



West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

Higher Education
News Clippings

Week of August 2, 2009



August 5, 2009

Byrd Announces Funding for Agricultural Research and Development

WASHINGTON -- Senator Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., has announced that the Senate has approved the FY 2010 Department of Agriculture Appropriations bill, which includes funding for several projects and programs throughout the State of West Virginia.

In addition, Senator Byrd included funding for several important research initiatives at West Virginia University, Marshall University, and West Virginia State University.

"The on-going research that is being conducted at these institutions of higher learning not only helps to ensure that the Nation's agricultural sector is flourishing, but that our natural resources are managed wisely," said Byrd. "In addition, these efforts by West Virginia scientists and researchers contribute to the Nation's efforts to increase conservation, productivity, and food safety. That is why I am committed to providing these funds for these research programs."

\$500,000 to the Marshall University (MU) Bacterial Source Tracking Project, Water Pollutants Database. This project will support environmental fecal source tracking and pathogen profiling in natural waters; research, education, and training of law enforcement in microbial forensics. Rapid identification of fecal contamination is paramount in reducing human exposure to pathogens and remediating the source;

\$500,000 for the West Virginia State University Agriculture Waste Utilization Project in Institute. This money will be used to continue work developing innovative and biological ways of utilizing livestock wastes by converting them into assets for the farmer. Environmental contamination caused by agricultural and other waste is a worldwide problem, and West Virginia State has been developing a technology that can contribute in alleviating and reducing these types of wastes;

\$484,000 for the West Virginia University Wood Utilization Program in Morgantown. West Virginia University will utilize this funding to further its role in the nine-state Wood Utilization Program which promotes forestry and forest products as viable contributors to the economies of each state. This project will focus on efforts to identify and promote economic opportunities for the state's wood products industries through applied research and technology transfers;

\$550,000 to West Virginia University for Aquaculture Production and Marketing Development. This will continue research and community outreach efforts on more efficient and profitable production of fish. Specific emphasis is given to marketing, cost of production and processing, product quality, improved production technologies, proper treatment and disposal of waste products, potential use of impaired mine waters, and technical support for state producers and processors of fish.

August 4, 2009

A Meeting Between Presidents

Morgantown, Monongalia County

New West Virginia University President Jim Clements is getting some advice from a man who knows what it's like to be the new guy in a college town in West Virginia, Marshall University President Stephen Kopp.

Kopp was in Morgantown on Tuesday to meet with Clements who officially took over as WVU's 23rd President earlier this summer.

"We've been trying to synchronize schedules and calendars and, I can tell you, having been through the new President experience, the time demands that you have are extraordinary just within your own University and I wanted to give him time to get his feet on the ground," Doctor Kopp said before Tuesday's meeting.

The two were scheduled to sit down over lunch.

"We're working together on some statewide initiatives that are in the queue and I want to get his take on some things," Kopp, who began work as Marshall's President in 2005, said.

Besides their job titles, Kopp and Clements have something else in common. Before coming to Huntington, Kopp served as a Provost at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

Clements came to WVU from Towson University in Maryland where he worked as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

August 3, 2009

Ky. dean is finalist for WVU health chancellor

The Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) - A dentistry school dean from Kentucky is the third finalist for the chancellor of health sciences at West Virginia University.

Sharon P. Turner, dean of the University of Kentucky's College of Dentistry, will visit Morgantown next week and participate in public forums on Aug. 10.

Turner has degrees from Winthrop College and the University of North Carolina, where she also completed a post doctoral fellowship with the National Institutes of Health.

She also has a law degree from North Carolina Central University.

The other finalists for the job are Peter Amenta, dean of medicine at New Jersey's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and Christopher Colenda, dean of medicine at Texas A&M.



August 4, 2009

Support a must for HSC chancellor

BY CASSIE SHANER The Dominion Post

WVU health sciences chancellor finalist Dr. Christopher Colenda said the person hired to fill the position will need to examine the education model, delivery of services and research opportunities at the Robert C. Byrd Health Sciences Center (HSC) to boost its reputation.

But Colenda, dean of medicine and vice president for clinical affairs at Texas A&M Health Science Center, said he won't be able to do it alone.

