

# Closing the Accountability Gap for Public Universities

## Putting Academic Departments in the Performance Loop

*Accountability programs become increasingly invisible on campus below the vice presidential level and academic departments are often left entirely out of the loop. That creates a disabling disconnect among societal concerns, institutional goals, and departmental aspirations. Adopting feedback loops with common departmental indicators can enhance accountability without threatening the unique nature of higher education institutions.*

by Joseph C. Burke

### Introduction

A fatal flaw in accountability initiatives is that they leave academic departments—the units most responsible for institutional results—out of the performance loop. A survey of institutional research directors in six states<sup>1</sup> suggests that state accountability programs become increasingly invisible on campus below the vice presidential level. Forty-five percent of the directors from two- and four-year public colleges and universities claimed their academic deans had little or no familiarity with accountability reporting in their states; 70 percent claimed the same of their department chairs (Burke and Minassians 2003). A similar survey on performance funding in five states<sup>2</sup> showed only slightly better results, with 40 percent of the deans and over 60 percent of the chairs admitting little or no familiarity with their state accountability program (Burke and Associates 2002). No planning process that leaves the units most responsible for academic results out of the loop can promote external accountability or improve institutional performance.

One of “Burke’s Laws” states that “the interest of academics in accountability is in direct proportion to its distance from their departments.” Decentralization is a hallowed tradition in universities. Currently, decentralization

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fosters a disabling disconnect among societal concerns, institutional goals, and departmental aspirations, the three links of public accountability and institutional improvement.

The 25 present and past leaders of leading public universities who compose the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities lamented, "The *uni*-versity has become an institutionally fragmented aggregation of departments" (Kellogg Commission 2000, p. 10). The Commission concluded, "If this proliferation of academic disciplines has yielded us today's public university, it has also encouraged what threatens to become a permanent lack of institutional cohesion" (p. 21).

Despite the complaints, the Kellogg Commission noted that "the departmental organization of academic life has been strangely absent from the reform conversation" (Kellogg Commission 2000, p. 31). A public university provost declared, "The current reform agenda envisions change at the institutional and individual levels but leaves departments out of the process...Moreover, by leaving departments out of the process, by default it makes them the natural centers of opposition to institutional change" (Edwards 1999, p. 27). The Commission reports have failed to alter departmental participation in higher education reforms. A search of the Web sites of the research universities of the Commission participants suggests that—despite their complaints about "fragmented universities"—their departments still remain strangely absent from the reform movement.

### **Accountability: Departments Out of the Loop**

State accountability programs hold presidents, vice presidents, and even trustees responsible for meeting state and public needs in student access and attainment, economic development, and public service. But presidents, vice presidents, and trustees do not teach students, do research, or provide services. Professors organized in academic departments perform these tasks. Achieving accountability and improvement always depend upon departmental activities. The information disconnect between the institution and its academic units results in departments that remain largely unaware of state needs or market demands directed at their university, and perhaps all too aware of outside demands pressed directly on them, mostly for applied research. The performance disconnect between campus goals and departmental aspirations makes empty promises of institutional pledges and priorities.

The growth of interdisciplinary, entrepreneurial research centers funded by industry and government offers an alternative avenue for market forces and state priorities to reach the academic core of universities. But these centers may sacrifice the instructional function to applied research and may distort institutional missions. In any case, the disconnect between institutions and their internal academic units, including interdisciplinary centers, means that universities cannot measure their responses to market forces by linking them to campus missions and goals (Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence 1997; Tierney 1999).

### **The performance disconnect between campus goals and departmental aspirations makes empty promises of institutional pledges and priorities.**

Many academics like having their departments left out of the loop. They believe it bolsters their autonomy. But this neglect weakens rather than empowers departments in an era of rising external demands, falling state support, and increasing market pressures. Jon Wergin (2003) details not only the difficulties of getting outside interests into departmental deliberations, but also of getting the inside concerns of departments out to institutional decision making. Being out of the institutional loop leaves academic departments as inevitable losers in the competition with interdisciplinary centers and institutes that are attracting increasing support from industry and government.

