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Issue Brief

Higher Education Accountability

November 2012

Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research (PACER)

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There is broad agreement that a postsecondary education is more important than ever. But college costs are rising while funding levels are dwindling. This PACER Issue Brief examines the issue of higher education accountability and funding.

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Introduction

Education beyond high school has become a prerequisite for stable, family-sustaining employment in the United States. Four of five jobs lost in the late 2000s recession were held by individuals whose education stopped at high school graduation, while more than half of the 3.4 million jobs gained in the recovery have gone to those with a bachelor's degree or higher.[1] However, the imperative for postsecondary education is challenged by substantial pressures:

- **Costs are rising.** Nationwide, the average price of studying and living on-campus at an in-state public university reached $21,447 in the fall of 2011.[2] Total student loan debt now exceeds one trillion dollars, surpassing even credit card debt.[3] The average debt load for Pennsylvania's students approaches $30,000, trailing only New Hampshire.[4] The drag of student loans is especially challenging amid a persistently weak job market for new entrants.

- **Support is declining.** While costs climb for students and families, 34 states have cut support for higher education in the last five years.[5] State spending for Pennsylvania's public postsecondary institutions decreased 15 percent from 2007 to 2012.[6]

Last winter, Governor Corbett created an Advisory Commission on Postsecondary Education to review the state's postsecondary system, and make recommendations concerning emerging challenges and trends, including in the areas of accessibility, cost, finance, and governance.[7] The Commission delivered its recommendations just this week and stakeholders and policymakers will examine these in the weeks and months ahead. This PACER brief seeks to provide context for this dialogue by reviewing research and policies on three tools that are often used to track and ensure the quality of public colleges and universities:

- **Performance funding** that links state appropriations with institutional results;
- **Data systems** that track student progress to better measure institutional performance; and
- **Transparency** laws that allow public access to institution and system records.

While accountability, per se, is not the express directive for the Commission, understanding how states try to ensure high quality, accessible postsecondary education may inform the discussion around the Commission's work.

The Pennsylvania Context

In his February 2012 budget address, Governor Corbett called for a "thorough, public, and candid conversation about how best to deal with the spiraling costs and…obligations" associated with higher education.[8] The Governor established the Advisory Commission on Postsecondary Education to lead this process, signing an executive order that formed the 31-member body consisting of institution leaders, state policymakers, and business officials.[9]

The Commission's recommendations, released earlier this week, examine a host of issues confronting the state's colleges and universities, both public and private.[10] The state's public institutions include the state-related Pennsylvania State University, University of Pittsburgh, Temple University, and Lincoln University; the commonwealth's 14-university State System of Higher Education; and its 14 community colleges. Together, these institutions educate approximately half of the state's 800,000 postsecondary students.[11] Pennsylvania's independent, or private, institutions educate the remaining half—a percentage far higher than the national average (46% versus 28%).[12] Private institutions include both non-profit colleges and universities and for-profit, or proprietary, schools.

Table 1 on the following page provides an overview of Pennsylvania's postsecondary institutions, including the number of students served, governing bodies, and types of degrees offered by each sector. It is important to note that each institutional class—and often the schools within each group—were established to fulfill specific missions, and are therefore accorded specific responsibilities under law. This diversity in institution type and mission is a key challenge in setting uniform policies around accountability and performance.

Table 1. Pennsylvania's Postsecondary Landscape

Category	Schools	Students	Governing Body	Credentials or Degree Offered
COMMUNITY COLLEGES	14	150,000	PA Department of Education**	Two-year associate's; certification in technical or occupational field
STATE INSTITUTIONS (PASSHE)	14	120,000	PA State System of Higher Education***	Bachelor's; graduate-level courses; master's and doctoral degrees
STATE-RELATED INSTITUTIONS	4	160,000	Individual boards of trustees	Bachelor's; graduate-level courses; master's and doctoral degrees
INDEPENDENTS (NON-PROFIT)	118	300,000	Individual boards of trustees	Certifications; two-year associate's; bachelor's; graduate-level courses; master's and doctoral degrees
FOR-PROFIT	83	72,000	Board of Private Licensed Schools	Certifications; two-year associate's; bachelor's; graduate-level courses; doctoral programs

* Number of students in each category obtained from source: PA Department of Education
**Each institution also has a separate governing board at the local level.
***Each PASSHE institution also has a separate governing board at the local level.

