Changing the Rules of the Game
New Research Seeks to Improve the Way We Measure Colleges and Universities

Washington, D.C.—How can we evaluate the performance of colleges when the students they serve are so different? A new series of papers and issue briefs could help answer that question. The papers, being released today, are part of a project called “Context for Success.” This two-year effort was led by HCM Strategists with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

With a focus on developing better assessment tools for driving accountability, HCM Strategists convened scholars to weigh in on both the theoretical and practical issues that should be considered in designing “input-adjusted” metrics for judging the effectiveness of postsecondary institutions. The basic premise of the work is that you cannot judge the outcomes of institutions without analyzing and adjusting for the various preparation levels of the students who enter the institution – the inputs.

The work was launched in recognition of the fact that while higher education attainment continues to increase outside the United States, the percentage of Americans with a postsecondary credential or degree has remained flat at 39 percent for the past 40 years, with minority attainment continuing to lag. In order to improve, U.S. education experts believe it necessary to effectively identify which institutions are most successful in educating their students by adjusting for the fact that students enter college with different degrees of readiness.

“Much like runners at a track meet, you have to recognize differences in starting positions,” said Charles Clotfelter, Professor of Public Policy and Professor of Economics and Law at Duke University, who chaired the meetings of scholars participating in the project and authored the project synopsis paper.

“If graduation rates are to be used to compare the educational effectiveness of postsecondary institutions, it is necessary to correct for differences in student preparedness or differences in educational ‘inputs.’”

As part of this project, the research papers were shared and discussed with policy and educational leaders who were asked to weigh in on the potential utility of the work in today’s accountability-focused environment. Already, one of the methodologies proposed for Context for Success has been integrated into the 2012 Washington Monthly ranking of colleges.
"In this age of heightened accountability, we have a responsibility to get it right when it comes to the evaluation of our colleges and universities. We hope this research will be useful as policymakers and the higher education community continue to seek better ways to measure institutional success,” said Dr. Kim Hunter Reed, HCM senior consultant and project manager for Context for Success.

The research papers released today, including two papers focused on community college assessment, apply or discuss each of three major approaches to outcome measurement: progression/completion, labor market outcomes and direct assessment of student learning.

In addition,
- Four of the seven papers focus mainly on graduation rates as an outcome measure.
- One paper uses graduation rates but also focuses on labor market outcomes as a measure.
- The authors of one paper examine how costs could be incorporated into input-corrected outcome measures.

All of these topics are timely and receiving much consideration in state houses and by members of Congress. In fact, just last month, Congress held hearings on higher education accountability and appropriate data collection for postsecondary education.

The project synopsis paper, seven research papers, literature review and accompanying issue briefs are available for download at http://www.hcmstrategists.com/contextforsuccess

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*Context for Success is a research and practice improvement project designed to advance the best academic thinking on postsecondary institutional outcome measures. The project was led by HCM Strategists, a public policy and advocacy consulting firm specializing in health and education, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*