### **Decentralization with Direction**

The answer to the problem is not to end decentralization in universities. Decentralization is crucial to knowledge creation and dissemination. The answer is to keep departmental decentralization but to add institutional direction. Combining institutional direction and departmental decentralization is the way to link both accountability and improvement—two goals often regarded as tendentious, if not conflicting (Ewell 2005). An alternate route in especially large public universities holds colleges and schools responsible for designated results and leaves to them the task of ensuring departmental contributions.

When outsiders even talk about direction on campus, academics often counter that colleges and universities are

not businesses. Colleges and universities are not businesses, but they are organizations and social systems. Organizations are collections of interrelated parts intentionally linked to accomplish overall goals. Social systems are combinations of interdependent groups joined to pursue common purposes (Senge 1994; Tierney 1999). The interrelatedness of organizations and systems requires connections between the goals and objectives of the whole and those of its parts—*something that many colleges and universities have lost.*

The Kellogg Commission makes the case for connections:

...we have created an intellectual landscape made up of mine shafts, where most of the mineworkers are intent on the essential task of deepening the mine without giving much thought to the need to build corridors linking the shafts (and the miners). We have become so poorly connected that we have fragmented our shared sense of learning, for both students and faculty. It is not the case that we need to abandon the mine shafts; they are essential as a source of new discoveries. But it is the case that we need to match our commitment to specialized academic units with stronger awareness of institutional mission. (Kellogg Commission 2000, p. 41)

## **Combining institutional direction and departmental decentralization is the way to link both accountability and improvement.**

The point is not that either institutions or departments lack accountability or improvement programs. Indeed, they may have too many, for in these initiatives more is seldom better (Graham, Lyman, and Trow 1995). Universities exhibit an array of accountability and improvement efforts, ranging from institutional to program accreditation and from outcomes assessment to program reviews and academic audits. The point is that these institutional and departmental programs are seldom connected. Internal performance reporting within universities could provide that connection by linking state needs, institutional goals, and departmental aspirations. Such a reporting system demands strong central administration leadership and appropriate faculty participation. Of course, both demands are easier to proclaim than provide.

## **Performance Reporting**

Performance reporting has become the preferred approach to accountability in the United States. Issued by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (National Center), *Measuring Up* grades the 50 states on their higher education results (National Center 2000; 2002; 2004). Forty-six states have some form of accountability reporting; most college or university systems and public institutions publish their own reports (Burke and Minassians 2003; Burke and Associates 2005). Despite all this reporting, doubts remain about the performance of higher education and each of the colleges and universities. In 2002, Pat Callan, president of the National Center, described the “national picture of higher education” as “one of unevenness and even mediocrity” (National Center 2002, p. 16). In 2004, he declared, “For the nation as a whole, our findings are not encouraging. They constitute...a ‘wake-up call’ for the country...” (National Center 2004, p. 8).

One reason for the poor performance is that states, systems, and institutions are asked to “measure up” on meeting societal needs in college/school collaboration, degree completion, job placement, and student learning. But few colleges and universities “measure down” to assess the contribution of their academic departments to meeting those societal needs. In short, they leave academic departments out of the reporting loop.

## **Institutional Goals**

Closing the accountability gap begins at the institutional level with clear goals, realistic objectives, and relevant indicators that reflect campus missions, state needs, and market demands. Though bows to state and campus diversity are always in order when discussing higher education in the United States, state needs and campus goals increasingly know no boundaries in a competitive world of knowledge and information. Public demands for access and equity in enrollments, college and school collaboration, degree completions and degrees awarded, increased knowledge and skills of graduates, and research and service activities that address fundamental issues and critical problems appear in every state and confront every campus.

