truly seamless educational system that encompasses pre-kindergarten through the baccalaureate. They want a system which has a higher education component that also takes responsibility for significantly improving the public education system by having, as Barnes suggests, college faculty and students teach in public schools and work directly with pupils, teachers, and administrators. Clearly, both governors saw providing highly qualified teachers for the K–12 systems as an accountability measure for higher education. Performing this function would meet an accountability criterion for both public schools and higher education.

### Emerging Themes for the Future

After the prepared remarks of the conference’s speakers, followed by extensive give-and-take discussion periods, what common areas of agreement emerged? What assessment criteria seemed plausible for ensuring higher education’s accountability to the public and to its financial sponsors, and what strategies could be designed for their implementation? Perhaps SREB’s Mark Musick had a significant part of the answer when he suggested on the conference’s first day that the higher education community should seek to address, in a straightforward and honest fashion, those things that matter intuitively to the general public. (He had also proposed inviting conferees who had seen the issues from both sides, politics and higher education.) Musick felt that while the public generally admires higher education, there is limited understanding of its culture and how it operates. For example, the public is confused by the mixed messages received when the higher education community announces enrollments have reached record level highs, but also

says funding support is inadequate to take in more students. Or, representatives of higher education speak of the importance of creating a seamless educational system between all levels, while at the same time failing to explain adequately why there is often such difficulty in transferring credits between institutions (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*).

The conference's deliberations reflected that the era of higher education's self-justification for resource needs, as well as its deciding independently what it will do with those resources, has ended

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forever. Professor Miller described how the higher education funding system has worked historically and how it must change: “We add up our total expenditures and look around us for the revenues to support them. . . . We are going to have to be much more deliberate about setting priorities and redirecting our resources toward those priorities” (2000a, 5). The higher education

community will also have to be much more open to discussion of what those priorities should be. That the subsequent accountability measures will be fairly and responsibly administered can never be guaranteed; that assessment demands will increase, seems assured.

After the discussions, what could each of the several perspectives take from the conference that might further clarify the assessment questions and build an environment of consensus and collaboration toward effective evaluation of higher education? Among conferees there developed a general understanding that existing conditions warranted proactive measures from all parties, if reasonable compromises were to be achieved before positions became completely inflexible and assessors' methods draconian. A number of themes also emerged. One theme gaining reinforcement was that higher education's attitude of “splendid isolation,” with its self-justification for use of resources, as well as the methods of accounting for them, has been unacceptable for some time, and would be changed by administrative edict when required. No discussion supported clinging to the historical predisposition of complete academic independence from the strictures of legislative oversight of higher education's resources and influence on its agenda. Indeed, it was felt that promulgation of that position risks a substantial and adverse reaction

from funding bodies and official assessment groups. The position is at best naive; at worst, it is dangerous in its potential to provoke a punitive reaction from politicians long exasperated with such dated and self-serving thinking.

A second theme that achieved clear consensus, and perhaps unanimity, saw assessment as a continuing reality, one requiring a commonsensical and cooperative approach among all parties, if a successful series of procedures and criteria were to be defined and implemented. The University of Virginia's Casteen, calling for a

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collaborative initiative along the philosophical lines espoused by Crèvecoeur, and modeled by voluntary accreditation, combined with SREB's Musick, who counseled listening to the general public's intuitive requests for soliciting specific types of performance data, struck responsive chords with the group. However, it was clear from the comparative insights provided by Oxford's Thomas that significant effort would

be required, in some instances, to re-open a civil dialogue among the affected parties. Attitudes have hardened, and examples exist to illustrate a growing arrogance of purpose and self-justification among assessment bodies that is reminiscent of the biases for which higher education has been justly criticized.

Third, from the perspective of two governors of southeastern states, North Carolina and Georgia, the benchmark of assessment in a higher education system is the preparation of a highly trained workforce “that doesn't necessarily need to understand Shakespeare better,” in the words of Governor Barnes (*Accountability and Financial Support* 2000). In this context, “education” is seen as the key to economic competitiveness for individual states, nationally and globally. The vocational predisposition of government officials reflects the perceived need of their agencies to ensure policies that produce a trained workforce which can compete for jobs in any environment. This attitude can run headlong into a more traditional goal of the university, namely, producing what faculty would call “the educated person.” This disparity of goals might prompt academicians

to ask, “What’s a university for?” That is, does a college or university exist to train or to educate? Can it do both? Assessors charged by state officials to evaluate educational outcomes might respond that it is a distinction without a difference. Nevertheless, most university officials and faculty across American campuses probably remain resolute in their belief that a university’s mission includes exposing students to a variety of educational experiences, and that it is broader than merely developing job skills.

A fourth theme, also reinforced by the two governors, is that higher education bears a major responsibility for ensuring the success of K–12. College and university schools of education were put on notice that poor performance by their graduates would mean unfavorable consequences. A corollary to this specific responsibility is the more general but vitally important condition in the governors’ minds that a seamless educational system be developed. Higher education is expected to take a major leadership role in achieving this objective. The consequences of failing to do so will include painful fiscal repercussions.

