

## EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY: EVIDENCE OF BROAD CONSENSUS OR NUANCED DISSENT?

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Two nationally visible reports provide historical bookends on the persistent and commanding call for accountability in higher education. In 1986, the National Governor’s Association released a report entitled *Time for Results*, outlining a plan to reform education in the United States. One of the report’s major foci called for nationwide commitment on the part of institutional leaders to improve educational quality and to produce credible evidence of student learning (National Governor’s Association, 1986). Twenty years later, the *Spellings Commission* (2006) released “*A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education* that once again expressed the concerns of stakeholders in government, industry, and other major constituencies to improve performance and accountability.

Historically American higher education systems have been caught in swinging pendulum of autonomy vs. accountability. Stakeholder viewpoints regarding the purpose of higher education fluctuate between reserving higher education as a ‘privilege’ by favoring higher education autonomy and asserting that higher education should be an American ‘right’. This latter viewpoint lends itself to increased conversations and buzz about accessibility, accountability, and educational outcomes (Alexander, 2000; Mora & Nugent, 1998). Indeed, the call for accountability and outcomes driven assessment is the norm for all areas of the public sector, including corporate companies (Peters, 1992). This societal driven influence towards performance measures has led to the resurgence of multiple states adopting standardized metrics for state funded higher education which include financial incentives for short and long-term goals and outcomes (McKeown-Moak, 2013). To this end, a growing body of literature has begun to examine the impact of performance funding models

on higher education (Dougherty & Reddy, 2013; Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015; Rabovsky, 2012). For instance, in their examination of Washington State's 2007 adoption of performance funding model, Hillman and his colleagues found the policy change had little effect on community college associate degree production or retention rates, but increased the certificate production. In another related study, Rabovsky (2012) found that performance funding reform had a direct impact on university spending.

Though stakeholders seem to broadly agree on the need for improved accountability in higher education, a building body of evidence points to a lack of consensus among stakeholders on the best approach to do so (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2013). Through a six-state survey of employers, college and university executives and senior faculty, and elected state legislators, Bogue and Hall (2012) demonstrated points of difference between these major stakeholder groups on the purpose, instruments, and indicators of accountability. In a follow-up study to examine partisan (Republican and Democrat) differences among state-elected political leaders, Morse (2013) found a lack of agreement among policymakers on preferences for indicators of fiscal stewardship, student learning outcomes, constituent (i.e. employer, student) satisfaction, and faculty productivity.

Although an emerging line of inquiry has begun to explore stakeholder perspectives on higher education accountability, little is known about the extent to which employers share consensus or hold points of difference on a credible approach to demonstrate the attainment of performance expectations. Therefore, this study sought to examine whether employers differ on the purpose and indicators of accountability for institutions of higher education. Examining potential differences between employers by level of degree attainment and company size, the following research questions guided the study:

- To what extent do employers differ on the purpose of higher education?
- To what extent do employers differ on the purpose of accountability?
- To what extent do employers' attitudes toward accountability differ?
- To what extent do employers differ on indicators of accountability?

In today's educational landscape higher education leaders have a responsibility to answer to the calls of accountability from society which are largely driven by leaders both in the corporate and political sectors. However, it is still unclear the evidence that such stakeholders deem as acceptable to demonstrate higher education outcomes. This study explores this question and helps us to understand how higher education leaders may demonstrate their institutional effectiveness.

## **Contextual and Conceptual Background**

The *political frame* of Bolman and Deal's (2004) *Organizational Frames Model* served as this study's conceptual perspective. Bolman and Deal explain each of their four frames as a way of understanding and negotiating terms within an organization. They describe the political frame as the facet of an organization in which members advocate for their goals and interests, thereby leading to conflict where goals and interests do not align. In other words, from the *political frame* the authors posit that organizations are a product of the many thoughts and ideas that arise from a number of diverse people with various perspectives; and, these differences inevitably lead to conflict which must be managed appropriately. This process occurs via bargaining and negotiation, where the most powerful organizations are those whose members successfully leverage and broker favorable deals from various stakeholders.

The present study examines institutions of higher education as organizations which seek to build relationships with corporate stakeholders. To this end, representing their personal and/or organizational interests, employers have broadly advocated for evidence of higher education accountability that is credible and informative. Given the wide array of industries served by colleges and universities across the United States, institutions of higher education and corporate America are linked together in a high-stakes investment and thus serve as important reciprocal stakeholders to one another. Through Bolman and Deal's political frame lens, we assert that for employee stakeholders to effectively negotiate with institutions of higher education, it is necessary to establish consensus on acceptable evidences of accountability for higher education.

