

Community College Accountability

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Accountability initiatives are not new to community colleges. But because scholars and educators have long disagreed about how to measure and compare the institutions' success in educating students, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education announced Tuesday their funding of an effort to create a national, voluntary accountability system for community colleges.

The project, which is being funded with \$1 million in grants from the two foundations, will gather leaders from groups like the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees and select community college districts to hash out what officials call a “common set of metrics and data points to evaluate their effectiveness, both internally and against one another, developed specifically for their mission”.

Eight community college sites around the country, mostly from urban areas, will pilot the new accountability system. Then, in two years, the project will expand and pilot in up to 20 more localities. Ultimately, project organizers hope their to-be-created system will be adopted by community colleges across the country to help improve the outcomes of their students.

Kent Phillippe, who as director of research at AACC has helped to plan this project, said there are few details of exactly what metrics this universal system would include, as the initiative is still in its nascent stages and the pilot sites still do not know exactly what data they will be tracking. Still, he argued that the project's creation reflects a sentiment among community college officials that the common metrics that have long been used to judge their institutions' relative success – led by the federal graduation rate – are insufficient and do not help institutions improve themselves. He also added that some new metrics are needed and must be developed.

“We need to try to build on progression measures of students and not just focus on the final outcome of degree and certificate attainment”, Phillippe said. “For instance, we need to highlight certain points along the learning path toward reaching graduation, such as the attainment of 30 credit hours or 60 credit hours or after the progression from development to college-level coursework [all points after which it is more likely that a student will graduate]. We also need to catch the things that community colleges do that aren't necessarily credential specific, such as work force and community development. Maybe we could track job placement rates in these programs or show the income change among students who've taken x number of courses at a community college”.

Officials from Gates and Lumina expressed a similar desire to see better measurements taken at prescribed benchmarks as students move through community colleges.

“We need to see beyond graduation rates”, said Holly Zanville, a senior program director at Lumina. “Even if colleges find that they have poor graduation rates – and many of them do – they can't tell where students get lost and how they can get along to improve themselves. We need to

pay more attention to milestone markers. Of course, we're still interested in outcomes, but we need to know more about what's happening along the way. For instance, it'd be great to know the point at which students transfer onward".

Diane Troyer, a senior program officer at Gates, said the foundation believes its support for this community college project will also help institutions work toward the philanthropy's publicly stated goal to "double the percentage of low-income young people who earn a postsecondary credential by the age of 26" by 2027, a benchmark that has appears to have influenced some of the goals set by the Obama administration. She also believes the critical mass of publicity that community colleges have recently received, not only from the federal government but from organizations like hers, bodes well for the success of this project.

"A lot more attention has been cast upon community colleges and the role they play in the full picture of higher education," Troyer said. "But, more attention has to be placed on completion initiatives. Consensus is what really matters when considering what we should be measuring [for this project]. Having these national benchmarks for colleges to assess their own performance will help them tremendously."

Community college presidents at the project's pilot institutions said they are excited to work with some of their peer institutions to compare and contrast some of the data they already collect to assess themselves.

"Most of us don't have large research departments like universities have, and we haven't had the resources to do this kind of work", said Jerry Sue Thornton, president of Cuyahoga Community College, in Cleveland, Ohio. "For us and others involved with this pilot, it's not about having a measuring stick or a strict comparison base, but trying to improve ourselves by sharing data with each other."

Thornton said Cuyahoga will be using this project to take a close look at what she called its "gatekeeper courses" -- those like algebra that are at the beginning of a sequence and, if not passed, keep many students from graduating. In addition, she said her institution will focus on shortening the amount of time its students spend in developmental courses, comparing and contrasting remedial sections of varying lengths and methods to see which achieve success and which do not.

Roy Flores, president of Pima Community College, in Arizona, said such a universal system will give his institution a more effective way to identify its shortcomings and remedy them.

"We're very data driven, and that's already reflected in our plans and measures", Flores said. "It's something we've been doing for some time. But, more importantly, this is an opportunity to learn from other colleges as well. There's outstanding work being done by other colleges, and we're mindful of the fact that some of them don't look a lot like Pima".

At least one prominent outside observer of this major community college initiative, however, expressed his appreciation for the project but wondered why the two-year sector appears to have bought into the notion of a universal accountability system long after the idea won favor among many officials at four-year institutions.

"I've had a lot of conversations with community college leaders in the past and -- fussed at them isn't the right word -- but just didn't understand why they weren't the leader in this accountability movement", said Charles Miller, former chair of former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education, known colloquially as the Spellings Commission.

“Community colleges tend to have – not an inferiority complex – but they feel like they have to wait in line behind their big brothers for some things. I commend them for doing this now. I don’t know the details of what they’re producing, but I have no reason to doubt they’ll come out with a good idea”.

Miller said he hopes the project embraces the idea of a “unit record system”, or a method of tracking a student’s progress throughout his or her educational career. Though this recommendation of the Spellings Commission ultimately never received the support of educators nationally, Miller said it would benefit community colleges most.

“One of the problems with accountability for community colleges is the need to follow students beyond community college,” Miller said. “Most community college students don’t come for the purpose of getting a degree or a certificate, and they’ll have to find a way to measure that. These accountability efforts often focus so much on degree completion, but that’s definitely not the only thing that community colleges do”.