"No single person can lead without the support of the faculty, of the staff and of the students to be able to execute an agenda for growth, for expansion and for higher quality academic endeavors," Colenda said.

Colenda fielded questions from WVU's faculty, staff and students during two open forums Monday, the second and final day of his visit.

About 100 people attended a 50-minute forum for the health sciences community held at the HSC Patteson Auditorium. The other forum, intended for the main campus and Morgantown community, was held at the Erickson Alumni Center.

Colenda was the first of three candidates for the job to visit campus this month. Dr. Peter S. Amenta, dean of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, will visit today and Wednesday; and Dr. Sharon P. Turner, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry, will be on campus next week.

Colenda stressed the importance of integration and collaboration throughout the health sciences forum. During his opening remarks, he said Texas A&M Health Science Center has been able to grow its programs, increase faculty, expand research and double class sizes during the past seven years while still meeting the needs of the community.

Colenda joined the facility in 2003, after working at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, Wake Forest University School of Medicine and Medical College of Virginia at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"We have been able to serve not only our faculty, staff and also the students, but most importantly, we've been able to demonstrate to the citizens that at A&M, we're serious about community engagement and community involvement," Colenda said.

Jim Helsley, a clinical faculty member for WVU's University Health Service, described the state as "one big small town" and asked how Colenda would work with community physicians in West Virginia.

"There are a number of practicing physicians in the state, and there are numerous examples of communications with the clinicians in the state," Helsley said. "But there still yet are huge gaps and disconnects between the Health Sciences Center and the plight and the life of the physicians who practice and refer patients here."

Colenda said his mother was born about 35 miles from Morgantown and spent part of her childhood in Charleston, so he understands the state's community nature. He said it will be important for WVU to partner with local doctors and add value to the community by providing services that aren't readily available.

Partnerships will also be important for increasing state support for the HSC. Responding to a question from Michael Hurst, a faculty physician at the Morgantown

ENT Clinic, Colenda said the chancellor would have to work with WVU President James P. Clements to be persistent and communicate WVU's economic benefit to lawmakers.

"It's not a one-shot deal," Colenda said. "You have to develop relationships with those folks."

HSC Chief Financial Officer Wendy King asked Colenda to talk about tough financial decisions he's had to make, noting that WVU often has "a lot more mission than we have money."

Faced with budget cuts, Colenda said he's met with deans, faculty members and other officials at Texas A&M to decide how to economize and opted to cut the dean's budget to maintain academics. This year, Colenda said the school balanced its budget in the face of a \$2.5 million deficit by finding alternative ways to spend and save money.

After the forum, King said she was impressed by Colenda's response.

"There's not always a right answer or a perfect answer," King said. "But if you do have an answer that's well thought out and uses your life experiences to tell a story, that's a great selling point."

Julie Brefczynski-Lewis, a postdoctoral student doing research in radiology, said she was encouraged by Colenda's discussion of interdisciplinary education and research.

"He seemed very interested in bringing different schools and departments together," Brefczynski-Lewis said. "The emphasis on research was nice to hear."



August 6, 2009

Chancellor finalist: Good business can aid academics 2nd HSC candidate speaks at forums

BY CASSIE SHANER The Dominion Post

Dr. Peter Amenta, a finalist for health sciences chancellor at WVU, said good business practices can enhance and improve academic output at medical centers like WVU's Robert C. Byrd Health Sciences Center (HSC).

"Everything I've done in my career has been to preserve and advance the academic mission," said Amenta, dean of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. "If you're an academic health center, the key word is academics, and I have worked very hard to develop the clinical arena, financial support to grow the academics."

About 100 people attended a 40-minute forum at the HSC Patteson Auditorium on Wednesday to learn more about Amenta, the second candidate for the chancellor job to visit campus this week. A second forum for the main campus and Morgantown community was held at the Erickson Alumni Center.

Dr. Christopher Colenda, dean of medicine and vice president for clinical affairs at Texas A&M Health Science Center, visited campus on Sunday and Monday, participating in forums on the second day of his visit.

Dr. Sharon Turner, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry, will be on campus next week. She's slated to participate in forums on Monday.

During Wednesday's health sciences forum, Amenta said the Robert Wood Medical School has faced challenges in recent years, but school officials "have worked tirelessly to improve our financial situation" and made strides.

