

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



Transparency in Higher Education

by Jennifer L. Crull

May is the month of graduations. The hopes and dreams of high school seniors are at their peak as they walk across the stage and receive their high school diploma. But what lies ahead? For many, the option is college. Most parents nowadays have raised their children to just know that the next step is college. But, in contrast, as our college graduates are graduating this month, their outlook on life is vastly different than that of the college freshman that they were four years ago. This demonstrates the need for accountability and transparency in higher education.

We often refer to colleges as the “Ivory Tower,” because they don’t reflect the real world. Students enter college with an excited anticipation of the next four years, only to be disappointed and surprised by the harsh reality of college and the information that isn’t disclosed to all students. There are so many questions that parents and students need to think about when they are choosing the

school they wish to attend, far more than a college admissions counselor could answer in one campus visit.

So given that, what are the questions you should be asking and what are the answers you should be looking for? The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) recently released a publication on the “10 Questions State Legislators Should Ask About Higher Education.” The number 9 question is “How can accountability and transparency in higher education be improved?”¹ When it comes

to evaluating businesses, we have many advanced matrixes to compare companies and products. This is not the case when comparing colleges.

We are used to having admissions counselors report graduation rates, job placement information, and the number of students who receive financial aid. There are many different things to use to evaluate colleges, but usually schools don’t report this information the same way, which makes it difficult to compare public and private schools. The first real effort we

Table One: Performance Scorecard	
Strategic Measures	
*	Graduation Rate
*	First-Year Retention Rate
*	Cost per Student
*	Cost Per Degree
*	Cost of Attrition
*	Student Loan Default Rate
*	Ratio of Student Loan Payments to Earnings per Recent Graduates

Source: College Measures, <<http://www.collegemeasures.org/reporting/institution/profile/location/154022.aspx>> accessed on May 23, 2011.

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Table Two: Profile Information	
Type	
* Type	
* Carnegie Classification	
* Historically Black College/University	
* Hispanic-Serving Institution	
* Land Grant College/Institution	
Size	
* Total Annual Budget	
* Total Students (FTE)	
* Total Employees	
* Total Faculty	
Degrees & Completions	
* Associates	
* Bachelors	
* Masters	
* Doctorate	
* First Professional	
* Awards	
* Certificates	
Undergraduate Student Characteristics	
	% of Total Students Who Are
	* Undergrads
	% of Undergrads Receiving Federal
	* Aid
	* % of Undergrads Living on Campus
	* % of Undergrads Who Transfer In
Undergraduate Annual Tuition	
	* In-State Tuition
	* Out-of-State Tuition
Undergraduate Admission	
	* Open Admissions?
	* Admission Rate
	% of Applicants Submitting SAT
	* scores
	% of Applicants Submitting ACT
	* scores
	* SAT Scores
	* ACT Scores
Undergraduates' High School Performance	
	* High School GPA
	% That Submitted High School Class
	* Rank
	* High School Class Rank
Location	
	* Mailing Address
Contact Information	
	* Website
	* Phone
Leadership	
	* President Information

Source: College Measures, <<http://www.collegemeasures.org/reporting/institution/profile/location/154022.aspx>> accessed on May 23, 2011.

have to address this problem is CollegeMeasures.org, "a joint venture between the American Institute for Research (AIR) and Matrix Knowledge Group."² This Website is very user-friendly. For each school, you are able to see the performance scorecard and profile information.³

This Website allows you to rank school performances and state performances, rank schools based on a certain criteria, and look at national performances. Table One includes the strategic measures a user is able to see for each college. Table Two lists the profile information for the school. This is a great tool to increase the information available to students and parents about schools. Let's say as a parent you wanted to rank all Iowa colleges and universities based on their first-year retention rate. The Website will produce a report for you and you would be able to see that the top three schools, with the highest first-year retention rate, are Grinnell College with 94.6 percent, Drake University with 89.4 percent, and Luther College with 88.9 percent.⁴

We have read several articles lately that are questioning the value of a college education. I think most of us would argue that a college education has value as long as you do your research and know the facts about your college. Vicki Murray, Ph.D, has authored the publication titled "10 Questions State

Table Three: Questions about Accountability and Transparency in Higher Education

1	Is state funding based on how many students enroll or how many students graduate? Are there funding incentives for full-time students graduating in two or four years? Do perverse incentives exist that discourage timely graduation?
2	What performance funding models are used by the state? The three basic models include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Performance Funding: state funding tied directly to performance of public institutions * Performance Budgeting: performance is one factor in determining state funding * Performance Reporting: periodic reports on performance
3	Do institutions allocate funding to departments based on performance and enrollment or based on set formulas?
4	Do institutions administer value-added assessments to measure learning growth between the first and final years of their undergraduate education?
5	Is a higher education data system in place? Can users compare institutions?
6	What institutions are included (public two- and four-year institutions, or private institutions as well)?
7	Is the data system linked to the K-12 education system?
8	What performance indicators does the data system track? Indicators could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Graduation rates * Transfer rates * Faculty workload/productivity * Follow-up student satisfaction studies * Remediation activities/effectiveness * Pass rates on licensure exams * Degrees awarded * Postgraduate employment/degree attainment * Admission standards and measures * Institutional and program funding
9	Do institutions define and present performance indicators and funding data on their Websites in a user-friendly way for parents, prospective students, and the public to make meaningful comparisons between institutions? Are institutions proactively promoting such information through public relations efforts?
10	Have the data systems and technology used by higher education institutions improved program effectiveness and lowered costs?
11	Are the data systems and technology used by higher education institutions promoting a culture of evidence and a commitment to continuous improvement?
12	Are [there] incentives in place, such as funding or greater institutional autonomy, to promote those goals?
13	Are there barriers toward achieving those goals that state legislators can remove?

Source: Vicki E. Murray, "10 Questions State Legislators Should Ask About Higher Education," American Legislative Exchange Council, 2011, p. 24-25.

Legislators Should Ask About Higher Education.” This publication suggests that they think about how prepared students are for college, how accessible is a college education, how is higher education financed, what is the price of a college education, and how affordable is it?⁵ These are just a few questions that Dr. Murray suggests that state Legislators take the time to figure out. The number nine question, as I stated earlier, is about accountability and transparency. Table Three includes additional questions that state Legislators need to ask about accountability and transparency. This table is full of truly important questions for parents and students. Do you expect your classes to be taught by faculty and not teaching assistants? Then a research university is NOT for you. Do you want to feel like you are part of the college? Then first-year retention rates are important.

While these are questions that Dr. Murray suggests state Legis-

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lators discuss, it is also important for parents and students to pay attention to the answers to these questions. College will be the most exciting and trying period of time for a person, but in order to know that you have made the correct choice for you and your family there are many different factors to consider. The CollegeMeasures.org Website and the questions raised in Dr. Murray’s publication are two very useful items to help in making a decision about what college to attend.

As taxpayers, we all know that our tax dollars support our state universities, and through the Iowa Tuition Grant, we also support private colleges and universities. So for Iowa it is

important that we bring more transparency to higher education. This will allow for more accountability and hopefully help remove the notion of the “Ivory Tower” of education that exists today.

Endnotes

¹ Vicki E. Murray, “10 Questions State Legislators Should Ask About Higher Education,” American Legislative Exchange Council, 2011, p. 22.

² Ibid.

³ College Measures, <<http://www.CollegeMeasures.org>> accessed on May 23, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Murray, p. 4, 10, 12, and 14.

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