



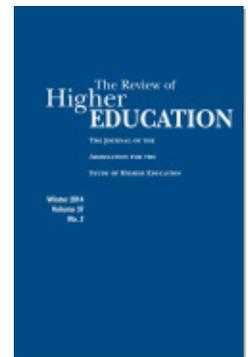
PROJECT MUSE®

What Does It Mean to Be Accountable?: Dimensions and Implications of Higher Education's Public Accountability

William M. Zumeta

The Review of Higher Education, Volume 35, Number 1, Fall 2011,
pp. 131-148 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rhe.2011.0037



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rhe/summary/v035/35.1.zumeta.html>

The Review of Higher Education

Fall 2011, Volume 35, No. 1, pp. 131–148

Copyright © 2011 Association for the Study of Higher Education

All Rights Reserved (ISSN 0162-5748)

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

What Does It Mean to Be Accountable? Dimensions and Implications of Higher Education's Public Accountability

William M. Zumeta

It is truly an honor to be standing before you today as president of this wonderful organization that so many people care deeply about and into which they put immense amounts of volunteer energy. I've been nothing but impressed during my presidential year by the range of ASHE's activities and the devotion of so many of its members. As a result, we are in the midst of a great conference program and have record attendance, estimated at around 1,350, a big increase over the former record of just over 1,100 set last year in Vancouver.

WILLIAM M. ZUMETA, the 2009–2010 president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, delivered this presidential address at ASHE's annual meeting November 18, 2010, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He is a Professor in the Evans School of Public Affairs and a Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, in the College of Education, University of Washington. He directs the Ph.D. program in the Evans School and serves as co-director of the interdisciplinary Collaborative Researchers in Education Sciences Training (CREST) program at UW. Zumeta is also a Senior Fellow of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and a Fellow of the TIAA-CREF Institute. Address queries to him at: University of Washington, Box 353055, Seattle, WA 98195; telephone: (206) 543-0743; email: zumeta@u.washington.edu.

Among those most devoted to ASHE have been its past presidents, a distinguished lineage, indeed, that I am proud and humbled to have joined. Some months back as I tried to conceive of what a presidential address should look like, I read a number of them. Fortunately they are published in our journal, *THE REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION*; and I want to thank my student, Robin LaSota, for helping to collect them. (By the way, two of my other students who are here, Alicia Kinne and Grant Blume, also helped with researching different aspects of this talk.) In any case, this reading assignment helped me get the idea of a presidential address (I hope so, anyway) as well as teaching me quite a lot about the various subject matters that my predecessors have addressed. I noted that several of them touched on public policy themes—the theme of this year’s conference, increasingly so in the more recent years. This thread, I believe, began with Pat Terenzini’s address in 1996, which made public policy a major theme and eventually led to the creation of ASHE’s Public Policy Forum. Several others also dealt with policy themes, including the addresses of Gary Rhoades (2004, published in 2006) and Sylvia Hurtado (2005, published in 2007), culminating in Linda Johnsrud’s address in 2007 (published in 2008), in which she called for higher education research that informs public agendas and their implementation and that speaks to broader audiences as well as to scholars and students. So, as I begin, let me thank my ASHE presidential “ancestors” for their shoulders to stand upon. None of them of course bear any responsibility for the ultimate result, which you are about to hear.

I’ve picked a big topic to talk to you about today: “What Does It Mean to Be Accountable? Dimensions and Implications of Higher Education’s Public Accountability.” I have found the topic of higher education accountability fascinating for a number of years, all the way back to my youthful years in California working in the state budget office on university budgets while studying as a Ph.D. student in public policy with Martin Trow. In our higher education policy seminar, which incidentally hooked me on higher education as a policy area to study, Professor Trow made us wrestle with the tensions between the idea of academic autonomy on the one hand and higher education’s public accountability on the other, drawing on the early writings of ASHE stalwart Bob Berdahl (1971) in this area, among others such as Lyman Glenny and Thomas Dalglish (1973). Trow had us work on definitions of autonomy and accountability that we thought applied to higher education and made us explore their implications in practice “on the ground,” in my case particularly around budgetary issues. But most importantly—to me, anyway—he helped us see that the way we think about accountability is a social construction and thus prone to vary from place to place and time to time. So today, in addition to offering some definitions and some context for the contemporary discussion of higher education accountability in the

United States, I'm going to try to provide some perspective on how and why the manifestations of accountability have looked quite different in different time periods in American history. My apologies to the historians among us who may think this survey too superficial and also to our comparative scholars for my America-centric focus. The topic of how higher education accountability looks across nations is surely a fascinating one worthy of attention. But I must limit my scope here.

From this American, and I hope historically informed, perspective I seek to illuminate a bit why accountability expectations for higher education are more demanding and elaborated now than in the past. I will say something about the challenges this expansion presents, about which I have written in more detail elsewhere (Zumeta 1998, 2000, 2001, 2005; Zumeta & Kinne, in press). However, I will also suggest that it offers some opportunities for the academic enterprise. If higher education—with some help from its friends—is able to address the challenges reasonably well while taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the more elaborated accountability demands, it may be able to see its way through the present gloomy period and all its negative trends to the dawn of sunnier days ahead.