Most public universities have developed performance indicators for reporting their results on societal needs. Too often, institutional priorities, goals, and indicators voicing

public purposes seem designed for external consumption rather than internal use. Presidents proclaim them at the institutional level and direct them at outside audiences. They rarely communicate them to colleges, schools, or departments as directions that should shape their programs and measure their performance. That failure is a prescription for poor performance. As Peter Senge (1994) says, "One is hard pressed to think of any organization that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organization" (p. 9). Another flaw is that the institutional priorities, goals, and indicators that really count in universities mimic the resource and reputation model of the *U.S. News & World Report* of admission selectivity, burgeoning budgets, and research reputations. They echo the ideals of provider-rather than public-driven institutions.

## The Throughput Model of Performance

Alexander Astin (1991) diagrams a simple production process in colleges and universities as I-E-O, with student inputs (I) transformed by the campus environment (E) into learning outputs (O). The environment reflects particularly academic processes—such as the curricular requirements and teaching techniques—that pursue the goals and objectives of a particular college or university. The programs and courses offered by departments in specialized studies and general education encourage the development of graduates who embody the academic goals of that institution. Unfortunately, the academic portion of the campus environment is seldom in practice tied closely to institutional goals. Given the fragmented university, the academic portion of the environment—especially general education—often lacks coherence.

## The Performance Loop Model

The design of *Information and Knowledge Loops* offers an alternate model to universities interested in meeting public purposes (see figure 1). It proposes a more complex planning and performance model, with academic departments as the critical part of the process. The model links state needs and market demands to institutional goals and objectives and connects them to college/school and departmental aspirations and accomplishments that in turn contribute to campus performance and goals. These feedback loops ensure both direction and decentralization.

Institutional goals and objectives and a limited number of common indicators provide direction that encourages departments to pursue campus aims. At the same time, the design encourages decentralization by allowing academic units to add their own aspirations in ways that not only contribute to institutional results but that also reshape campus priorities by providing feedback to institutional planning groups.

Each link on the loops is both an effect and a cause in the performance chain, receiving others' inputs and recording its own outputs to the process. For example, the goals, objectives, and performance indicators of institutions and of colleges/schools affect the activities and aims of academic departments, but departmental goals, objectives, indicators, and, especially, their results in turn affect the results of colleges/schools and the institution and can lead to revised campus goals. The feedback loops represent virtuous circles composed of "respond and revise," rather than vicious cycles consisting of "accept and submit" or the more common "receive and ignore."

