

The Master Plan & Accountability

No concept has come to be more quickly tossed around in discussions of higher education over the past decade than “accountability,” which is praised by some as the salvation of higher educational and condemned by others as the death knell for quality education. Both policymakers—including the Federal Department of Education and the California Legislature—and professional organizations, including accrediting commissions and higher education professional organizations, trumpet “accountability” as education’s salvation. *What’s the real story?*

To many observers, “accountability” means producing more degree recipients with the same (or reduced) funding. There has always been a tension between quantity and quality in public policy. The Master Plan itself recognizes this fact in the three-tier system of higher education: maintaining the research excellence for which the University of California is globally recognized requires a different policy, organizational model, and budget than is appropriate for the community colleges with their open door policy. Faculty in each segment, however, are actively engaged in longstanding efforts to maintain quality and be accountable.

What accountability Systems are already in place?

Program Evaluation and Review: It is already the case that professional peer evaluation is an integral aspect of California’s higher education institutional culture. In the UC and CSU, academic departments are regularly subject to the scrutiny of their peers, which often make recommendations for improvement. Community college faculty engage in regular program review to evaluate the effectiveness of programs throughout the campus.

Accreditation: Overseen by the Federal Department of Education, regional accrediting bodies assemble teams of professional peers to review significant bodies of data, visit campuses, and make recommendations for improvement. At any given time several California colleges are subject to short-term sanction by accrediting bodies as they seek to meet professional standards.

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 California community colleges.

Trustee Boards: The UC and CSU systems are overseen by appointed boards whose members are approved by the legislature. Community colleges are overseen *both* by the Board of Governors and by locally elected boards of trustees. In each system, trustees are increasingly aware of expectations that institutions use public funding as effectively as possible and increasingly expect that chancellors and presidents hold their institutions to the highest possible standard of performance *and* quality.

Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates

Combining quality and meeting California's higher ed needs:

- The California Master Plan recognizes that each segment of higher education serves a distinct student population—faculty labor to do the best they can for students in their segment.
- Each segment of California higher education is seeing increased demand and seeking to serve more students and students who bring a wider variety of life and educational experience and skill to the classroom.
- For more than 20 years, ICAS has developed “competency statements” intended to convey to students, their families, and policymakers what preparation students need in order to be able to progress effectively through college education(see <<http://icas-ca.org/competencies>>).

California's students: *challenge and opportunity*

- California's college freshmen have in most cases not identified an academic or a career/professional goal.
- Contemporary students are increasingly likely to be employed more hours per week, necessarily splitting their focus and jeopardizing their success at both education and job.
- Most public college students begin higher education with a vaguely defined goal, and begin taking courses even as their goals evolve. This is not new to higher education: California's public colleges continue to transform unfocused students into degree-bound and career focused young adults with an ever diminishing budget and increased reliance on part-time faculty who have no permanent commitment to the colleges, and no opportunity to establish relationships with and mentor students.
- If California colleges are to provide more college graduates, faculty could easily meet this goal by awarding more passing grades to students without regard for their actual achievement. For many students, however, who must pass external licensing requirements or establish preparation for continued education through tests like the Law School Aptitude Test or the Medical College Aptitude Test, relaxing standards and increasing “outputs” would quickly be shown for the lie it is when scores plummet and students are unable to progress successfully. Colleges could tout improved performance and “accountability” but California's students and economy would suffer in the long run.
- 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 and to “be accountable.” It is worth noting that CSU has only been able to develop the Compass project with grant support from private foundations.

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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/>