To summarize this introduction and rationale for my topic then, I speak about accountability at a conference with a public policy theme because it is so fundamental. Public policies and the spending of public funds in a democracy inherently imply expectations for some form of accountability. Public accountability will not go away, so higher education needs to learn to live more comfortably with it.

DEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY

I'll begin with a simple definition of the accountability concept in its broader meaning: Accountability is responsibility for one's actions to someone or to multiple parties as a result of legal, political (in the best, constitutive sense), financial, personal, or simply morally based ties. So, if I give my son money to buy his college textbooks, I expect him to buy them and not a ticket to Mazatlan. He is accountable to me for his use of those "appropriated" funds. Similarly with colleges and those who pay us for our ministrations. Jacques Barzun in his *Teacher for America* (1945), reports that around 1900 the president of Princeton University responded to an inquiring parent, "Madam, we guarantee results—or we return the boy" (and presumably the money) (p. 13). Now that's accountability in higher education!

Thus, we are accountable for our doings and behavior to many people or entities in social life. Students are accountable to teachers for assignments and presumably for learning and, conversely, teachers are accountable to students to offer something useful in their courses, to be prepared, to provide

considered feedback and assessment of student work, etc. We are accountable to the norms of our various professions. Faculty members usually have several professional identities, each of which carries accountability expectations, not only as teachers but also as disciplinary or professional scholars to the scholarly norms of organizations like this one or a disciplinary analogue. Other academic professionals have similar professional accountability expectations to the clients for their services as well as to the norms and expectations of their particular profession, such as counseling or admissions or financial management. Furthermore, most of us have employers and thus are accountable to them for fulfilling the obligations of our contract. Finally, if you are a student, you are accountable not only to teachers but also to those who provide your financial support—at a minimum, enrolling for a certain number of credits and making satisfactory academic progress, and, more broadly, in some sense also to your family and community supporters. In sum, there are multiple forms of accountability in social life; and I would suggest that, by and large, these types of accountability relationships and the expectations that go with them are enduring. They don't change greatly over time.

Now let me turn to public accountability.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

In a paper I published in 1998 in a public policy journal, I used the term “democratic accountability” to refer to higher education’s responsibility to the citizenry in a democracy. Here I will use the slightly broader term “public accountability” to mean essentially the same thing. I am going to argue that the meaning in practice of this type of accountability—the expectations associated with it—are different from the types of accountability I just discussed in that public accountability’s meaning is subject to reinterpretation over time as a society and polity’s needs, values, and expectations change. One might think about this as the *social contract* between higher education and the supporting society of which it is a part. In 1973, in *Governance of Higher Education: Six Priority Problems*, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education put it thus: “No Holy Writ gives higher education a right to reasonable independence for institutional actions. No natural law confers upon it escape from public surveillance. The case for reasonable independence must be made with reasonable arguments” (p. 22). And, I would assert, these arguments must reside in honestly and successfully serving broad societal interests, or what I like to call *public purposes*, which can vary over time.

At one point, for instance, a society may signal that highly autonomous academic institutions are thought to serve the society best and so laws, regulations, and budgets are written to provide for limited oversight. But as needs or values change, the society and its political institutions can decide to rewrite

the contract, as reflected in such instruments as an institution's governance arrangements, the amount of direction built into its government-provided budgets, its reporting requirements, and even its state charter (specifying missions, etc.). Public policymakers' choices in these matters may not always be wise, but elected policymakers clearly have the ultimate authority to set the rules. Within constitutional limits, they get to interpret what accountability to the citizenry means at any given time.

To be sure, higher education can try to influence the debate about this interpretation. Some may want to argue that, in certain instances, policymakers are wrongheaded and higher education has a higher responsibility to the citizenry to behave in a different way than legislators may be calling for. But in this country, unlike in some European countries I could mention, it is pretty clear that the elected officials' views in the end will largely prevail since they hold most of the trump cards, at least as long as they are in office. The late 1960s and early '70s excepted, we don't have much of a tradition in the United States of taking higher education policy matters to the streets in the way that one sees fairly frequently in France or parts of the developing world.

Now, I want to offer a brief gloss on American higher education history pertaining to public accountability.

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY OVER TIME

The colonial colleges were neither public nor private in today's terms but were legislatively chartered and originally had both legislators and churchmen on their boards, as well as other respected citizens, to ensure a kind of social accountability for performance, or at least for behavior. Former ASHE President John Thelin in his *A History of American Higher Education* (2004) traces the idea of an external governing board to what he calls, "the new world college founders" and ultimately to the example of Scottish universities. These new world founders, he says, "detested the sloth and autonomy of the Oxford scholars" and faculty control of governance, preferring instead, "provision for ultimate control by an external board, [which] built in a mechanism for continual accountability" (p. 11). Legislators and clergy on the board could presumably be trusted to keep colleges' and students' doings in line with societal norms. This is clearly a form of social accountability. And it was not mostly about financial accountability in the modern governmental sense because the colonial colleges only episodically received public funds, usually gifts of land and the like, not annual operating budgets.