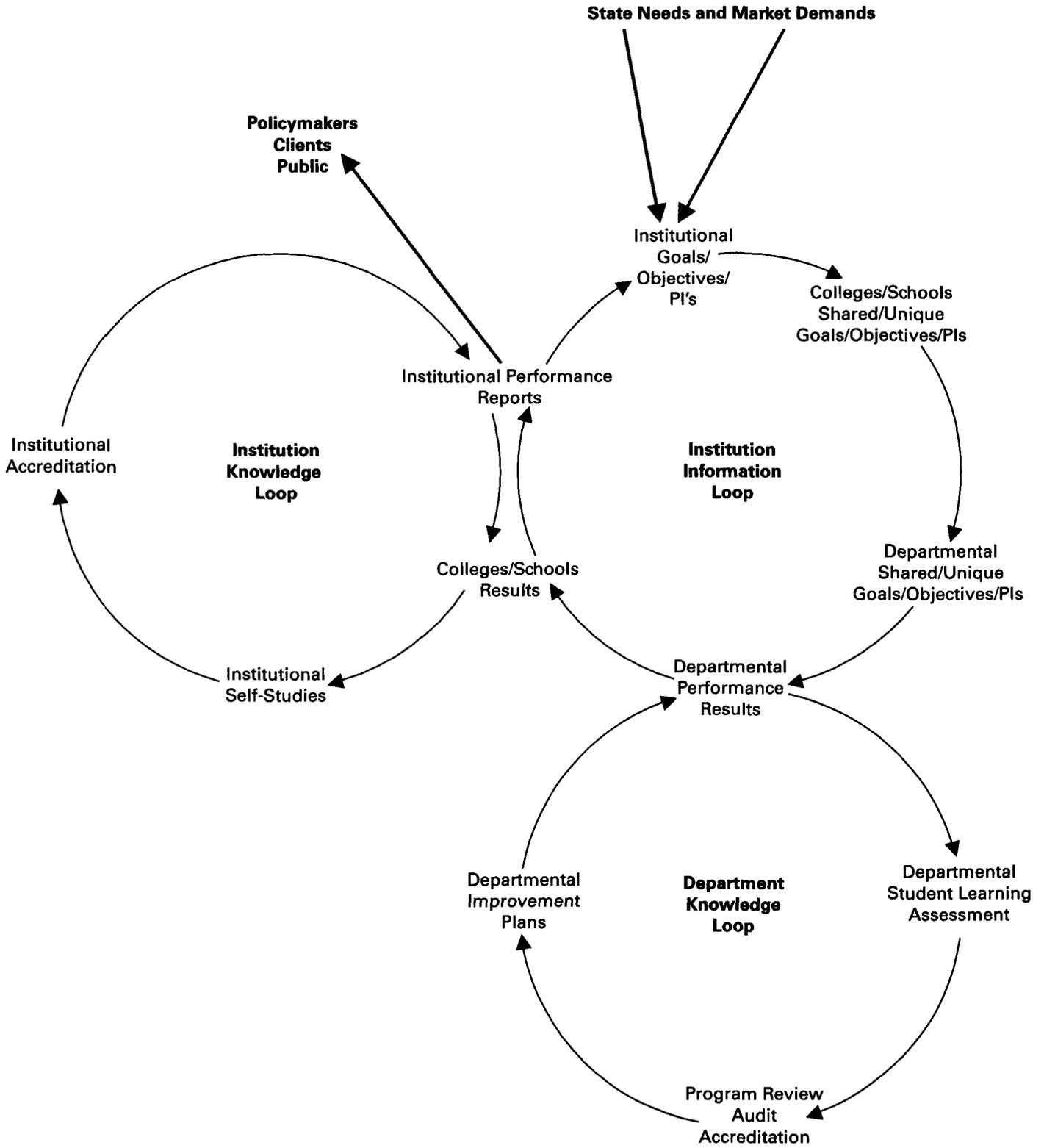
**Institutional level.** Identifying state needs and market demands represents the first step in planning for public colleges and universities. Governors and legislators often call public universities "unresponsive" to state needs and business leaders say the same about market demands. Champions of colleges and universities counter that state needs are seldom well defined and often change with election and market cycles. A recent work recommends that representative groups of civic, business, political, and education leaders develop a public agenda of what each state needs most from its higher education system, which should include both state and market interests (Burke 2005). Those public agendas would no doubt include student preparation and participation, college access and affordability, degree completion and job placement (especially in critical fields), civic engagement, and innovative research and public service that benefit states and society.

Despite the importance of responsiveness to external needs and demands, this first stage in the performance chain often becomes in practice the first of many disconnects. The performance chain often resembles an old string of Christmas tree bulbs—when one link breaks down, all the lights go out. Unfortunately, the performance chain in practice at many universities reveals more breaks than connections.

State needs and market demands, even when adopted in public agendas, do not—and should not—dictate a university's goals, objectives, or performance indicators. Dictation is rarely found and always fought on campus. Of

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Figure 1 **Information and Knowledge Loops**



course, institutional mission and type influence institutional goals, objectives, and indicators. Internal aspirations at the institutional and unit levels also affect institutional goals and objectives. At times, those aspirations are more felt than affirmed. Aspirations become effective when vision and values statements express what a university hopes to become and what its community holds dear, with some degree of specificity.