Asked how he would boost research at WVU, Amenta said he's found success with "The Virtuous Cycle," a model for academic health centers developed by Dr. Steven Wartman, president of the Association of Academic Health Centers. Wartman described the model, which recommends using clinical revenue to support academics, during a lecture at WVU last year.

But Amenta said it's hard to boost research much without increasing private donations and support from state and federal agencies.

"We're going to have to sustain what we have now and then fund it to try to grow it, and we'll grow it as quickly as we can," Amenta said. Growing too fast can also create problems.

Amenta said communication and trust are essential for success at any institution. Establishing trust and communication has helped to resolve issues between Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and Amenta said it could help solve problems at WVU, too.

He suggested building trust and increasing transparency to smooth relations between the HSC, WVU Hospitals and University Health Associates, the clinical practice arm for School of Medicine faculty.

Dr. Ansaar Rai, an associate professor of radiology, asked about the relationship.

“At best, it’s a wobbly stool,” Rai said.

Though Amenta said it’s hard to accurately evaluate the challenges facing WVU’s clinical operations in a two-day visit, pathologist Kathryn Skitarelic said she liked Amenta’s answers.

“He appears to be knowledgeable on the background of the university and some of the pertinent issues,” Skitarelic said after the forum.

Regardless of the challenges, Amenta said the ability to interact with the various disciplines — nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, medicine, etc. — included in the university’s health enterprise attracted him to WVU.

“I like the concept of having the authority, the opportunity to build interdisciplinary opportunities...,” Amenta said. “Coming to a school where the different programs are within the school gives us a great opportunity to build those programs and then build strengths across the entire academic health program, and hopefully throughout the entire university.”

Gail VanVoorhis, director of clinical practice and simulation for the School of Nursing, said she was impressed by Amenta’s interest in working across disciplines.

“That’s a good thing,” she said, adding that she had no concerns about Amenta’s medical school background. “I want him to be open to all of us in the medical center, and I think he will.”



August 3, 2009

WVU seeks CIO, again

Newly hired info officer quits before first day

BY CASSIE SHANER The Dominion Post

WVU is again seeking a chief information officer (CIO) to oversee the university's technology systems — less than two months after hiring someone to fill the vacancy.

Joe Norris, chief technology officer at East Carolina University (ECU), was hired in June to fill the position. He would have replaced Sid Morrison, who announced his retirement last December.

But Norris — who was slated to begin work July 16, reporting to interim WVU Provost E. Jane Martin — opted not to take the job for personal reasons. WVU spokesman Dan Kim said Norris notified WVU of his decision earlier this month.

“The university conducted a fair and thorough search, offered a position to a qualified candidate, and he accepted,” Kim said in an e-mail to The Dominion Post. “Unfortunately it didn't work out. He decided not to come. I think these things sometimes happen in business, government, higher education.”

Kim wasn't sure if Norris submitted anything to WVU in writing related to the decision, but he said any documentation would be confidential, as it pertains to a personnel matter.

Norris did not return calls to The Dominion Post in time for this report.

His wife, Kimberly Floyd, was also hired at WVU. Though Norris opted not to take the CIO job, Kim said Floyd will begin teaching this fall as an assistant professor for the Department of Special Education in the College of Human Resources and Education.

In a statement provided to The Dominion Post, Floyd said her experience is a good fit for WVU's preschool education program, and the special education department has a great reputation.

“I truly believe my experiences and expertise will blend nicely with the vision of the department,” Floyd said. “The town of Morgantown is very inviting. I love the small town feel of the city and the many oppor- tunities for families.”

She declined to answer questions of a personal nature.

Norris was hired by the provost, and Kim said the provost's office is debating what to do to fill the position now.

“They are considering their next steps,” Kim said. “They can take a look at the candidates they had or they may consider other options.”

An organizational chart for the Office of Information Technology dated July 1 lists the position as being vacant. The position is not listed on the WVU Division of Human Resources' online jobs bulletin.

Norris was one of several finalists for the job identified by an internal search committee. The panel included senior staffers in the provost's office, deans and other administrators.