Eventually, after the landmark *Dartmouth v. Woodward* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1819 held that the New Hampshire legislature could not terminate the Dartmouth trustees at will under its corporate charter—which had been enacted earlier by that very body—legislatures began slowly

to see the wisdom of creating institutions explicitly accountable to them: institutions that we now call public colleges and universities. Only a few such institutions were created prior to the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862 but many more followed the Civil War. As states began providing more regular appropriations, of course expectations became somewhat more explicit; but by and large, for about a century, most states' operating budget appropriation acts were remarkably broad with respect to higher education and there was minimal after-the-fact reporting. Certainly one can find some prominent exceptions in regard to politicians' pet projects and cases of preferential appointments and admissions and the like, but I won't digress into those here. My point is that the corporate status of academic institutions and their governing boards of leading citizens provided a mostly effective check on the prevalence of such excesses. Interestingly, it was the corporate governance model, evolved in what we now call private colleges, that provided the basic model, with some adaptations, for the corporate governance form adopted for most public institutions. I'll just note by way of comparison here that this was a far cry from both British and continental European approaches to public university governance where faculty guilds and in some cases national ministries held much more sway.

Citizen governing boards, though without legislators and, in public institutions without clergy, retained a very important role in this period and long afterward in ensuring what was then considered sufficient accountability to society. The boards were of course still made up of leading, respected citizens, i.e., more or less social elites, so were not broadly representative of the population. Many groups were excluded and certainly still are not well represented. Thus, their true social accountability could certainly be questioned. Nonetheless, it is notable that, for the vast majority of U.S. history, it was felt that this nominal academic governance by leading citizens—even if the trustees did not normally exert strong influence internally within the institutions—was sufficient to ensure that both public and private colleges and universities responsibly pursued the missions provided for in their state charters. There was a general acceptance in this period, it seems, of the notion that such autonomous but broadly socially accountable academic institutions could best serve the public interest.

After World War II, the public sector of American higher education saw dramatic enrollment growth and many new institutions to accommodate it. Beginning with the GI Bill era, the public became hungry for higher education, and securing a college or university for one's electoral district was thus a political asset for elected officials and those seeking election, so there was a fierce competition for these prizes. As a result, in the '50s and '60s, many states established state-level higher education governing bodies to help referee the potentially costly competition for new public campuses. Notably, these,

too, were lay citizen boards and commissions, not standard state agencies run entirely by civil servants under a cabinet appointee. In higher education agencies, the citizen boards ostensibly directed the work of the civil servants. Federal legislation in 1972 encouraged the creation of these state-level boards, further empowered them, and provided strong incentives for broadening their purview to encompass private higher education. There was a great deal of variation, of course, in how this development played out across the 50 states. After all we are talking about the United States of America here!

Another important form of public accountability also emerged via state budgetary appropriations, which gradually—but then more rapidly in the '60s and later—became more complex and directive in many states in specifying how state dollars for higher education were to be spent. Over time, legislators and finance agencies became increasingly likely to ask if money had been used as intended and sometimes wanted answers at a fairly detailed level. They also began inquiring about efficiency in resource use. In other words, they cared about the *inputs* to higher education because state money was involved, but there was surprisingly little focus on *outcomes* of the spending such as what students learned or how many graduated.

Beginning in the 1980s, policymakers began to feel that more than citizen board oversight and budgetary specification was necessary to ensure appropriate accountability from public higher education. The outcomes revolution was beginning. Why? Here are six key factors that were at play.

First, growth in the size and expense of public higher education simply made it more salient in state budgeting, especially during the nasty recession of the early 1980s where unemployment peaked at a higher level than even in the current downturn. So it was natural to ask what the state was getting for so much of its money.

Second, that recession led many in the United States to look toward business-based methods, some imported, of quality improvement and cost control. (Remember Edward Deming and Japanese quality-control methods?) Application of these methods did not start with higher education and newer approaches go beyond them, but higher education was not exempt from such scrutiny. Indeed, as a publicly subsidized function and sizeable budget item, it would be surprising if it were exempt.

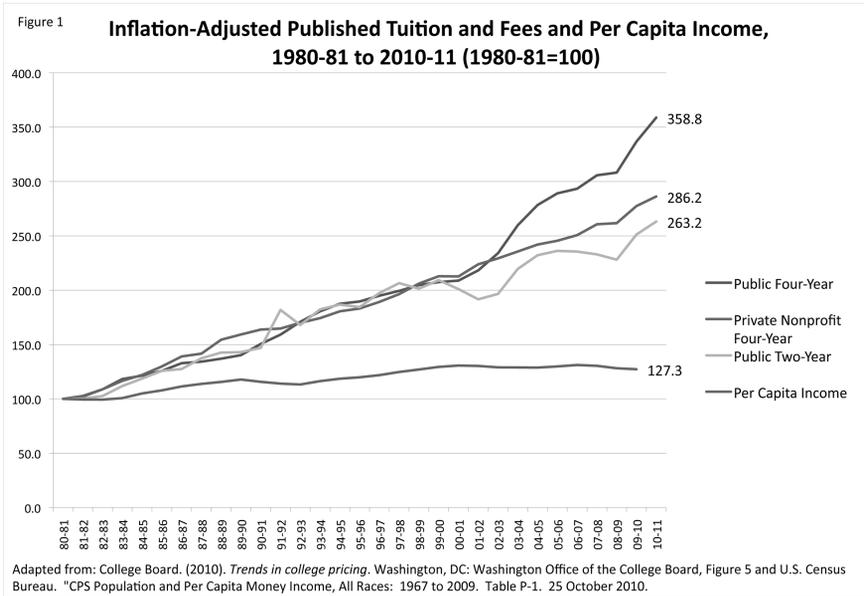
Third, it was in this period as well that we begin seeing commission reports and the like complaining about workers' skills. Remember that *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983. At first the criticism was directed mostly at K-12 schooling, as in that report, but it reached higher education by the latter part of the decade. Indeed, later surveys of the adult population, in 1992 and 2003, have shown a surprising number of associate's and bachelor's degree holders with weak practical literacy and numeracy skills, and the 2003 results were worse than those in 1992 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006b). The

