Using External Accountability Mandates to Create Internal Change

Planners can reap benefits for their institutions by being proactive rather than reactive and by aligning external mandates related to performance funding with long-term internal goals and the institution's mission.

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Introduction

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Performance-based funding in higher education has seen a dramatic increase since it was first introduced by Tennessee in 1978, although the largest increase of state-legislated performance-based funding has taken place during the past decade. In 1997, about half the states used performance measures to allocate funding to postsecondary institutions; by 2000, almost three-quarters of the states linked at least a portion of state funding to postsecondary results (Burke and Minassians 2001). While the portion of state funding tied to these mandates has been relatively small compared to the total amount of funding that is received from the state (less than 5 percent), it typically represents a significant percentage of a college's discretionary funds (Burke and Serban 1998). This legislative interest in linking state funding to college performance on outcome measures has coincided with increased public demands for colleges and universities to improve quality, productivity, and effectiveness (Peterson and Augustine 2000).

At the heart of performance-based funding is the development of state-mandated measures for college outcomes and the required tracking and reporting of these measures by postsecondary campuses. In the past, state

legislators were content to know a college's enrollment figures, the number of credit hours delivered, and the types of classes students were taking. Now they are demanding information that can be more directly linked to academic results, such as the percentage of students who persist past the first year of college, transfer to other institutions, and ultimately receive certificates and degrees. By linking these kinds of results to state allocations, many legislators are hopeful that performance-based funding can provide campuses with a strong impetus to focus on and improve student outcomes.

A reliable assessment of the effects of performance-based funding is not yet possible, since most state programs have only been implemented for a few years. Yet, according to early survey results, the impact of performance-based funding on overall campus outcomes has been moderate at best (Burke and Minassians 2001). Our research at a multicampus community college district in California suggests that even in a college that maintains a culture that is self-reflective about the impact of its services and outcomes, the implementation of externally mandated performance measures can create an evaluative environment that reinforces self-serving, rather than self-reflective, behaviors. Ironically, these self-serving behaviors can prevent the very change that mandated performance measures seek to accomplish: an improved understanding of how the college can have a greater impact on student learning and success. This article examines this dynamic and offers recommendations for its moderation through effective planning and management.

Setting and Research Method

This article discusses the results of a research study that was conducted at a large, multicampus community college district in California, with a combined enrollment of more than 45,000 students. Over the past decades, the district served a more regional rather than a strictly local population, and, as with many other educational institutions in the state, its student body has grown increasingly diverse. Two members of our research team spent 18 months as participant/observers in the district, taking part in more than 200 meetings and more than 70 formal and informal interviews with a cross section of administrators, faculty, and staff. These interviews focused on issues of data and information gathering, the analysis and sharing of data, and data used for decision making in the district. The team's

observations and interviews provided insights into the practices of organizational politics, reporting channels, and other campuswide behaviors and patterns that manifested themselves at the micro and macro levels. The observations and interviews were analyzed using a qualitative data-analysis software program (Atlas.ti), which enabled the team to code and search the information by thematic content.

The Context of State Accountability

In 1998, the state of California and the California Community Colleges inaugurated a performance-based funding program called the Partnership for Excellence (PFE). The program launch represented a commitment by the state legislature to earmark additional funding for the community colleges in exchange for the colleges' agreement to develop, track, and achieve, by 2005, systemwide performance goals to improve student learning and success. The performance objectives were built from the mission of the community colleges and specified five overall areas: transfer, degrees and certificates, successful course completion, workforce development, and basic skills improvement.

Through 2000–2001, the state appropriation to the community colleges for the PFE program was allocated by the community college chancellor to local college districts based on their FTE enrollment, with the understanding that districts would invest the funding in infrastructure and program enhancements that would increase performance on identified systemwide goals. The law that authorized PFE required the community college chancellor, in 2000–2001, to develop a contingency funding mechanism that would, if necessary, encourage greater efforts within the colleges to meet the systemwide goals through rewards or other methods. However, the contingency plan was to be implemented only if the board of governors of the California Community Colleges determined that systemwide progress in meeting the goals had not been satisfactory. As a result, the board determined that systemwide progress had been satisfactory. However, the PFE mandate was not refunded, which meant that the annual state appropriation to the community colleges would be allocated to the community college districts based on enrollment levels rather than progress toward identified PFE goals.

Within the initial statewide framework, each community college district was given flexibility, on an annual basis, as to how to allocate its PFE funding, which represented about 3 percent of the state's base-level funding for each

community college. Each district was required to submit an annual report of projected goals based on an analysis of actual district performance and comparisons to systemwide performance criteria. Particularly in the early years of PFE funding, this reporting requirement—as well as the prospect of having PFE allocations based on a reward system rather than enrollment levels—placed significant pressure on the community colleges to reconsider and improve how they tracked, analyzed, and reported data regarding student outcomes.

Internal Responses to External Demands

From the early interviews and observations of our research team, it was clear that the district we studied was actively engaged in continuous learning efforts geared toward the improvement of programs and services. Administrators, faculty, and staff paid close attention to the changing demographics of the student body at the college campuses and were engaged in several self-reflective efforts about how to best meet the needs of their students through improved performance of their own; that is, collaborative efforts were made to rigorously analyze data in making decisions and taking action. For instance, there had been a great deal of research and discussion on the effectiveness of how student service interventions could be used to improve persistence and completion. Many people—administrators, faculty, and staff—sought to determine the effectiveness and cost of various interventions, including tutorial centers and academic counseling. Moreover, the institution had a strong reputation for offering an innovative and flexible curriculum in response to meeting these student needs.