Institutional goals, objectives, and indicators should reflect those aspirations as well as relevant state needs and market demands. Determining goals, objectives, and indicators should constitute a community project on campus, not a top-down process (Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence 1997; Rowley and Sherman 2001). Trustees, administrators, professors, and student leaders should participate in developing these overall directions. One of the unintended and least desirable consequences of leaving departments out of the loop encourages the mistaken belief that the administration owns the institution and the faculty owns the departments, with the deans pummeled by both sides.

Aspirations and goals are often vague and unrealistic wish lists. Setting objectives and picking performance indicators should bring dreams down to earth. Objectives should state precisely how a campus intends to achieve its broad goals. Sadly, most of the goals and objectives announced by universities have a repetitive ring, whatever their campus type, mission, or location. They mimic traditional notions of quality in higher education based on resources and reputations, rather than reflect the distinctive goals and objectives that make their college or university different. Performance indicators test the progress in reaching those objectives. Indicators perform two purposes, both measuring performance and directing priorities. The first phase of the performance chain for universities demands realistic and distinctive goals, precise and related objectives, and restricted and relevant performance indicators. Goals, objectives, and indicators should not come as dictates from above, but rather should communicate institutional directions and priorities.

**Unit level.** Colleges/schools and academic departments should add their own unique goals, objectives, and indicators to those shared with the institution. The process asks how each academic unit can contribute to institutional goals, objectives, and indicators and what unique aims each would add, given its special expertise and interests. This participatory process should achieve the best and avoid the worst of both "top-down" and "bottom-up" planning. All

too often, especially in large research universities, the top never gets down, nor the bottom up. In the feedback loops presented in figure 1, each college, school, and department not only receives direction and information from the preceding unit on the loop but also adds its own direction and information to the feedback process.

**Institution information loop.** The planning diagram begins with the institution information loop (see figure 1), which conveys information about state needs and market demands to universities that then shape institutional goals, objectives, and indicators. These institutional goals, objectives, and indicators are shared with all colleges/schools and departments. Each of these units adds its unique goals, objectives, and indicators. Information on departmental results on both shared and unique indicators is then aggregated into college/school results that connect with institutional performance reports. After conveying institutional information to policymakers, clients, and the public, the performance reports complete the institution information loop by feeding back into institutional goals, objectives, and indicators.

**Knowledge loops: turning information into knowledge.** The information loop is insufficient, since information is not knowledge. Universities must do more than acquire information; they must create knowledge about producing results as part of their planning and performance processes. Information, unlike data, reveals relationships, but it does not impart meaning and significance. Knowledge consists of information assessed, considered, and judged. Only knowledge can generate the belief and commitment required for the reflective decisions and actions demanded to improve organizational results (Argyris and Schon 1996; Serban and Luan 2002; Senge 1994). Decision makers receive information, but knowledge requires reflection. Documents and reports formalize and codify explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is more elusive and collaborative. It involves the perceptions and insights that arise without being formally recorded. Their discovery often comes during dialogue among professors and professionals as they reflect about performance and results. The planning process must consider explicit knowledge but also create tacit knowledge (Serban and Luan 2002).

There are two knowledge loops in this process, one for the department and one for the institution.

- *Department knowledge loop.* The process of turning information into knowledge begins with the department knowledge loop. It starts with departmental

performance results, which includes at this point only information about results. The internal dialogue among department members about the departmental student learning assessment can convert this information on performance results into knowledge that contributes to improvement plans. Program reviews, audits, or accreditations, aided by the insights from external peers, also contribute to knowledge development as department members reflect on their collective performance on shared and unique goals, objectives, and indicators. These insights, perceptions, and judgments resulting from discussions on internal assessment and external review inform the departmental improvement plans that feed back into departmental performance results, which should convey fresh insights on performance connections among inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes.

- *Institution knowledge loop.* The institution knowledge loop continues the conversion of information into institution-wide knowledge. It begins with colleges/schools results and adds the perceptions and insights gathered from the dialogue between administrators and professors in preparing institutional self-studies and from reflections on the external reviews in institutional accreditation reports. The knowledge derived feeds into the institutional performance report, which also receives the information previously processed on the institutional information loop. The result is that the institutional performance report and institutional goals and objectives benefit not only from the information received about past performance but also from the knowledge derived from reflection on the inputs and processes that produced those results.