growing push, including in accreditation standards, for colleges to demonstrate what graduates “know and are able to do,” culminating (so far) in the 2006 Spellings Commission report (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a), reflects in substantial measure these types of employer concerns that began in the ’80s. Of course, business is an influential employer and key player in governmental decision-making and a potential supporter of higher education as well as a critic.

To digress for a moment since I brought up the K-12 connection, certainly there is a danger that simplistic, No Child Left Behind-like notions of accountability for student learning could spill over into higher education if we are not careful. Higher education researchers, like those in ASHE, and spokespeople must present in a compelling way more sophisticated views of how to assess student learning credibly across diverse fields and varied goals if we are to turn these pressures to positive ends.

Fourth, scholars of state government have noted how much more professionalized many legislatures have become in recent decades with longer sessions, better educated legislators and professional staffs, and of course much more data and capacity to analyze it. These developments have enabled legislators frustrated with aspects of higher education (e.g., its cost) to dig more deeply and effectively into them. Also, with more of the legislators and their staffs holding one or more college degrees, they have been less inclined to be deferential to academic leaders and trustees than was the case in the past. Furthermore, more of them have children or grandchildren in college who come home for Thanksgiving with stories that make for colorful anecdotes to use in legislative deliberations, particularly about various manifestations of the alleged excessive focus of costly higher education institutions on research at the expense of undergraduate teaching and the like.

Fifth, the 1980s were also the Reagan years. Ronald Reagan had come to power as governor of California in the late 1960s on a crusade to “clean up the mess at Berkeley” and so was an early leader in the movement for closer scrutiny of higher education. (As it happens I was a graduate student at Berkeley in the early 1970s studying with Professor Trow, while also working for the state Department of Finance on UC’s budget, so I was right in the middle of this.) The Vietnam-era battles on campuses, backlash against affirmative action in its heyday in the late 1970s, and the subsequent generational “culture wars” certainly helped to hasten the breakdown of traditional deference to academe by state government. As evidence of the breakdown of deference, recall some of the following titles of “exposés” of what really goes on in higher education: *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Alan Bloom (1987); *Illiberal Education* by Dinesh D’Souza (1991); and *ProfScam* by Charles Sykes (1988). These were scathing critiques. While one might question how much influence these writings had, no legislator would have seen or heard anything like them 20 or 30 years earlier.



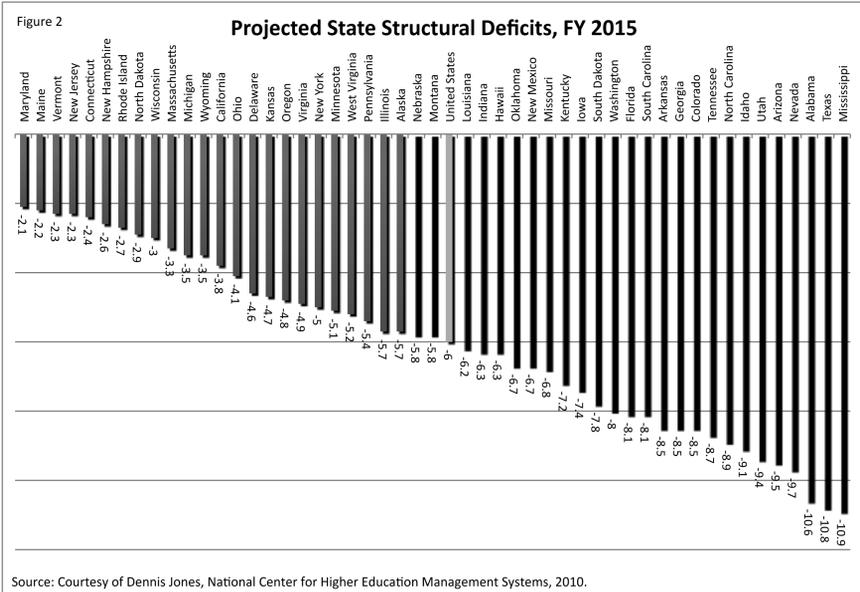
Sixth, during the Reagan years, the federal government became involved in an unprecedented way in critiquing higher education and also raised a new issue that has proven to have growing resonance with the public. President Reagan's Secretary of Education, William Bennett, used his bully pulpit in the mid-1980s to start complaining about higher education's costs, noting that the federal government pays for many students' tuition bills with grants and loans and so is a major stakeholder. This perspective represented a big shift—for the federal government to be worrying about the internal decision-making of academic institutions. Tuition had indeed started climbing in inflation-adjusted terms in the 1980s and has increased far more than growth rates in both inflation and family incomes in almost every year since. (See Figure 1.) We know that some of these rising costs result from the stagnation (and sometimes worse) in state support, but the fact that tuition has grown so much faster than typical incomes for so long and is now so expensive—while simultaneously, college is now recognized as so important to so many—virtually ensures that higher education budgets and even academe's inner workings get greater scrutiny. Simply put, voters and their elected representatives naturally ask, "Why does college have to cost so much?" And now federal officials are pushing at least as hard on this front as the states.