## **Research Design and Methods**

This quantitative survey study examined whether employers differ on the purpose and indicators of accountability for institutions of higher education. Examining potential differences between employers by level of degree attainment and company size, the following research questions guided the study:

- To what extent do employers differ on the purpose of higher education?
- To what extent do employers differ on the purpose of accountability?
- To what extent do employers' attitudes toward accountability differ?
- To what extent do employers differ on indicators of accountability?

We hypothesize that both the size of company affiliation and highest degree earned by the result in categorical differences between business leaders on their attitudes and perceptions of accountability measures in higher education.

### **Participants**

Participants were employers in business from six states: Tennessee, Connecticut, Georgia, Michigan, Colorado, and Oregon. These six states were selected to represent diversity within the United States on levels such as geographical, economical, and higher education landscape. The study included 186 total respondents, 34.9% were female and 65.1% were male. The majority of participants reported having more than 20 years of experience (66.1%) while an additional 14.5% reported 16-20 years of experience; 8.6% had 11-15 years, 7.0% served 6-10 years, and 3.8% had 0-5 years of experience. Of the six states, the largest number of respondents were in Tennessee (27.4%), followed by Michigan (19.4%), Connecticut (17.2%), Oregon (14.5%), Georgia (12.4%), and Colorado (7.5%). Employers were solicited by purposive sampling of the local chambers of commerce within the six states examined. Chambers of commerce were targeted as a means to obtain a variety of business leaders who represent every county within their state and whose leadership extends beyond their organization to the broader community.

### **Instrumentation**

Use of a quantitative survey design allowed the researchers to collect and compare relevant information regarding perceptions and attitudes of employers (Creswell, 2009). The instrument was created by the researchers and utilized single-response 4-point Likert scale answers to gain insights into employer perceptions on accountability policy in higher education. Several measures were taken to ensure reliability and validity. The survey was submitted to an expert panel comprised of faculty, administrators, and policy scholars nation-wide to provide feedback and establish content and face validity. Survey reliability was checked by utilizing the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient test (.89). The survey consisted of two parts: the first part collected demographic information (e.g. gender, years of experience, and highest degree earned), and the second part inquired about attitudes and perceptions regarding accountability in higher education.

### **Measures and Data Analysis**

The independent (i.e. grouping) variables for this study were company size and highest academic degree earned. That is, the researchers sought to determine if employer perceptions of accountability variability existed based on differences in the a) highest degree earned by the individual and b) the size of the company where the individual was employed. The variable *company size* initially consisted of six categories, but given the number of respondents in each category, was recoded into two categories for analysis, (a) 500 or fewer and (b) 500 or more employees. Similarly, the variable *highest degree earned* included six original categories, but was condensed into three categories (a) less than a bachelor's degree (b) bachelor's degree and (c) graduate or professional degree to ensure statistical reliability across each category.

Initial analyses revealed that, for several of the variables, expected values fell below the recommended five percent threshold for appropriate use of chi square analysis (Muijs, 2011). Therefore, researchers combined the initial four-point scales into two categories. The first question, *to what extent do employers differ on the purpose of higher education*, was measured by asking participants to indicate how important they felt various stated purposes were to the mission of higher education. Some purpose items included, *to develop economic/workforce development* and *to encourage student discovery of talents, interests and values*. Values were combined into two categories, 'not important' and 'important'. The second research question, *to what extent do employers differ on the purpose of accountability*, was answered by asking participants to rate the appropriateness of items as measures of accountability in higher education. Responses were re-coded into two categories, 'not appropriate' and 'appropriate'. Some sample items included, *institution achieves established goals* and *institution demonstrates fiscal and management integrity*. The third question, *to what extent do employers' attitudes toward accountability differ*, was answered by two questions asking participants about their attitudes towards accountability. Answers were re-coded into two categories, 'disagree' and 'agree'. Some sample items included, *accountability data submitted by higher education institutions can be trusted*, and *an effective accountability policy will improve student academic performance*. Finally, the fourth research question, *to what extent do employers differ on indicators of accountability*, was answered by four questions pertaining to the desirability of different forms of evidence to demonstrate higher education accountability. Three areas of accountability outcomes were assessed, (a) higher education enrollment profiles, (b) student learning outcomes, and (c) fiscal policy. Values were

indicated as 'not desirable' and 'desirable'. Sample outcomes included, *student retention and graduation rates and graduating students have knowledge about and appreciate other cultures.*

