

VIEWPOINTS

Keeping Your Eyes on the Dashboard

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Higher education has come under increasing scrutiny from many segments of society, including students, families of students, state and federal politicians, and higher education agency officials. The high cost of higher education and the time required for undergraduate, professional, and graduate degrees are regularly criticized, and there is a perception that higher education is inefficient. Media stories have appeared where the value of higher education is questioned. Law schools have come under intense criticism for the relevancy of their curriculum, student debt load, and failure to place students in jobs within the profession. Because of these concerns higher education institutions, particularly public institutions, are being asked to be more accountable to the taxpayers, state citizens, and federal agencies.

In our state, the governor has called for universities to more broadly report key “dashboard” metrics such as student retention rate, graduation rate, and job placement statistics. Also, state officials are asking universities to demonstrate economic benefit, without clearly defining how that is to be determined. Typically, the call for dashboard measures is focused on undergraduate programs, but it would be a mistake to assume that the calls for public accountability apply only to undergraduate programs and not to professional or graduate education. The controversy over law schools should provide warning and guidance to colleges and schools of pharmacy about public accountability for professional programs as a flurry of class-action lawsuits against law schools appear to be in the works.

Pharmacy colleges and schools have put much effort into programmatic and curricular assessment, often driven by accreditation requirements. However, much of

the assessment measures do not address the major questions coming from those who are paying the tuition bills or from government officials. Colleges and schools of pharmacy should be prepared to provide dashboard metrics to their stakeholders to demonstrate acceptable institutional performance and efficiency. This includes greater transparency in tuition and fees, student retention rates, graduation rates, time to degree completion, pass rates on professional examinations, and job placement data. While some of these data are readily available, other measures such as determination of faculty productivity or economic impact are difficult to quantify.

There are limitations to dashboard measures. They are typically retrospective, often do not reflect important success measures, are not predictive of the future success for the organization, and may reward wrong behavior. While dashboard measures are important for accountability of pharmacy education, and colleges and schools of pharmacy need to provide this information, these data do not well represent the ultimate goal, which is to produce pharmacists who can improve health. Attention to dashboard measures is necessary and appropriate, but too much focus on them will distract educators and administrators from their most important goals.

Administrators and faculty members at colleges and schools of pharmacy should recognize the broad societal call for more accountability by institutions of higher education and the need to provide dashboard measures so that those outside of our universities are provided the information that they believe is important to make informed decisions about higher education. While educators are attentive to the dashboard, we need to remain focused on the road and the important goals ahead of us.