Policy Discussion: The National Commission on Accountability and the National Student Record Database

In March 2005, the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, which had been convened by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) organization, released a major national report, “Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education.” This report calls for a concerted collaborative effort – by the federal government, state governments, institutions (CEOs and trustees), accrediting bodies, faculty, and students – to more aggressively demand and provide greater accountability in American higher education.

The national commission was cochaired by the Honorable Frank Keating, former governor of Oklahoma, and the Honorable Richard W. Riley, former governor of South Carolina and former U.S. Secretary of Education. The remaining 11 members included exceptional individuals from various stakeholder groups, including WICHE Commissioner Senator Dave Nething from North Dakota and WICHE Legislative Advisory Committee member Carol Liu, assemblywoman from California.

The report argues compellingly that our systems of accountability need to be improved and lays out possible ways in which different stakeholders could contribute to improved accountability, making the case that the roles of various stakeholders in assuring accountability should align with their specific areas of responsibility. One of the most provocative recommendations in the report is the call for “a national student unit record system.” Absent such a system in the higher education arena – in which the majority of students swirl from one institution to another – we will never know whether students are achieving their goals or whether our institutions are doing their job. Many states have successfully developed such systems, assuring security of individual students’ records while substantially enhancing the state’s knowledge of its systems efficacy. A national system would allow for this kind of analysis for our overall system of higher education. While many in higher education have received this recommendation with enthusiasm, others are concerned. Lingenfelter will describe the major findings of the report and discuss perspectives from different points of view.

Biographical Information about the Speaker

Paul E. Lingenfelter became executive director of SHEEO, the national organization of State Higher Education Executive Officers, in June 2000. His work at SHEEO has focused on increasing successful student participation in higher education, including: strengthening student preparation by building stronger relationships with K-12 educators; improving the quality of teaching; developing accountability systems that contribute to improved performance; improving mechanisms for developing state higher education policy; and developing the data systems and financial policies needed to achieve educational improvement. From 1985 to 2000 Lingenfelter served on the staff
of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In 1996, he was appointed vice president to establish and lead the MacArthur Foundation’s Program on Human and Community Development, which supports research, policy analysis, and practical interventions that address economic opportunity, community capacity, child and youth development, and mental health. Before this appointment, he was involved in the full range of the foundation’s international and domestic programs as associate vice president for planning and evaluation and director of program-related investments. Lingenfelter served as deputy director for fiscal affairs for the Illinois Board of Higher Education from 1980 to 1985. From 1968 to 1980, he held other administrative positions with the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the University of Michigan, where he staffed a faculty research grants competition and a university committee on the role of the dissertation in graduate education. He has been retained as a consultant by the United States Corporation for National Service, the Laidlaw Foundation in Canada, the Education Commission of the States, the New York Board of Regents, and the U.S. Office of Education. Lingenfelter received an A.B. from Wheaton College in literature, an M.A. from Michigan State University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in higher education. His graduate work in higher education administration emphasized political science and policy analysis. He has written numerous policy studies and articles related to his work in higher education and philanthropy.

10.45 - 11.00 am  Break