WVU Faculty Senate chairman Nigel Clark also served on the committee, but he referred questions about the search to Senior Associate Provost Russ Dean. Kim said Dean is currently in charge of the Office of Information Technology, but he was not available for an interview late last week.

At the time Norris was hired, Kim said he would earn an annual salary of \$175,000. Morrison earned \$176,873.

Kim was not sure how much the initial CIO search cost WVU, but he said the university did not use a search firm.

“The costs would be limited to just travel, lodging and running a couple advertisements,” Kim said.

The Daily Athenaeum

August 5, 2009

\$5.3 million childcare facility opens doors

By Brian Young, Staff Writer

West Virginia University's new \$5.3 million Child Learning Center opened Aug. 3.

Located on Laurel Street beside Krepps Park, the facility can hold up to 184 children of all ages.

Construction on the facility started last fall. When combined with the new WVU Nursery School facility built next door, the total cost is \$8 million.

"General University revenue will be used to pay for the facility," said Liz Reynolds, associate vice president for Planning and Treasury Operations at WVU. "That includes any basic income the school gets like tuition or rent from businesses but would not include something like a research grant."

Currently there are 137 children enrolled, ages 6 months to school-age. Children of WVU faculty members and students are given first priority when signing up.

"About one-third of the children enrolled are children of WVU students, 45 percent are the children of WVU faculty," said Diane Rudash, director of the WVU Child Learning Center.

"The remaining are children of staff and community members."

Teachers employed at the center have the proper qualifications to work with children and have been training for two weeks prior to its opening. State required skills the staff must learn include CPR, first aid, food handling and administering medication.

"Eighty to 85 percent of our teachers have bachelor's degrees in child development and family studies," Rudash said.

All other teachers have completed a course that is comparable to an associate's degree.

The center is divided into two wings, one for children up to 2 years old and another for children between 2 years old and school age.

Children can be enrolled full time or part time, for anywhere from two to five days per week.

School age children can be enrolled in a before and after school program, which allows parents to drop them off at the center where they will ride a bus to and from school.

This allows parents to drop children off and pick them up at convenient times, Rudash said.

Protecting children is important at the center. The front door is the only way to enter or leave the facility, according to Rudash.

“Parents will punch in a four -digit number, which will allow them to come into the facility,” Rudash said. “They will then sign into a computer system and be able to escort their children to the classrooms.”

The center is managed by Hildebrandt Learning Centers, a company from Dallas, Pa., which manages 38 child care centers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The WVU Child Learning Center is the first Hildebrandt center in West Virginia.

Rudash, an employee of Hildebrandt, has 20 years of experience in the child care industry.

Before joining WVU, she was the director of the Lasting Impressions Child Development Center at the FBI complex in Clarksburg, W.Va.

Fairmont State students go the extra mile to save energy

By Ben Adducchio

Two students at Fairmont State University sacrificed part of their summers to research how to make the campus greener.

The students received a NASA grant to explore how the school can save energy on air conditioning and water consumption.

Standing on a roof, architecture student Justin Cullen looks like he is going to go base jumping. He wears a harness and is attached to a lifeline so he doesn't fall off the edge of the Technology Building on Fairmont State's campus.

Instead, Cullen is pulling a sunshade off the side of the building.

It's a part of a project he and Kiley Wilfong, another architecture student, are testing this summer to help reduce the school's energy costs.

The students are studying solar heat gain. They used PVC pipe, duct tape, and foam insulation to build a small sunshade.

They covered a fourth floor classroom window with the sunshade, comparing temperatures in that room with the room next door.

The room next door is shaded by traditional window blinds.

Kiley Wilfong says the sunshade keeps the room consistently lit without increasing the temperature.

"We found that it's usually about four degrees cooler in the room with the sunshade than the control room with the blinds," she said.

The students believe the use of sunshades can cut the costs of cooling rooms with air conditioning throughout the summer months.

They also say the school has a unique opportunity to become a model university in saving energy and becoming greener.

The second part of the project involves water consumption.

The students placed two water meters in one of the bathrooms on campus.

For seven days, they monitored how much water is consumed at the bathroom sink. Then, they replaced the aerator on the sink.

An aerator is the nozzle which controls how much water is released during use.