HIGHER EDUCATION'S PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY TODAY

So, what does all this mean for expectations about higher education's public accountability today? First, academic institutions clearly have an enduring responsibility to serve their fundamental purposes in creating and transmitting credible knowledge, for intellectual innovation (i.e., developing new fields, new ways of thinking, new materials, processes, etc., and creative artistic and humanistic work), as well as for public service and the offering of social and cultural critique where warranted.

To digress for a moment on this last point if I may, sometimes higher education or scholars within it can best do their duty to social or public accountability not merely by doing what their legislative overseers say they want but rather by seeking to educate them—and the citizens who in turn oversee the legislators—as to what they *should* want. Such an approach is surely appropriate and desirable as part of the public debate in a democracy, though it will not, of course, always be appreciated by all parties; and other viewpoints will weigh in, too. And in the current climate that emphasizes performance-based accountability and measurement, this function is hard to place in such terms. Rather, universities' performance in this area of public accountability has to be assessed by historians and philosophers as well as by enlightened citizens, editorial writers, and the like. That said, policymakers have a right to ask higher education to respond to responsible public policy priorities, e.g. educating *all* groups in the population in equitable proportions; in the present context, educating *more* students overall; and finding ways to apply academic expertise to social and community problems and to economic and community development where higher education is relevant, while being true to its fundamental teaching and research missions. Indeed, related to the previous point, higher education should be involved in public debates about the dimensions and specifics of such public priorities because it has relevant expertise as well as a public responsibility to be involved.

Public policymakers also have a right to ask that colleges and universities demonstrate, as other publicly supported entities must now do, with solid evidence and as rigorously as possible, not only what they are doing but what impact they have made. Failure to do this credibly will certainly disadvantage the enterprise in its quest for public support and financial sustenance in the contemporary context. Researchers such as ASHE members can clearly play a constructive professional role here. There are complex questions, to be sure, about how to represent accomplishments most accurately and without unintended consequences for behavior that merits scholarly attention. There are also many conceptual and technical problems associated with performance measurement in higher education that I have written about elsewhere (see esp. Zumeta, 1998, 2001) but will not focus on here.



Policymakers also have a right to expect efficiency—in the broad sense of that term—in higher education’s operations and to ask hard questions about them, to compare sensible institutional efficiency measures to those of appropriate peers, and to an institution’s past performance, and so on. This requirement was certainly never more true than in the current fiscal policy environment. In the present economic doldrums, which I expect to last in some form for at least half a decade (see Figure 2), it should be getting clearer to those in higher education that it is in their interest to rethink long-standing assumptions about how to educate more students with the resources they have, because it is unlikely that we will see much if any growth in per-student revenues for the foreseeable future. I’m convinced that the usual belt-tightening and waiting out the downturn won’t work this time, especially if the enterprise is to contribute to contemporary public goals to educate more people, as most of its members surely want to do. In the long run, plainly a more educated population is the only way out of the current squeeze in a knowledge-based, competitive global economy.

I am aware that, in past eras when enrollments increased and resources did not, degree productivity fell off, as has been well documented by economists Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2010). To me, this pattern implies that we can’t do more with the same resources in the same old ways, simply

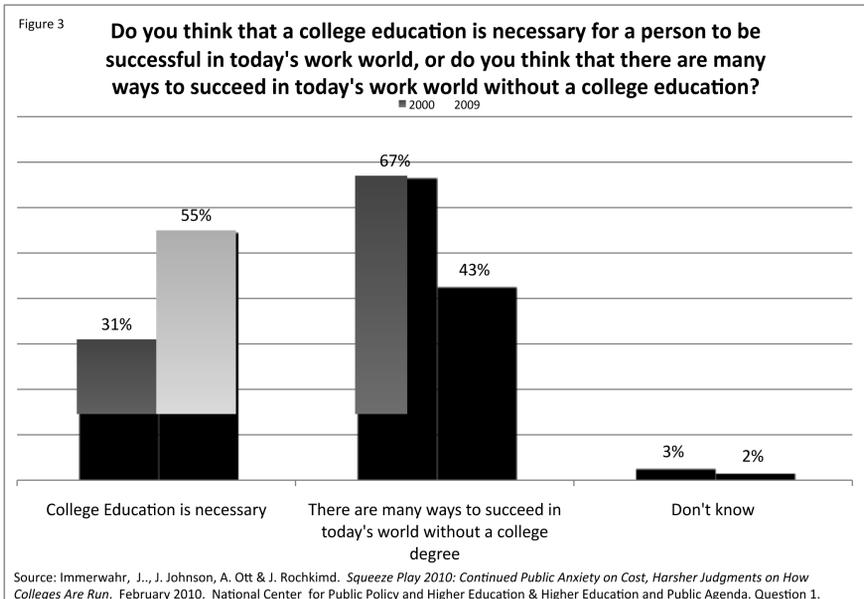
by adding more seats to our classrooms or hiring more part-time faculty. More fundamental changes are going to be needed; and one way or another, they are going to come—for example, trimming unnecessary credits, more efficient teaching methods using technology, and credit by examination for prior learning. Higher education can either take the lead in figuring out what these changes should be and how to implement them or will surely have less sensible and sensitive changes imposed upon it. In general, if higher education does not respond visibly to more ambitious public goals, even in tough times, its stock with citizens and legislators will just sink further, jeopardizing its support and ultimately its autonomy.