The accountability tools examined in this brief focus on public institutions. Table 2 provides a checklist of the accountability levers present in Pennsylvania and each of our neighboring states.

Table 2. Public Postsecondary Accountability Tools in Pennsylvania and Neighboring States

		Accountability Tools 1	2	3
		Performance Funding	State Data System Linked to K-12	Open Records
PA	2-year Public	✗	✓	✓
	4-year Public*	✓	✓	✓
	State-Related	✗	✗	✗
DE	2-year Public	✗	In Progress	✗
	4-year Public	✗	In Progress	✗
MD	2-year Public	✗	✓	✓
	4-year Public	✗	✓	✓
NJ	2-year Public	✗	✗	✓
	4-year Public	✗	✗	✓
NY	2-year Public	✗	✓	✓
	4-year Public	✗	✓	✓
OH	2-year Public	✓	In Progress	✓
	4-year Public	✓	In Progress	✓

* Pennsylvania's 4-year public sector consists of PASSHE and state-related institutions.

Accountability Tool 1: Performance Funding

Q A

What is performance funding?

Performance funding links a portion of public funds to institutional performance using a set of pre-determined goals or metrics. Over the last three decades, states have attempted to incentivize better performance and cost efficiencies in the public postsecondary sector by directly linking funding to student and institutional results.[13] Performance funding was established as a policy option in the late 1970s. Since then, its popularity has expanded, receded, and reemerged. For example, while more than 20 states have experimented with performance funding policies, half abandoned their programs. More recently, several states have again adopted performance funding, modifying the incentive structures in hopes of achieving better results. [14] [15]

Q A

What are common design elements of performance funding policies?

The specific components of any performance funding policy depend on the relationship between: 1) the policy's overarching goal, 2) the observed or measured outcomes, and 3) the established incentive structure.[16] There is considerable room for variation within each element, and designs have changed over time. Performance funding policies implemented between the late 1970s and the late 1990s—programs commonly referred to as *Performance Funding 1.0*—generally set bonuses ***above*** an institution's regular appropriation to reward:

- "ultimate," or long-term student outcomes (*e.g.*, graduation and job placement rates); and
- "intermediate" results (*e.g.*, retention rates and developmental education completion)—elements seen as preconditions to longer-term student outcomes.

These designs proved problematic due to questions over the appropriate amount of money needed to compel change, and the difficulty of preserving dedicated funding over time.

To address these challenges, more recent performance funding policies commonly embed funding incentives within an institution or system's base formula. This second wave of policies tends to place greater focus on intermediate markers of student achievement to reward improvements in student progress throughout the system.[17] Policies are also more likely to allow institutions to select certain targeted outcomes, providing flexibility in recognition of institutional diversity.[18]

How do performance funding policies differ across states?

Pennsylvania's experience with performance funding is contained within PASSHE, which voluntarily implemented a policy in 2003 to incentivize degree completion, academic program quality, faculty productivity, and overall institutional efficiency. PASSHE's recently-amended policy devotes 2.4 percent of the system's total operating budget, nearly $40 million, to promote improved institutional performance in 10 target areas, including five system-wide goals (*e.g.*, course completions, access for diverse student populations, development), along with five indicators selected by each institution. Institutions receive funding for every target reached, with the amount dependent upon the overall number of targets met system-wide.[19]

Ohio implemented a different approach, covering multiple public systems. From 1995 to 2009, the state distributed bonuses based largely on four-year graduation rates. In 2010-11, the state implemented a new formula to allocate all public university funds based on course and degree completion, weighting funding by program cost and number of need-based aid students. Ohio employs a separate plan for its community colleges, distributing five percent of funding based on remedial course completion, associates degrees earned, and transfers to four-year colleges; the percentage of total allocation awarded via performance funding is scheduled to increase to 30 percent by 2015.

In **Tennessee**, all public postsecondary funding is distributed according to separate performance schedules for two- and four-year institutions.