Justin Cullen says the new aerators are saving several gallons of water.

“Our original averages were around 40 gallons of water a day. That’s just an outstanding number,” he said.

“We put on our aerator, and we used about a third of the amount of water.”

The old aerators released more than two gallons per minute. The new aerators release less than half that amount.

Architecture Professor Phillip Freeman is advising the students.

He says there are two reasons why these methods are not used more often to save energy.

“There are design issues; you have things hanging over your building, so how do you integrate that,” he said.

“The other question is it’s more expensive to add things like sunshades and water saving devices,” he said, “we have to make them understand that in the course of two or three years, that up-front cost is paid back.”

The students plan to present a report to NASA with the results from their research.

They’re hoping Fairmont State will consider making changes based on their findings.

August 7, 2009

New leadership at Wheeling Jesuit University

By Keri Brown/Beth Vorhees

There's been a sudden change in leadership at Wheeling Jesuit University.

The Board of Trustees announced on Thursday that Father Julio Giuletti has left the school after two years as president to pursue his ministry.

University Vice President Davitt McAteer will serve as interim president. He says a search committee for the president's job will begin in the coming weeks.

"There are about 3,500 colleges and universities in the country and of that number about 12 to 15 percent change leadership every year. It is not unusual. I'm not privy to the reasons for the university's Board of Trustees action.

"I think we have had an increase in our enrollment this year, we have increased support in our Sponsored Programs area, and we are operating a balanced budget position so we are very positive about where we are and want to move forward," said McAteer.

Giuletti became Wheeling Jesuit's eighth president in 2007. He came to the school after teaching at Boston College and running Georgetown University's Center for Intercultural Education and Development.

August 3, 2009

Will Higher Education Ever Change as It Should?

By Robert Zemsky

The history of American higher education is well supplied with reform movements that have gone nowhere. Despite fervent calls for change in a number of areas, most often issued by a commission with an impressive masthead, nothing much happens—or worse, the only visible result is hurt feelings and a hunkering down by the college leaders on whom change depends.

But reform, while difficult, is possible. Consider Europe's Bologna Process, a decade-long effort in which the ministers of education from dozens of countries have put in place a process of extended consultation that has resulted in greater integration and cooperation. The process has gone a long way toward creating commonality and interchangeability among Europe's competing systems of higher education—and is being celebrated as a remarkable achievement in multinational reform.

What can would-be reformers of American higher education learn from that? First, the Bologna Process was conceived of as a multiyear undertaking. Second, it linked six sets of key actors: ministers of education, university administrators, student leaders, heads of international organizations, European Union bureaucrats, and policy wonks. And third, a limited number of goals were set, with clear benchmarks.

Would a similar process work to reform higher education in this country? Could the president of the United States ask the secretary of education to organize not a national commission, but a multiyear process? Could the 50 states work together and with Congress to create and carry out strategies to promote purposeful change?

Unfortunately, many people in American higher education would be uncomfortable with the idea of a federally organized process. Leaders of private colleges in particular would argue that the market, for all its imperfections, is a better gauge of what does and doesn't work in higher education. But the problem, as the economist Richard Vedder and others have noted, is that the classic rules of supply and demand apply at best imperfectly to higher education. In a market so awash with federal money—for research support, for grants and loans to students and parents—competitive pressures aren't sufficient to change the system.

Our previous reform efforts have also taught us that:

Strong rhetoric changes nothing—not even a clear indictment, based on what the reformers believe is overwhelming evidence, will shame the academy into changing. Demand for reform must be internal. Faculty members do not necessarily have to want to reform, but they do have to see in the proposed reform a means to a desirable end. Like outside reformers, state agencies cannot prescribe change (unless they are prepared for a long, exhausting battle) but must create the conditions that make change possible. Money can't in itself secure the changes reformers want, but unwillingness to invest new money almost guarantees that change won't be forthcoming—especially given higher education's practice of hunkering down when appropriations are cut.

It is best to focus on truly systemic change. The nature of the academy sucks the air out of piecemeal reforms. People lose interest, and old ways win out. Individual institutions can—and do—change, but their successes tend to pale with time because of the inertia in the system.

