

April 2005

Commentary: Altruism vs. Incentives

Just weeks after participants at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools called on states to hold postsecondary education institutions accountable for the success of the students they admit, an Accountability Commission formed by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) issued a thoughtful report on the topic.

[Accountability for Better Results](#) presents a picture of data-driven institutional improvement, with each postsecondary institution focused on a set of explicit goals and measures such as improving access, graduation rates and learning. The theory is that governing boards and campus leaders will provide incentives for faculty, students and others to take the necessary steps to improve performance when they have clear and compelling goals that they helped shape and accurate data on institutional performance. State and federal policymakers should be setting broad priorities, providing resources and establishing the data systems necessary to track progress.

This method stands in sharp contrast to the K-12 approach to accountability, which emphasizes common standards and measures for all schools and a system of interventions and consequences to motivate improved performance. The proposed postsecondary accountability system relies more on each institution's desire to improve than on carrots and sticks wielded by the state.

The higher education system clearly differs from the K-12 system, and an accountability system for higher education must allow for these differences. But despite their differences, both systems could learn something useful from each other. The tightening pressures of No Child Left Behind would no doubt yield greater results if federal, state and local leaders had more powerful strategies for tapping educators' sense of

News Clips

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1. **Aligning expectations.** [New York](#) will now require four years of high school math and has adopted a more specific set of course requirements that align with what students need to know to be successful in college or the workplace.
2. **Ready or not.** More than half of **California** high school graduates who go to college have to take remedial classes in English and math, according to a [new report](#). Facing such dire news, it is surprising that California lawmakers are considering [two bills](#) that would delay or eliminate a high school graduation exam in English and math that might help identify struggling students and offer an opportunity to better prepare them for life after graduation.
3. **Measuring what matters?** For the first time in more than 10 years, [Illinois](#) students won't take a writing test due to budget considerations. Lawmakers decided to cut writing from the state assessments at the same time that writing has been added to the major college entrance exams. Are legislators saving money at the expense of student success?
4. **K-16 governance.** Gov. Ted Kulongoski of [Oregon](#) has responded swiftly to the agreement he and other governors made in February at the National Education Summit on High Schools to ensure that all

professional responsibility -- schools recognizing on their own that they need to improve and having the capacity and motivation to change their practices to get better results.

At the same time, Education Trust's [College Results Online](#) underscores the importance of finding the right external incentives for improvement in higher education. In [One Step from the Finish Line](#), Ed Trust documents significant and persistent variations in college graduation rates among similar institutions -- students thrive at some, while others lose far too many before they earn their degrees. A companion report, [Choosing to Improve](#), highlights how leaders at high-performing institutions monitor student progress, better connect students to their institutions, and identify and remove obstacles to learning -- precisely what the SHEEO Accountability Commission recommends. Yet there are plenty of college campuses with leaders who have not begun any comprehensive effort to improve graduation rates.

This suggests that internal motivation alone may not be enough. In their efforts to design appropriate accountability systems for higher education, state officials must address the altruism versus incentive conundrum. Are financial and other incentives needed? Or will good will alone effectively promote needed campus-by-campus changes that result in large-scale, sustained improvement?

high school students are prepared for college or the workforce. Kulongoski began by encouraging the K-12 and higher education boards to merge into one organization. This would be a bold move -- and one that other states should consider as a way to encourage the two systems to work closely together.

5. **A nation in decline?** In a *U.S. News and World Report* [editorial](#), David Gergen suggests that the poor performance of our high schools may be the single most significant threat to America's position as a global economic and political leader.

Did You Know?

U.S. College Graduation Rate Is Below Average among Developed Countries

Rank	OECD Member Country	College Graduation Rate (%)	Rank	OECD Member Country	College Graduation Rate (%)
1	Japan	94	10	Australia	69
2	Turkey	88	10	Denmark	69
3	Ireland	85	10	Netherlands	69
4	United Kingdom	83	14	United States	66
5	Korea	79	15	Czech Republic	61
6	Spain	77	16	Belgium (Fl.)	60
7	Finland	75	17	Austria	59

8	Iceland	73	17	France	59
9	Germany	70	19	Sweden	48
10	Mexico	69	20	Italy	42

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Education at a Glance 2004, 2004.

Although the United States has one of the highest college enrollment rates in the world, our college graduation rate is below average among developed countries -- a fact that could have a significant impact on U.S. competitiveness in the increasingly global economy.

New Resources

- As part of its Double the Numbers initiative to dramatically increase the percentage of low-income young people who enter and complete postsecondary education, a new report from Jobs for the Future (JFF), [Fast Track to College: Increasing Postsecondary Success for All Students](#), suggests three alternatives to the traditional high school senior year.
- A majority of young adults consider higher education valuable, but lack of financial resources and high school counseling affect their opportunities to attend college, according to a recent survey by Public Agenda, [Life After High School: Young People Talk about Their Hopes and Prospects](#). In several respects, the Public Agenda survey echoes findings from [Achieve's poll](#), which found that as many as 40 percent of the nation's high school graduates say they are inadequately prepared to deal with the demands of postsecondary education and employment.
- [What Do We Know? Seeking Effective Math and Science Instruction](#), a new report from the Urban Institute funded by the GE Foundation, seeks to identify middle and high school math and science curricula and professional development models that are effective in improving student achievement.
- Creating positive change in schools requires effective leadership. IBM and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have teamed up to create **Education Leadership**, a monthly e-newsletter that provides expert advice and success stories drawn from IBM and CCSSO's work with school districts as part of the Reinventing Education Change Toolkit project. View the [toolkit](#) or subscribe to the [e-newsletter](#).

New from Achieve

- **Strengthening 12th grade NAEP.** As participation in the 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has fallen to its lowest rate ever, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) is examining ways to strengthen the test and make it more relevant to students. As part of its efforts, NAGB asked Achieve to provide recommendations for how to make the test a sound measure of college and work readiness. In March, NAGB unanimously approved Achieve's recommendations for the reading test. Achieve now is examining the math test; our advice is expected in the fall. A recent article from [Education Week](#) summarizes additional recommendations that NAGB is considering to improve participation.
- **Data partnership.** [SchoolMatters.com](#), one of the largest searchable collections of education performance data available online, was unveiled March 29 by the Education Data Partnership, a coalition of the Council of Chief State School Officers, Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services, Achieve, and the CELT Corporation. The site includes student achievement information, financial data and demographic breakdowns for every public school in the nation. It also offers sophisticated online

tools to compare schools and school districts. The Broad Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided \$45 million to fund the project. The Web site will serve as a resource for Achieve as it helps state and national policymakers use data to identify policy priorities and engage the public and key stakeholders in addressing those priorities.

Perspective is sent to you monthly by Achieve, a bipartisan, non-profit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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