Washington's Student Achievement Initiative rewards two-year colleges with bonuses above annual expected appropriations based on student performance in specific courses, along with the number of degrees, certificates, and credits awarded.[20]

Table 3. Performance Funding Policies in PA, OH, TN, & WA

	Types of Institutions	Funding Embedded in Base or Bonus	% of Funding Based on Performance
PA	Public 4-year (PASSHE)	**Bonus**	2.4% of total operating budget (between $36 - $38 million)
OH	Public 4-year	**Base**	100% of state appropriations
	Community College	**Base**	5% of state appropriations; increasing to 30% by 2015
TN	Public 4-year	**Base and Bonus**	100%
	Community College	**Base and Bonus**	100%
WA	Community College	**Bonus**	In 2011, $1.15 million of state appropriation

"Over the years it was in effect, this accountability and performance-funding program achieved results. For example, four-year graduation rates increased from 26 percent to nearly 34 percent, while the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded annually increased by nearly 2,000, or 12 percent."

Dr. John C. Cavanaugh, Chancellor, PA State System of Higher Education

Q A

What does the research say about the impact of performance funding?

Studies indicate performance funding policies are associated with benefits such as increased awareness of state priorities and university performance, greater use of data in planning, and enhanced student services policies and practices.[21] In Pennsylvania, PASSHE leadership has credited performance funding with positive change in campus and institutional focus on system and state goals, and in contributing to student outcomes, including an eight percent increase in four-year graduation rates.[22]

Yet, broader effects on student outcomes have, to date, not been established. Research has not shown that performance funding yields positive returns for retention and remediation, for example.[23] Likewise, states with performance funding policies are not significantly outperforming states that lack these policies in the areas of degree completion and instructional productivity.[24][25]

Much of the existing research has focused on earlier performance funding policies. As the current wave of performance funding measures are fully implemented, it will be important to monitor outcomes across states and various higher education systems.

What are the potential unintended consequences of performance funding policies?

Performance funding can lead to a range of unintended consequences. By focusing on some measures and excluding others, states and systems can inadvertently produce perverse incentives to prioritize outcomes that can harm some students. For example, incentivizing graduation rates may cause institutions to limit college access for high-risk or disadvantaged students.

Performance funding can also be unpopular among college faculty and administrators. About half the states that adopted performance funding policies between 1979 and 2010 dropped or suspended their programs. Pushback from system leaders and unstable funding sources played key roles in the discontinued programs.

In addition, the recession in the early 2000s factored into the abandonment of performance funding programs in Missouri and Florida, while opposition from within the postsecondary sector contributed to shifts away from these policies in a number of states.[26] Factors contributing to discontinued programs include:

- **Lack of buy-in** – *e.g.*, performance funding policies were implemented without consulting the higher education professionals being measured;
- **Inadequate metrics** – *e.g.*, graduation rates that do not account for successful transfers, job placement rates that may reflect economic conditions rather than the quality of education;
- **Vague or easily manipulated measures** – *e.g.*, rewards allocated based on measures that are unclear or inappropriately influenced; and
- **Measures not reflective of institutional mission** – *e.g.*, rewarding only graduation rates at community colleges, rather than also recognizing transfer as a successful outcome.[27][28]

Best Practices in Performance Funding

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) outlines provisions that may ameliorate negative impacts or unintended consequences of performance funding.

PRINCIPLE	APPLICATION OR EXAMPLE
Institution and policy leaders should agree on goals before implementing programs	Clear objectives and goals should be at the center of performance funding programs
Create flexible metrics and designs	Institutions should have an opportunity to excel at different missions; different institutions should have different metrics; different resource streams should be used for different types of institutions
Reward success in underserved populations	Policies could reward improvements for low income, minority, or at-risk students
Cap the number of outcomes	Too many metrics risks lack of focus or competing goals
Use metrics that are difficult to manipulate	Number of graduates instead of graduation rates

*Dennis Jones and Jeff Stanley (2012). Financing change: Performance funding and the larger issues. SHEEO Leadership Seminar. NCHEMS and HCM Strategists.

Setting accurate, valid performance measures and tracking progress are the foundation of performance funding policies. Improvements in data collection and reporting provide reason for optimism surrounding the more recent performance funding programs.[29] We examine state policies in postsecondary data quality below.

Q A

Why are states investing in data quality across education systems?