Data analysis proceeded in two steps. Frequencies were run on all variables to understand the general characteristics of the data and ensure enough variation across response rates. Second, although T-tests and Anova are typically used to measure group differences, the authors determined the four points on the dependent variable scales did not represent enough variety to appropriately be treated as continuous level variables. Considering the T-test and Anova assume continuous level dependent variables and ours were categorical in nature consisting of two or more independent groups, Pearson's chi square statistics were deemed the most appropriate approach to describe the relationships between variables and answer the research questions (Muijis, 2011; Vogt, 2007). Utilization of the chi square still allowed us to determine if there were significant differences in perspectives and attitudes of business leaders on higher education accountability measures among our grouping categories, company size and academic degree level.

## Findings

Examining responses among employers based on their highest degree earned and their company size, the researchers found points of difference on participants' perspectives on and preferences for accountability in higher education. These differences are presented here.

### **Accountability perspective differences by company size**

Significant differences between participants from small as compared to large companies were observed in four variables on perspectives of higher education accountability. For instance, chi-square analyses revealed that those employed in small companies were more likely to consider contribution to economic or workforce development to be an important mission of higher education as compared to their counterparts employed in large companies  $X^2(1, N = 170) = 3.98, p < .05$ . On the other hand, those in large companies were significantly more likely than those in small companies to agree that institutions that offer public evidence on education and fiscal performance provide an appropriate definition of higher education accountability  $X^2(1, N = 170) = 4.28, p < .05$ . Similarly, employers from small companies were less likely than those from large companies to consider entering academic ability (e.g. ACT/SAT scores, etc.) to be a desirable form of accountability evidence  $X^2(1, N = 170) = 4.29, p < .05$ . Finally, those from small companies were less

likely than those from large companies to view knowledge and appreciation of other cultures to be a desirable student learning outcome  $\chi^2 (1, N = 170) = 3.96, p < .05$ .

### **Accountability perspective differences by highest degree earned**

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if any differences existed on employer perspectives of higher education accountability according to the highest degree earned. Participants were grouped into those who had earned less than a bachelor's degree, earned a bachelor's degree, or earned a graduate or professional degree. Significant differences were observed on five variables. For example, those who earned a graduate degree were more likely than those with a bachelor's or less to agree that an effective accountability policy would improve public and/or government confidence  $\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 6.21, p < .05$ . Additionally, those with a bachelor's degree were less likely than their comparison groups to suggest that an effective accountability policy would improve transparency and candor on purpose and performance  $\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 6.31, p < .05$ . Those with graduate degrees were also more likely than those with a bachelor's or less to agree that a public poll (similar to Gallup poll) should be commissioned to gauge public confidence in higher education  $\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 11.75, p < .05$ , and were less likely to agree than their comparison groups that a student's entering academic ability was a desirable evidence of accountability  $\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 7.18, p < .05$ . Finally, graduate degree earners were more likely to find proficiency in analytical and critical thinking a desirable student learning outcome than other participants  $\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 6.24, p < .05$ .

## **Discussion**

We examined corporate perspectives on higher education accountability through the lens of Bolman and Deal's political frame, which posits that given unique backgrounds and perspectives, conflict within organizations and among stakeholders is inevitable and must be resolved via negotiations and bargaining tactics. From this point of view, the corporate sector must successfully negotiate with institutions of higher education and influence learning outcomes. To this end, it is necessary to understand and address areas of dissent regarding acceptable evidence of accountability. This study sought to identify areas where there was a lack of consensus among employers based on their company size and highest degree earned. Indeed, numerous points of difference on accountability preferences and perspectives were noted; these findings and implications are discussed here.