You may have noticed that most influential folks, including those in business, are finally convinced that higher education is important to the society's well being. Indeed, this realization has produced a sense that some articulate as "Higher education is now too important to be left solely to educators." We should look soberly at what similar sentiments have meant to our sisters and brothers in K-12 education who have had fairly crude forms of accountability imposed upon them. Higher education needs to engage policymakers and other key societal actors in forging a new social contract, or, as I prefer, *social compact*, around the goals and requirements of a quality higher education system and who has accountability for what.

A NEW SOCIAL COMPACT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

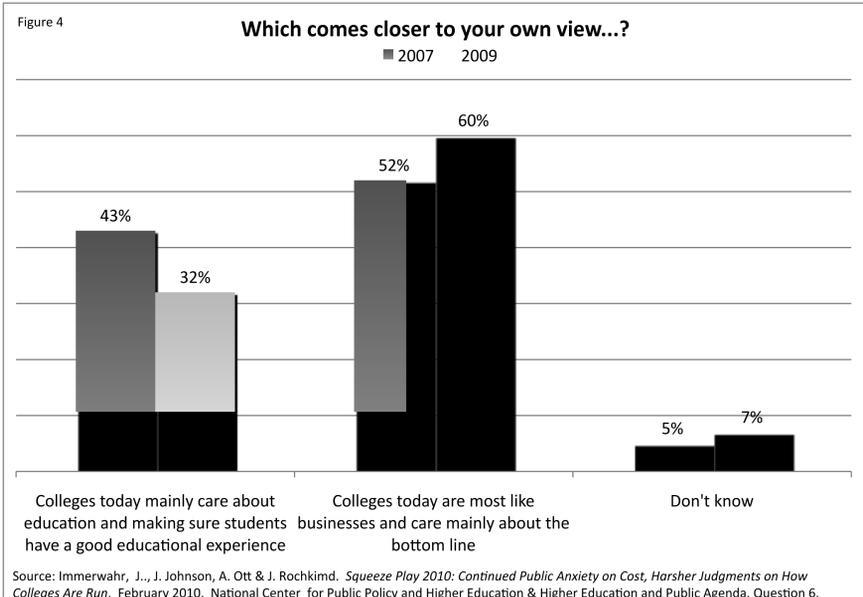
In my view, an unproductive stalemate has developed between those in higher education on the one hand who would like to reclaim their historic postwar growth pattern in public financial support and, if they don't get it, would turn to charging the students more regardless of the consequences for societal priorities. On the other hand are many policymakers, business leaders and, increasingly, other stakeholders, and just plain folks who want affordable higher education for themselves or their children (or grandchildren) and want to see degrees completed in a reasonable time. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda have been polling Americans about their attitudes toward higher education and related policy choices for more than a decade. Let me show you some sobering results about public attitudes that bear on what the future may hold for higher education.

- First, there is a strong trend toward widespread appreciation that a college education is "necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world." (See Figure 3.) So increasingly, people know how important college is.



- But, ominously, most people don't think that colleges care mainly about students. (See Figure 4.)
- Third, a majority think colleges could "spend less and still maintain a high quality of education." (See Figure 5.)
- Finally, when asked about how colleges should use stimulus money, nearly two thirds say that they should use it to "hold down tuition and fees even if it means they have less money to spend on operations." (See Figure 6.) This gives a sense of public priorities that is sobering, I think, and ultimately the public holds the purse strings.