For true reform, we need a process that will change most, if not all, institutions simultaneously. What is required is a kind of dislodging event. Such an event might promote reform because the various parts of our higher-education system, despite their distinct missions and organizational arrangements, are linked to one another. What happens in one place is almost always translated into something happening in another.

Over the past three years, I have asked friends, colleagues, students, even potential adversaries, "Can you imagine a dislodging event of sufficient magnitude that it breaks the gridlock that now holds hostage any attempt to reform higher education?" My questions have produced three pretty good answers. Although none may prove feasible or desirable, they suggest that a dislodging event could in fact drive real reform.

Dislodging Event #1: Congress could metaphorically "nuke" today's federal student-aid program, and turn the experts loose to craft a system that supports participation, invests in motivation, and rewards institutions that use aid money effectively. Such a system would link what happens in schools more directly to what happens in colleges, involve better incentives for family savings, and get students—perhaps as early as sixth grade—actively engaged in planning and saving for college.

Jonathan Grayer, a former chairman and CEO of Kaplan Inc., has proposed, in fact, giving every sixth-grader in the nation a \$10,000 stake in a 529 plan—a federally guaranteed college-savings account whose value would grow as that of the federally monitored stock accounts increased over time. The impact would cascade across higher education. Colleges would have both the opportunity and the rationale to work early with school students in their neighborhoods. As a result, they might be committed to grooming and not just recruiting their students. Faculty members might also be more focused on understanding how their would-be students learn as well as determining what they know.

Federally funded 529 plans could even help spark a broad-based consumer movement in which students and their families learn early on to ask tough questions about the nature and quality of the higher education they are purchasing. The administrative side of colleges would have to rethink how prices are set, what services are provided, and what kinds of information would have to be routinely made available.

Dislodging Event #2: Institutions with big endowments have become like hedge funds: They use their accumulated capital to make money through the shrewd buying and selling of capital assets. It is not hard to imagine Congress passing legislation requiring college endowments to pay the same taxes on their earnings from their investments that other, similarly constituted hedge funds are required to pay.

A simple rule could differentiate the strictly commercial from the educational: All dividends, interest, rents, and realized capital gains would be taxed at current rates, but the money owed the IRS would be reduced by the amount of cash an institution withdrew from its endowment to support educational and research programs. In years when the money spent exceeded the growth in the value of the endowment, a credit would be awarded to offset future taxes.

Such a proposal would have little immediate effect on institutions with small endowments. But the megabillion-dollar endowments that often earn annual returns in excess of 15 percent would have to significantly increase their expenditures on education and research or pay substantial federal taxes.

Ultimately this dislodging event would have mixed consequences. Institutions with large endowments that appreciably raised their spending would flourish, and their students would benefit. The rest of higher education, however, could find itself increasingly disadvantaged. One result could be a drastic consolidation of the industry.

Or, if many institutions chose to pay taxes instead of spending more, an unintended consequence might be a renewed scrutiny of academe as a source of tax revenue for cash-strapped states and localities. The resulting fracas would draw state legislatures, and perhaps the public, into an examination of just when a college is an eleemosynary institution or is not.

Dislodging Event #3: What would happen if a Bologna-like process concluded that the standard undergraduate degree in the United States, as in Europe, should be a three-year baccalaureate? With more Americans pursuing advanced degrees, it makes sense to look for ways to shorten the undergraduate portion of their postsecondary education. For many college-ready students, the senior year in high school is something of a waste. More of that year's curriculum could be devoted to acquiring advanced college-ready skills in a foreign language, composition, and mathematics. What's more, an undergraduate education would then cost 25 percent less.

In many ways, the second-order effects of a shift to a three-year baccalaureate curriculum make the proposal attractive and establish its bona fides as a truly dislodging event. Suddenly all the questions about teaching and learning would be on the table as faculty members everywhere would have to wrestle with questions of how to teach what. To judge whether their shorter degree programs were achieving the same learning outcomes as their four-year programs had promised, they would find themselves in need of the performance measures they had hitherto eschewed. Technology might become a handmaiden of change rather than an educational add-on, while the balance between general and specialized education would have to be restruck.