### **Differences between large and small companies on higher education accountability perspectives**

It is well recognized that the size of an organization shapes and influences organizational culture. In this study four differences in higher education accountability perspectives were observed between leaders who belonged to a small company as compared to those who worked for a large company. First, those at small companies were less likely than their large company counterparts to view the incoming academic ability (as measured by admissions tests such as the ACT or SAT) as an appropriate measure of accountability in higher education. One explanation for this finding may consider that leaders in small companies often wear multiple hats and are asked to tackle a wider variety of tasks than those in large companies. Perhaps, then, small company leaders are more interested than those in large companies in the variety of skills potential employees learned in college as opposed their ability to score well on a singular admissions test. In support of this notion, a report by the Business Roundtable (2001) reported that large business leaders supported standardized testing at the K-12 levels as a means to identify problem areas. Those demonstrating favorable attitudes towards standardized testing at K-12 levels are likely to denote favorable attitudes towards standardized testing at higher levels of education as well. It is possible also, that for large company employees, standardization exists as part of the organizational culture. Small company culture, on the other hand, may place larger emphasis on developing individual talents vs. standardizing and norming the work force.

We also noted that large company employees were more likely than those in small companies to consider the ability to offer public evidence on educational and fiscal performance to be acceptable accountability measures. We suspect that this finding may be demonstrative of a 'big business' led societal charge to demand discrete measures of attainment of stated goals from all areas of the public sector. As large corporations tend to be profitable and powerful, their leaders are often in positions to advance these ideas, contributing to what some have termed 'the corporatization of higher education'.

In our analysis, large company leaders were also more likely than small company leaders to consider knowledge and appreciation of those from other cultures to be a desirable outcome of higher education. On the other hand, those in large companies were less likely their their small company counterparts to consider contribution to the workforce an important mission of higher education institutions. It is plausible that these findings speak to the impact of globalization on our corporate sector. Large companies may be more affected by globalization by virtue of their size. To this end, employees in large companies may develop working business relationships with a culturally



diverse populations, particularly if their business demands that they are interconnected with people outside of the United States. The ability to foster and maintain relationships with culturally diverse populations would be viewed as valuable to the company and thus explains why those in large companies would deem it an important higher education outcome. By the same logic, small companies are more likely to be more localized, and less likely to be able to recruit internationally. Dependence on American higher education graduates to staff their organizations may explain why those in small companies were more likely to view contribution to the workforce an important mission for intuitions of higher education.

### **Differences between employee accountability perspectives by highest degree earned**

As people's personal experiences shape their perspectives, we examined how corporate employee perspectives of accountability differ based on their own educational experience as measured by their highest degree earned. We expected that those with higher levels of education may hold different views from those with lower levels. Indeed we observed significant differences between these groups on five variables. To begin, there is some evidence to support the idea that bachelor degree only recipients tend to be more skeptical of higher education than their counterparts. For instance, this group was less likely to agree that effective accountability policy would improve the transparency and candor of higher education on purpose and performance. It is unclear, however, if this finding is consequence of lack of confidence in higher education institutions in general or rather lack of confidence the policies designed to have an impact on higher education. Graduate degree holders, on the other hand, seemed to be more inclined to trust systematic methods of improving higher education. For example, graduate degree holders were significantly more likely to agree that a public poll, similar to the Gallup Poll, should be produced examining the public confidence in higher education. Similarly, grad degree holders were more likely to agree that effective accountability policy would improve public and governmental confidence. Taken together, perhaps these findings are demonstrative of the graduate degree holders overall confidence in the mechanisms in place to assess success. Bachelor degree holders, then, perhaps lack confidence in our collective ability to assess and fix issues with higher education.

## Conclusions and Implications: Evidence of Nuanced Dissent

Stakeholders will no doubt continue to demand that institutions of higher education demonstrate accountability. And, while there is a general perception that accountability is necessary, our study points to a number of differences on perceptions and attitudes of higher education accountability even within stakeholder groups. It stands to reason, then, that this lack of consensus as demonstrated by obvious differences regarding acceptable forms of evidence of accountability among and within stakeholder groups, make a difficult task of meeting accountability standards near impossible. Findings from this study have important implications for institutions of higher education and for educational stakeholders. That is, the observed differences presented here point to the need for college and university leaders to engage in dialogue with stakeholders to build awareness of the challenges to consensus on accountability that need to be addressed before acceptable practices and policies regarding higher education accountability are achievable. Our findings, which show there are considerable differences among what corporate stakeholders view as acceptable evidence of higher education outcomes and accountability, point to the critical need for university administrators to engage in further conversations with stakeholders to establish policy that accurately reflects their perceptions of evidence of accountability for institutions of higher education.

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