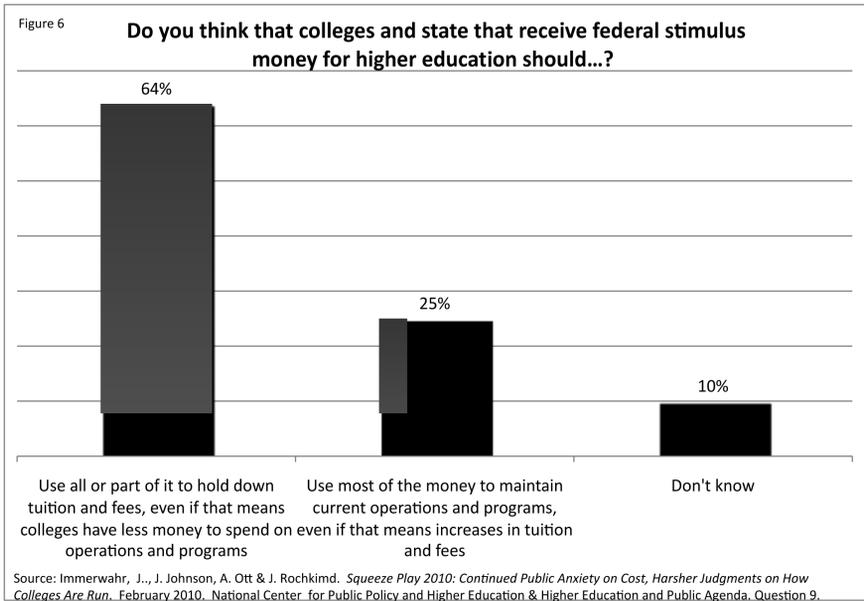
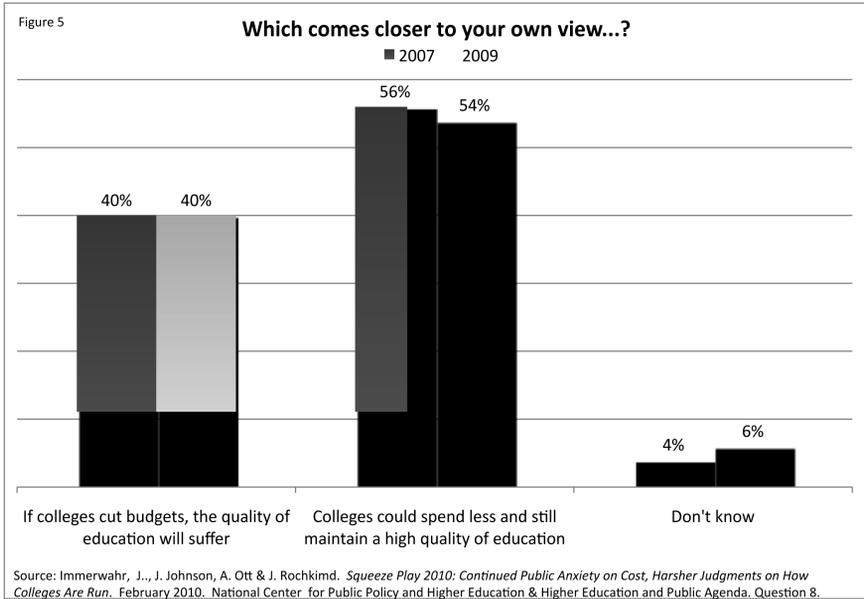
There are other disconnects that frustrate policymakers and citizens as well, some of which relate to the obvious inefficiencies in a system where colleges and universities and the K-12 education folks don't talk to each other and seek to align things better—such as curricula, assessments, and teacher training—so that far fewer students fall into the cracks between the education sectors. The same point applies to weak linkages between community colleges and baccalaureate institutions in many states as well. These are systemic inefficiencies that understandably frustrate policymakers and citizens in a world with very limited resources. (I'm developing a doctoral course, by the way, on why these disconnects are so persistent and difficult



to bridge and what might be done about it. Let's hope the students' research projects can produce some useful approaches to remedies.)

Fortunately, there is some potential common ground between these alternative perspectives on higher education policy—some of what one of my Ph.D. mentors called “negotiable terrain.” Higher education still has considerable public good will and respect, though it seems to be slowly eroding if one looks closely at trends in the public opinion data. If the public and their elected representatives can be convinced that we are all pulling in the same direction—toward the same ends, by and large—proving it with evidence of impact, and operating as efficiently as reasonably possible—probably not exactly as we do today and certainly not so disconnected from our K-12 brethren and sisters—then I believe there is a real prospect for some new investment once basic economic and fiscal conditions are better.

If we are truly now part of a knowledge-driven, human capital economy that is highly competitive internationally and this is increasingly widely recognized, then logically it should also eventually be recognized—hopefully before the proverbial frog in the pot is too warm to jump—that public investment in higher education is fundamental to keeping the economic (and sociopolitical and cultural) engines running that support everything else we want to do as a society. But I believe that serious new investment will only follow from an earned trust that additional resources invested will actually



bring more and better results that align with public priorities and will be used efficiently and in part to keep charges to students roughly in line with growth in personal incomes.

To me, this is the essence of what can be a “virtuous cycle” (that is, the opposite of a vicious cycle) by which visible accountability and performance lead to additional investment, which leads to more and better outcomes—e.g., more educated people, much greater equity, more successful economic development, a more enlightened society—and in the end, a more prosperous country, which in turn prompts further investment to produce more of these good things. I’m convinced that better goal alignment and clear accountability for accomplishing the goals are critical pieces that could break through the current unproductive stalemate.