Those are just a few examples of dislodging events. I am not offering a list of solutions but rather am recommending a fundamental change in how people inside and outside of higher education generally conceive of the reform process. To overcome the gridlock that, for most of the last half-century, has held reform captive, we must create conditions that foster change—even change for change's sake—such that those of us in higher education will own the results

Robert Zemsky is chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education, based at the University of Pennsylvania. This essay is adapted from Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming American Higher Education, to be published next month by Rutgers University Press.

The Engineering Dropout Myth

By Scott Jaschik

For years, one theory about the supply of engineering students has been that the field suffers from poor retention of students, especially women.

New research, from overlapping research teams, challenges that view. In fact, the study found that while engineering retention varies widely by institution and is indeed low at some institutions, it is not significantly lower than other fields. And women – though a minority in these programs – are as likely as men to remain in them.

The research suggests another reason for the numbers of engineering students being lower than many academics (not to mention politicians) would like: Engineering is much less likely than other disciplines to attract students who have started as majors in other subjects.

Of students graduating with an undergraduate degree in social sciences, the study found that only about half started in that field. For the rest of the sciences, about 60 percent started that way. But 93 percent of engineering degrees are awarded to those who started there, suggesting only minimal “migration” into the field, the researchers noted.

The findings are based on the Multiple-Institution Database for Investigating Engineering Development, which features data on 70,000 engineering students from nine institutions in the Southeast over a 17-year period ending in 2005. The database is managed by Matthew Ohland, an associate professor of engineering education at Purdue University.

While the data rebut the idea of retention gaps holding back engineering enrollments, they don't show a successful overall pattern in retention. The data in the study find that the nine institutions have retention rates, over eight semesters, of 66 percent to 37 percent.

The researchers argue that institutions with higher rates should be studied to find ways to emulate their practices. But overall, the authors argue the study suggests that the way to increase enrollments is to do better recruitment, and not just of freshmen.

In a statement, Ohland said that “a huge message in these findings is that engineering students are amazingly like those in other disciplines, but we need to do more to attract students to engineering programs.”

Given this finding, Ohland suggests that colleges look at policies that discourage transfer into engineering. For example, many colleges have multiple calculus courses, one for engineering and others for other fields. As a result, a business or biology student who becomes interested in engineering may be discouraged by the prospect of retaking calculus.

Some of the findings from the database analysis appeared last year in the Journal of Engineering Education. The other findings have been accepted for publication in the Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering.

The Challenge of Comparability

By Doug Lederman

It's hardly a coincidence that the push for colleges to measure and report how successfully their students achieve certain learning outcomes has been least embraced by elite, traditional institutions already perceived to be atop the higher education pyramid, and championed most by colleges with less name recognition or nontraditional approaches. The former would arguably have the most to lose, and the latter the most to gain, if evidence about student learning were to upend longstanding perceptions about which colleges did the best job.

So it's also not surprising that of all the accountability systems that have emerged from within higher education in the last few years, perhaps the most aggressive and expansive, a project known as Transparency by Design, has come from a group of primarily online institutions that serve adult students.

The system, which officially gets off the ground today with the launch of its Web site, CollegeChoicesforadults.org, differs from the accountability tools developed by groups of public (College Portraits) and private (University and College Accountability Network) colleges primarily because it aims to provide tangible information about students' learning outcomes in specific fields and programs -- in organizational leadership at Arizona's Rio Salado College, business administration at Kaplan University, and accounting at Franklin University, to cite three examples.

The site already does or soon will provide nationally comparable information for all participants in such areas as undergraduate student engagement (using nationally normed surveys), and alumni satisfaction (using a commonly agreed upon set of questions the colleges have agreed to ask their graduates).

Despite the lofty goals of Transparency by Design's leaders, though, the program has been ensnared in exactly the same kind of concerns that have imperiled or at least impeded other discussions of college learning outcomes -- difficulty in defining common outcomes among diverse groups of institutions, and worries about whether disclosure of some information will make some colleges look worse than others, hurting them competitively. After much discussion among the participants, leaders of the effort opted not to ask institutions to use common measures of program-level learning, but to be fully forthright about the measures they use and the results they produce -- information typically found buried deep within accreditation reports or institutional research Web sites, if public at all.