The federal government requires postsecondary institutions to report information on cost, enrollment, degrees, and student success to receive funding for student aid programs.[30] Traditionally, postsecondary reporting was compartmentalized within a system or institution. In the early 2000s, as part of an effort to increase accountability for student progress and institutional outcomes, business leaders, lawmakers, and philanthropic groups pushed for data systems that could track individual students over time, and to follow students as they move across postsecondary institutions and sectors.[31]

The ability to track students individually as they progress through their education addresses a significant problem related to postsecondary success: one-third of students at public four-year colleges transferred at least once before earning a degree.[32][33] By creating databases that link information across institutions, policymakers and experts can better understand factors affecting dropouts or transfers, and the ultimate success of these students. These data systems—known as Student Unit Record Systems, or SURS—allow for focused examinations into the impact of investments on specific populations, and provide a more detailed picture of individual student progress.[34]

Over the past three years, federal investments have greatly accelerated the development of SURS within states. All but three states—Alabama, New Mexico, and Wyoming—have received at least one USDE Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems grant.[35] In the past three years, the federal government has invested at least $460 million in student data systems. The focus on linkages—connecting records across education levels—resulted in 34 states having the ability to track student progress from K-12 to college and the workforce.[36]

How does Pennsylvania's system for collecting data compare to neighboring states'?

Pennsylvania utilized three federally funded Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems grants to help build and expand its Information Management System, or PIMS. PIMS began collecting individual student records for K-12 students in 2007, later expanding to students in early childhood education, community colleges, and PASSHE.[37] The data system engendered opposition from some quarters of the state's higher education community based on privacy concerns and perceived administrative costs and capacity burdens. As a result, state lawmakers passed Act 24 of 2011, which placed a two-year moratorium on the state's collection of information not expressly required by state or federal law. Act 82 of 2012 eases the moratorium, allowing the Pennsylvania Department of Education to collect information if it is voluntarily provided by an institution of higher education.

Table 5, below, provides a glimpse of how Pennsylvania's SURS compares to neighboring states: the systems covered, whether the systems connect to the K-12 sector, and if the connection is required by state law or voluntary.

Table 5. Data System Linkages in Pennsylvania and Neighboring States

	Connection to K-12 Data		
PA	2-year public	Yes	☑ Voluntary ☐ Required
	4-year public	Yes	
	State-related	No	
DE	2-year public 4-year public	All Connect	☐ Voluntary ☑ Required
MD	2-year public 4-year public	All Connect	☐ Voluntary ☑ Required
NJ	2-year public 4-year public	No Linkages	NA
NY	2-year public 4-year public	All Connect	☐ Voluntary ☑ Required
OH	2-year public 4-year public	All Connect	☐ Voluntary ☑ Required

Accountability Tool 3: Open Records

In Pennsylvania, public access to records and information is another strand of the accountability discussion.

Every state in the nation has an open records law for higher education institutions receiving public funds. Yet these laws vary considerably across states. Pennsylvania's statute, once considered among the least open in the nation, was amended in 2008 to provide greater public access to government records.[38] The law affects the commonwealth's public postsecondary institutions differently. Pennsylvania's community colleges and PASSHE universities are subject to the same requirements as state agencies – they must assign an open-records officer to respond to appropriate requests for internal documents within five business days. Pennsylvania's state-related institutions—Penn State, Pitt, Temple and Lincoln—are exempt from this provision. Under law, these state-related universities are required to make annual reports for salaries of its officers and directors.[39]

Table 6 compares open records laws in the Mid-Atlantic states and Ohio. Pennsylvania and Delaware are the only states with records laws that do not apply to all public postsecondary institutions.

Table 6. Open Record Laws in Pennsylvania and Neighboring States

OPEN RECORD LAWS

	2-year	State System	State-Related
PA	☑	☑	☒
DE	☒	☒	
MD	☑	☑	
NJ	☑	☑	
NY	☑	☑	
OH	☑	☑	

KEY ☑ YES ☒ NO ☐ N/A

Conclusion

Stronger accountability measures, tying public resources to desired outcomes, and attention to data quality have been key tenets of the most recent wave of K-12 education reforms—from the push for standards-based instruction in the 1990s, to the present day. These same issues are now driving reform debates in higher education, with the potential for outsized impact given diminished public investments in this area in the wake of the recession. As Pennsylvania policymakers consider how best to ensure high-quality, efficient, and affordable postsecondary education, it will be critical to examine the experience of neighboring states, consult the growing research base on these questions, and to be attentive for the possibility of adverse impacts and unintended consequences.

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