To work well, any new social compact involving higher education must involve multiple institutions (not just the flagship research universities), needs to cross sector boundaries, and needs to involve our K-12 partners in a substantial way. Moreover, given the turnover in political players in state governments and the inevitable ups and downs of the economy, it is in higher education’s and the public’s interest to broaden the cast of serious participants in any new social compact around higher education to include nongovernmental players like business leaders and other employers, representatives of underrepresented populations, and the media, to name a few important stakeholders (Zumeta, 2007). Higher education has not been winning the “inside game” it has been playing with government, and this is not going to change; so, as our political science colleagues might say, it should seek to broaden the arena in which the conversation takes place about what higher education should be doing and how much it will cost. One key function of such broadening of involvement would be to seek to improve the stability of agreements within the social compact as individuals come and go and as economic conditions inevitably fluctuate. The idea would be to use more broadly recognized stakes and stakeholders to help hold both higher education’s and government’s feet to the fire when they are tempted to wriggle out of prior commitments, i.e., both to accountable performance from education and, on the state side, to reasonably stable funding (or, failing this, at least a commitment to the space for institutions to create secure reserve funds). Accountability has to be a two-way street in order to work well.

CONCLUSION: WHERE IS HIGHER EDUCATION IN THIS COUNTRY HEADED?

I am an optimist by nature so I will say that I see a bright future out there somewhere. Obviously there is a dense fog of adversity and uncertainty dead ahead at the moment, but I don’t think that fog is necessarily the long-term

future before us. We in ASHE know how important higher education is to the future of our nation and people. Other countries surely know it, and there are signs that our people and policymakers are getting the idea. It certainly helps that the President and many business leaders are on board, at least at the rhetorical level. This is a necessary step in the right direction though, of course, it is not enough by itself.

To sum matters up, a dismal future is clearly ahead for the country if we don't figure out how to educate many more of our people. And we simply must do it a lot more efficiently than we do now. Clearly the task will require new resources, but I believe we will have to earn most of those by demonstrating more transparently and compellingly what higher education does and can do for *all* the people and for society, the environment, and the economy, and proving that we do it reasonably efficiently and affordably. Other sectors have to make similar demonstrations now to justify their requests for public support, and higher education has a stronger case to make than most because what we do can ultimately *create* additional capacities and wealth, not just drain them.

Public accountability is inevitable—and always has been in some form—if you are a large, important institution in society, as higher education surely is. Higher education has a great story to tell, particularly in the contemporary world, and we should not shy away from telling it in rigorous terms. Demonstrating how what we do makes a difference can even help us learn things that make us better at what we do. Research findings from people like ASHE members can surely help a lot in this data-driven world to figure out how to do what we do better and how to show it more definitively and clearly. There are exciting and important tasks before us as higher education scholars. The world is watching.

REFERENCES

- Barzun, J. (1945). *Teacher in America*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Berdahl, R. O. (1971). *Statewide coordination of higher education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Bloom, A. D. (1987). *The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bound, J., Lovenheim, M., & Turner, S. (2010). Why have college completion rates declined?: An analysis of changing student preparation and collegiate resources. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2(3), 129–157.
- Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. (1973). *Governance of higher education: Six priority problems. A report and recommendations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Glenny, L., & Dalglish, T. (1973). *Public universities, state agencies, and the law: Constitutional autonomy in decline*. Berkeley: University of California, Center for Research and Development in Higher Education.

- Hurtado, S. (2007, Winter). Linking diversity with the educational and civic missions of higher education. *Review of Higher Education* 30(2), 185–196.
- Johnsrud, L. K. (2008, Summer). Faculty work: Making our research matter—more. *Review of Higher Education* 31(4), 489–504.
- Rhoades, G. (2006). The higher education we choose: A question of balance. *Review of Higher Education* 29(3), 381–404.
- D’Souza, D. (1991). *Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus*. New York: Free Press.
- Sykes, C. J. (1988). *ProfScam: Professors and the demise of higher education*. Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway.
- Terenzini, P. T. (1996). Rediscovering roots: Public policy and higher education research. *Review of Higher Education* 20(1), 5–13.
- Thelin, J. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- United States Department of Education. (2006a). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education*. A report of the commission appointed by Secretary Margaret Spellings. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Department of Education. (2006b). *A first look at the literacy of America’s adults in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Zumeta, W. (1998). Public university accountability to the state in the late twentieth century: Time for a rethinking? *Policy Studies Review* 15(4), 5–22.
- Zumeta, W. (2000). Accountability: Challenges for higher education. In *The NEA 2000 Almanac of Higher Education* (pp. 57–71). Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Zumeta, W. (2001). Public policy and higher education accountability: Lessons from the past for the new millennium. In D. Heller (Ed.), *Access, affordability, and accountability: The states and public colleges and universities* (pp. 155–197). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Zumeta, W. (2005). Accountability and the private sector: State and federal perspectives. In J. C. Burke & Associates (Ed.), *The many faces of accountability: Holding higher education accountable for performance* (pp. 25–54). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Zumeta, W. (2007). The new accountability: The potential of performance compacts in higher education. *National CrossTalk* 15(1), 12–13.
- Zumeta, William, and Kinne, A. (2011, in press). Accountability policies in higher education: Directions old and new. In D. Heller (Ed.), *Access, affordability, and accountability: The states and public colleges and universities* (2nd ed.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.