## **Performance loops ensure connections in a continuous process capable of producing institutional results.**

Critics will claim that this process is complex and burdensome. It is complex, but hardly more burdensome than existing planning processes and program assessments. Nearly all of the elements on the feedback loops are usually found in the planning and assessment processes at most universities. The information is collected, but all too often remains unconnected, unassessed, and unused. The

difference is that the performance loops ensure connections in a continuous process capable of producing institutional results.

## **Feedback Loops in Action: The Case of Florida International University**

Most universities fall far short of having the type of continuous process that conveys information on goals and objectives and creates knowledge about performance results. Florida International University (FIU) demonstrates that it can be done. This research-intensive university—enrolling 34,000 students in 18 colleges and schools and offering more than 190 bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs—has adopted a performance plan that is remarkably similar to that proposed in the performance loops. The leaders of FIU asked the critical question for any public university:

How can we institutionalize a performance assessment system that enhances the University's performance in three areas: first, meeting the needs, wants, and expectations of our students and other stakeholders; second, documenting our performance for stakeholder accountability; third, obtaining the performance feedback required to identify the opportunities for improvement needed to remain competitive in an increasingly competitive higher education environment? (Florida International University, 2003, p. 34)

A strategic plan using external and internal environmental scans and wide participation of the university community identified institutional goals and objectives. To ensure pursuit of those ends, the planning process at FIU produced a common set of performance indicators for all departments reflecting campus goals and objectives for use in assessing their performance results. In addition, departments also added unique outcome measures that match unit strengths to university purposes in instruction, research, and service.

The shared performance indicators include student enrollment, degree attainment, and retention and graduation rates for first-time and transfer students by race and gender. They also cover the percentage of undergraduate credit hours taught by regular faculty, sponsored research, faculty

publications, and percentage of faculty effort devoted to public service and to public schools. (The shared indicators include items for master's and doctoral as well as bachelor's programs.) Most of the common measures have an intended outcome of meeting or exceeding a three-year average for the department. The university Web site includes full information on departmental results on most of these indicators for the last three years, organized by colleges and schools (see [www.fiu.edu/oir/](http://www.fiu.edu/oir/)). The FIU performance process resembles the institution information loop in figure 1. It widely disseminates information on goals, objectives, indicators, and results at the institutional and departmental levels.

Though discerning knowledge creation is much more difficult than detecting information dissemination, the FIU process develops knowledge about performance that should stimulate departmental and institutional improvement. The departmental assessment of outcomes tracks unit performance on instruction, research, and service against established benchmarks. In addition, the examination of the responses from student, alumni, and employer surveys must contribute to faculty dialogue about departmental and institutional performance. A program review process, led by a representative campus council, feeds all of the performance information from departments—including results on the common departmental indicators—into a periodic evaluation using outside consultants. Those

reviews consider information garnered from program accreditation. The process is public, conducted in a university-wide forum where a department presents its review results along with its improvement plans.

FIU's departmental assessment and program review track the stages in the department knowledge loop. The public and collaborative approach of FIU to self-studies for undergraduate, graduate, and research activities and for institutional accreditation also suggests a process that incorporates many of the elements in the institution knowledge loop.

### Developing Departmental Indicators

Developing departmental indicators that reflect the common responsibility for meeting institutional priorities and state needs constitutes the most difficult step in performance planning. To identify some tentative departmental indicators, staff at the Rockefeller Institute surveyed the deans and chairs of two- and four-year colleges and universities in the City University of New York (CUNY) and the State University of New York (SUNY) systems (see figure 2 for survey statistics). The survey asked respondents to rank the appropriateness of indicators commonly found in performance reporting as departmental measures for internal reporting for public colleges and universities.

