



Educational Standards and Accountability

Executive Summary

- Faculty in all three segments of higher education in California understand and appreciate the need for accountability in both economic and qualitative terms.
- Accountability systems based solely on quantitative measures, such as degree production, have the potential to undermine educational standards and quality.
- Practices and systems already exist to ensure quality at both the local and system level.

Background

Faculty in California's systems of public higher education know that high expectations and rigorous educational standards are essential to quality learning experiences for students. Setting entrance standards for incoming students, employing meaningful grading criteria and policies, and promoting efficient admission and transfer processes have been and remain central and ongoing concerns of all three segments' Academic Senates.

Although some issues regarding educational standards are most appropriately discussed locally or within a single segment of higher education, the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS) identifies and addresses issues of statewide concern. For example, for over 20 years, ICAS has been publishing a joint set of core expectations for incoming first-year students. Detailed competency statements for academic literacy, mathematics, foreign language, and natural science have been produced to help students prepare for enrollment and success in higher education. More recently, intersegmental faculty have worked together to develop the Course Identification Numbering System (C-ID) to simplify transfer between institutions and to develop model curricula for associate degrees for transfer.

In addition to high standards for students, California's higher education faculty have and maintain high standards of scholarship for themselves. Comprehensive peer-review of teaching, research, and service are integral parts of tenure and promotion decisions. At the institutional level, all colleges and universities in California must be accredited by an independent, external agency overseen by the Federal Department of Education. In order to maintain accreditation and avoid sanction, the accreditation process requires member institutions to demonstrate that they meet or exceed regional standards for institutions of higher learning.

Notwithstanding higher education's formal procedures of peer and external review, there have been additional calls for accountability, often involving the setting of targets to increase the number of degrees an institution awards. While increasing the number of degrees that students receive is a laudable goal, doing so will only be significant if the degrees themselves are meaningful. If the main or only measure of accountability is taken to be the number of graduates or transfers, faculty may be pressured to help meet this goal by giving passing grades to students without regard for their actual achievement. Such a practice would cheapen all degrees, leaving students unprepared for further study or the workplace. Colleges and universities would be able to tout improved performance in the short term, but California's students and economy would suffer in the long run.

Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates

Higher education faculty at public institutions understand the public policy goal to provide the best collegiate or graduate education possible to the largest number of students who could benefit with the least cost to taxpayers. Although some individuals or bodies may wish to evaluate institutions primarily by the number of students who graduate or reach other academic milestones, faculty believe that measures of institutional accountability must begin with the quality of programs and services. Institutions should be expected to maintain high standards in instruction and research and be rewarded for doing so. Existing mechanisms of peer-review and accreditation already work to ensure robust academic standards, but higher education faculty are receptive to additional approaches that would promote excellence and quality.

Current Status

Various practices and systems are already in place to ensure accountability.

- **Trustee Boards:** All three segments are overseen by appointed boards whose members are approved by the legislature or locally elected. These trustees are increasingly aware of expectations that institutions use funding as effectively as possible, and expect that chancellors and presidents hold their institutions to the highest standards of performance and quality.
- **Accreditation:** A central focus of accreditation for the last decade has been the implementation of a continuous quality improvement model at colleges and universities in which faculty develop and assess student learning outcomes.
- **Accountability Report for Community Colleges:** As mandated by Assembly Bill 1417, the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges prepares an annual report that provides quantitative data mapping changes in institutional effectiveness for all colleges.
- **Teaching Initiatives:** Faculty in all three segments are working to identify and implement "high impact" teaching methods—those particularly likely to improve the educational attainment of first-in-family and underrepresented students. The CSU *Compass* project and the CCC *Basic Skills Initiative* are both examples of system-wide efforts to improve student learning.

Goals and Recommendations

View Accountability Holistically – Faculty urge the legislature and other policy makers to recognize the importance of a holistic approach to accountability, one that first focuses on maintaining rigorous academic standards and providing robust guidance and support for students.

Visit ICAS – If legislators have concerns about standards and accountability, ICAS would welcome them to meet with ICAS to establish dialogue as to how we can most effectively work together to solve these problems.

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The Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS) was established by faculty in 1980 as a voluntary organization consisting of representatives of the Academic Senates of the three segments of public higher education in California. For more information, see: <http://icas-ca.org/>