It is those painful repercussions that provide a fifth theme, one initially suggested by the conference’s title itself, and one which ran throughout the deliberations of the conference’s two days: the conditions for financial support of public higher education. Everyone recognized that the overall budgets of the states are subject to the ebb and flow of economic cycles, the 1990s having been the most expansive in the United States’ history, while the new century’s first year has already seen the beginning of a downturn. Aside from the popular belief that higher education will raise all the money it can, and spend all it raises (*Bowen 1996*), lies a more fundamental question: when does tying the financial support of public higher education to the state’s political agenda cross the line separating reasonable accountability from legalized extortion and appropriation of the mission higher education has deemed appropriate and reasonable?

At issue is not only the self-justifying “we know best” philosophy, but the genuinely rudimentary discussion of what constitutes the core purpose of colleges and universities, as contrasted with other sectors in the postsecondary arena. Depending on the speaker, politician or academic, there can be a blurring and confusion of institutional missions when reviewing all of higher education. Often, in the eyes of an elected official, filling information technology (IT) job vacancies is seen as the responsibility of all, two-year technical colleges through universities. Concurrent discussions of “seamless education” can cloud important distinctions in mission among



various institutional types, particularly in the minds of the general public. That the esoteric character of some university research attracts the barbs and ridicule of the “real world” has long been part of a popular public stereotyping of the “ivory tower,” and has contributed, even if unconsciously, to the calls for better accountability. Nevertheless, there continues to loom the central debate as to the degree of freedom public universities should enjoy in establishing their agendas, particularly in research. Again, it was the University of Virginia’s Casteen who provided an important clarifying illustration of the vital importance of what he calls “speculative funded basic research.” Summarizing the viewpoint of a recent University of Virginia commencement speaker, Alfred Berkeley, president of the NASDAQ stock exchange, Casteen noted that Mr. Berkeley had said, in effect, that if the graduates wanted prosperity to continue they should get busy and support basic university research, because the foundation of the 1990s’ technology boom had been created over the last twenty-five years by the fruits of such research. As Casteen further observed, this information became a resource to the public by first appearing in the juried publications of university researchers (*Accountability and Financial Support* 2000). Whether the argument to continue adequate financial support for speculative research can be made sufficiently compelling to public officials living in the “economic moment of political time” forms the crux of one of the single most important discussions in the broader accountability debate. Support for speculative research is thus another area in which the higher education community’s research universities can clash with those assessors of the public sector oriented toward the “training for jobs now” accountability concept.

A sixth and final theme emerged repeatedly throughout the course of the forum: the need to ensure quality, and to achieve a workable, mutual understanding of what is meant by the term as it is used in discussions of accountability. Is accountability just about saving money, or does it include, in the eyes of higher education’s constituencies, maintaining the viability (quality) of an institution in the marketplace, as the Commission on Colleges’s James Rogers suggests (2000, 3)? As SREB’s Musick outlined, the general public’s intuitive concept of quality could be reflected in such questions as: How many and what percentage of our high school graduates enroll in college? How well prepared are entering freshmen as measured by the need for remediation? Of those who begin college, what percentage finish? How long does it take for a student to complete a particular certificate or degree? What jobs do the graduates obtain?



What percentage of those completing undergraduate degrees go on to graduate and professional schools? (*Accountability and Financial Support 2000*). To these queries can be added many more quantitative elements, and all are illustrative of a strategy to satisfy demands for one notion of what constitutes quality. The intangibles of the “college experience,” on the other hand, are far more difficult to measure and often are subjectively assessed, reflecting the biases of the evaluator. For example, how does one assess the value or quality of a residential honors college for undergraduates, as opposed to the normal dormitory experience? The task of defining quality, of necessity, continues.

The six themes described above, and numerous corollaries, most probably existed in the minds and experiences of the conference’s participants before that group was initially called to order. What benefit, then, came from reviewing, yet again, the overarching topic of accountability’s being linked to public fiscal support? First, the topic has a sustained and ever increasing vitality as an element of public policy; that is, it is timely, and will continue to be so. Second, as the conference’s presentations and discussions illustrate, there are ongoing difficulties in reaching a consensus that establishes what the several constituencies might describe as appropriate accountability measures, civilly discharged. The creation of a forum that provides for the thoughtful discussion of such matters serves as a vehicle to advance the level and sophistication of the dialogue, both systematically and serendipitously, while also affording the opportunity for substantive policy proposals to emerge.

For these reasons, at least, the discussions referenced from this conference have become part of an iterative process that should be sustained, formally and informally, in a variety of venues and formats. To this end, the University of Georgia’s Institute of Higher Education continues its outreach agenda, seeking not only to explore further the potentialities contained in this subject of accountability (including for the future, perhaps, an international comparative forum), but to identify other issues that significantly affect postsecondary education and, specifically, the agenda of the engaged university.

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