"We probably would have spent the next 30 years getting" to agreement about common outcome measures, says Michael Offerman, vice chairman of Capella University and chair of the project's executive committee. "We opted instead to lay things out that have been hidden or secret, and that's scary. It's not perfect, and for now it's the best we have. But we're going to figure out how to do it even better."

As political and other pressure has built on colleges to prove their performance and value, prompting various efforts in response, the participants in Transparency by Design (a list of participating institutions to date can be found at right) were motivated by their desire to provide information about colleges' performance for a very specific set of prospective students: adults (rather than traditional college-aged students) who were interested in studying via distance education.

While comparable mechanisms like College Portraits and U-CAN focused primarily on traditional undergrads, those behind Transparency by Design (the Presidents' Forum of Excelsior College and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education's WCET, backed -- what isn't? -- by the Lumina Foundation for Education) sought to differentiate it by emphasizing information most important to older students, who are likeliest to be viewing college as a way to bolster their experience and grounding in specific workplace fields.

The participants began with a working consensus (disputed by some in higher education) that, wherever possible, common definitions and measures were preferable. So they agreed, for instance, to use the National Survey of Student Engagement or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement for the section on student engagement, the Educational Testing Service's Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress for the section on general education learning outcomes, and the Priorities Survey for Online Learners, from Noel-Levitz, to assess the satisfaction of online learners. (Some of these data aren't on the site yet, but will be in the coming days and weeks.)

In addition, the colleges agreed to ask their alumni a common set of questions ("Is the education you received relevant to your current career?" "How satisfied are you that this institution helped you meet your program outcomes?") to try to produce comparable information about after-the-fact satisfaction.

But when it came to defining sets of common learning outcomes for specific degree programs -- Transparency by Design's most distinguishing characteristic -- commonality was hard to come by. There was widespread agreement, says Offerman of Capella, that the members wanted to provide "proof that you're really teaching people what they're there to learn." But defining that was difficult because of the wide diversity of institutions in the consortium, which includes for-profit universities (such as Kaplan and American Public University System) as well as public (Connecticut's Charter Oak State College) and private nonprofit (Southwestern College in Kansas and Franklin University) institutions, and the full gamut from two-year (Rio Salado) to primarily graduate (Capella University) institutions.

That mix, says Offerman, is "our blessing and our curse," the latter in terms of posing barriers to a common view of mission and approach. "You might think, how different can one accounting program be from another," he says. "But it was unbelievable the level of defensiveness that people had about the ability to differentiate among programs."

Instead of continuing to disagree over that, says Russell Poulin, associate director of WCET and project director for Transparency by Design, the group's members opted to require each institution to make public both the measures it uses to gauge whether students are learning what they're supposed to in specific programs, and its results. Most institutions use such information for internal purposes only, and "we are hopeful

that just by the whole act of sharing, we'll bring the conversation about what people are doing out into the open," says Poulin.

The initial information produced is not readily comparable, not surprisingly. Western Governors University's master's in business administration, for instance, uses a set of "objective," "performance," and "essay" assessments to judge what its students have learned, and lists its overall pass rate as 71.4 percent; Regis University's MBA, in turn, uses a 3.0 scale to rate student work from capstone courses on a set of rubrics, finding in fall 2008 that students averaged a 2.16 on communication and 2.50 on critical thinking.

A potential student may not have a lot to go on in judging his or her potential success in one of those programs based on that information, but the mere process of sharing results with one another has helped some institutional participants. "I've seen things in some of the other reports that make me think we're not performing at the level I think we should," says Karen Pedersen, vice president for professional studies at Kansas's Southwestern College, which is participating in Transparency by Design.

Going forward, the leaders of the consortium say they plan to add significantly more members and to continue to work through the program level outcomes and other issues on which they've yet to reach full agreement, such as how to report the proportion of students who make it through a given program -- a problem complicated by the fact that some of its institutions (like Charter Oak) focus specifically on degree completion, so that far larger numbers of students finish, but in many cases by completing a relatively small number of credits at the college.

They are also exploring a mechanism for the "missing piece" of the puzzle for adults -- employer satisfaction with the products of colleges' programs.

The site is a work in progress, and much remains to be done to improve it, says Offerman. But as with the other accountability systems that have emerged, he adds, "it's a step forward from where we are today."