Figure 2 **Survey Statistics—Rockefeller Institute Survey of CUNY and SUNY Deans and Chairs**

	Responses Received			Total Responses Received	Total Surveys Sent	Percentage Received
	CUNY	SUNY	Unidentified			
<b>Two-Year Chairs</b>	23	141	0	164	420	39.0%
<b>Two-Year Deans</b>	3	26	0	29	52	55.7%
<b>Four-Year Chairs</b>	67	165	35	267	547	48.8%
<b>Four-Year Deans</b>	4	25	3	32	60	53.3%
<b>Total</b>	97	357	38	492	1,079	43.1%

Combining the survey responses with a consideration of societal needs, it is recommended to use the following departmental indicators. Most of the categories and many of the indicators intentionally resemble those from *Measuring Up* to provide the final link in a performance chain that reaches down to departments. Departmental indicators for internal reporting should also show trends over time and, where relevant, trends by race and gender.

- Funding
  - *Funding per FTE student.* Funding and results are not as synonymous as some academics say, neither are they as unconnected as some outsiders contend.
  - *Faculty trends, full and part time.* A number of respondents to our survey suggested the need for a measure that tracks the effect of declining funding on the increasing reliance on part-time faculty.
- Participation
  - *Enrollment trends by major and FTE.* The major stresses specialized education; the FTE illustrates the department's contribution to general learning.
  - *Two- to four-year transfers.* Our survey showed strong support for transfers from community college deans and chairs but also strong resistance from their baccalaureate counterparts.
- Completion
  - *Degree completion rates.* Access is only a promise; completion is the achievement. Institutional completion rates are really composites of very different completion rates by majors.
  - *Course completion rates.* This measure assesses the progress of part-time students.
- Societal benefits
  - *Degrees granted.* Degrees granted at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels contribute to the human capital so essential to economic and civic success in a knowledge and information era.
  - *Job placements/advanced education.* The first records the human capital developed, while the second develops it further.
  - *Publications, performances, and exhibits.* This indicator topped the favored list of baccalaureate deans and chairs in our survey. They seem to feel that sponsored research and patents and licenses should not apply as a common indicator for all

departments, but become a measure for those in relevant disciplines, especially at research universities.

- Student learning
  - *Student learning assessment.* Deans and chairs strongly supported the idea of student learning assessment in departmental indicators. The measure should follow an institutional plan that tracks not just assessment processes but also learning outcomes.
  - *Results from program accreditation, program review, or academic audits.* Respondents rated highly these programs that rely on external peer reviews.
  - *Department-selected mission indicators.* The deans and chairs endorsed including department-selected indicators that stress institutional and departmental missions and faculty expertise.

The good news is that the information for most of these indicators is already available at nearly all colleges and universities. The bad news is that presidents, vice presidents, deans, and chairs rarely use it to link institutional accountability to departmental results.

## Conclusion

Adopting feedback loops with common departmental indicators addresses many of the problems of achieving institutional accountability and improved performance. If properly implemented, feedback loops can:

- close the gap in the accountability chain by linking departmental, school/college, and institutional performance
  - combine departmental decentralization with institutional direction
  - achieve the advantages and avoid the defects of both top-down and bottom-up planning
  - reconcile external accountability and internal improvement
  - move outcomes assessment from the fringe to the center of campus priorities by linking departmental, school, and institutional results
  - link all of the quality assurance approaches, such as institutional and program accreditation, outcome assessment, academic audits, and program reviews
- Universities are unique institutions, but as organizations and social systems they must find ways to link the productivity of their parts to the purposes of the whole.

The information and knowledge loops incorporate concepts from strategic planning, systems theory, and knowledge management. These are not alien notions to higher education, for academics developed every one of them and advocated their use for outside organizations. Surely, the calls for additional accountability and improved performance suggest that it is time to bring these theories home to university planning. ■

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## Notes

1. Two- and four-year institutions in California, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin.
2. Two- and four-year institutions in Florida, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

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