The institution's technological infrastructure for student data consisted of a flat, nonrelational database that used an assortment of software applications for data translation, access, and reporting. As a result, extracting data from the system was reported to require a high level of technical expertise. While many program heads, coordinators, and others reported dissatisfaction associated with the difficulties of accessing data from the institution's technology infrastructure, many had established creative ways to work around the system in order to gather and analyze the data they needed. These creative responses ranged from manually gathering and analyzing information to downloading data from the system into software packages for more sophisticated analysis. Many faculty and staff had active, informal networks for sharing this kind of information with others.

The district, meanwhile, was working to improve its ability, through expanding access to data and information, to better understand student learning and success. In the late 1990s, the board of trustees consolidated the research function for the colleges at the district level in order to facilitate district-wide data comparison and analysis. While the resulting arrangement sought to improve the district's capacity to respond to external mandates and to align district-wide policies accordingly, administrators, staff, and faculty at each campus reported a decrease in their ability to get answers to their own questions about important relationships between services and student learning. The district addressed these concerns by creating a district-wide committee to enable administrators, staff, and faculty to set new priorities for institutional research and to reorganize the research office to improve long-term planning, data gathering, and other information needs of the colleges.

In response to the opportunities represented by the new PFE funding, the district and college leadership sought to align internal objectives and processes to meet the goals that had been identified systemwide. Rather than distributing the funds based on enrollment levels within programs or other across-the-board formulas, the district developed a proposal process through which programs could apply for the new funding. This process required programs to set measurable goals for student learning outcomes and to design program evaluations to measure whether those outcomes had been reached. Funding was awarded to programs based on the quality of the proposals, their relevance to the PFE goals, as well as other factors such as their plans to monitor and evaluate their own program success.

Campus leaders conducted a series of meetings with administrators, staff, and faculty to inform them about the goals of the PFE initiative and to set forth a plan for how the district would respond to the new state mandates. The district also provided trainings to assist administrators, staff, and faculty in developing effective evaluation methods for their programs. These trainings consisted of developing models for collecting baseline data and brainstorming about ways to disaggregate data and collect additional information about their PFE-funded program's success. Participants were actively engaged in developing sophisticated questions about, for instance, key student transition points that might have an impact on student learning outcomes. In addition, they shared their questions and explorations across disciplines and departments.

At the same time that many people publicly voiced their commitment to improved outcomes, however, the research team observed that many people throughout the organization sought to buffer themselves from the possible consequences of the emerging evaluative environment. Specifically, we observed a great deal of resistance to taking part in PFE program evaluation. This ranged from engaging in rationalizing behaviors to deflect attention from their own program's possible substandard performance to resisting attempts to improve the institutional research function on campus.

Participants reported many examples that underscored their understanding of a chain of events that linked state-mandated accountability to internal evaluative contexts. For example, one participant described the state's requirements as serving to dilute the district's own institutional research efforts:

> To me, Sacramento has institutional research whipped into shape where all they know how to do is just fill in the blank, and that's kind of sad.

Other participants reported examples of people excusing themselves from engaging in any PFE outcomes research, due to problems they described as outside their control. Said one participant:

> Occasionally, I've tried to do research projects on my own and have big ideas of research to do using institutional research, but I've never really had the time to follow through with the actual ideas, and there has never been enough support from [the institutional research office] who can really do most of the work for me and help me construct the projects that I have. So I haven't really done heavy outcomes research or stud- ies of before and after, grades, things like that which I would really like to do.

Some faulted the organizational infrastructure as being insufficient to maintain accountability. For instance, one participant remarked:

> When you sit down to write a report, it's basically, a lot of it is conjecture, where you hope that things are going. And you're asked often by the chancellor or the president to improve rates of under-prepared students, and you have a really difficult time even identifying who is under-prepared, and then you're expected to set goals and rates that you can't measure. You can't be accountable if you don't have the data, and that's what we're finding.

Another participant explained:

> If I need a report or if I need information to do my job, I should be able to get it. Or don't ask me to do my job and don't ask me for reports. Don't ask me for information.

Administrators, staff, and faculty who sought to buffer themselves from the possible consequences of the emerging evaluative environment were also very aware of the link between state accountability and internal performance evaluations of programs. When asked to discuss their own performance, they frequently criticized the performance of others and the larger organizational structure as a way to rationalize their performance (see figure 1).

Figure 1 **Observations of Behaviors That Rationalized Resistance to Taking Part in PFE Program Evaluation**

Observation	Frequency
Directly criticized institutional research (IR) office to rationalize past performance	63
Blamed the larger organizational structures in which IR was housed	27
Rationalized their own past performance in other ways	25
Total	**115**

It is often difficult to differentiate between instances in which people employed rationalizing strategies and instances in which people offered critical feedback about the organization. In many cases, in fact, people can be

engaged in both at the same time. The key difference, however, involved the efforts made, on an individual and organizational level, to perpetuate rather than address these organizational deficiencies. For example, at this district, although many participants reported that the information infrastructure was insufficient for meeting the decision-making needs of administrators, staff, and faculty, during this time, the position of institutional research director sat unfilled for nearly two years while the position was redefined and renegotiated by those who stood to directly or indirectly lose power with the new hire. Here we see an example of organization deficiencies being perpetuated, rather than addressed and corrected.

An individual's behavior, in our view, was categorized as self-serving when it served primarily as a method for either minimizing responsibility for negative outcomes or maximizing positive evaluation or outcomes. Research has shown that it is not uncommon for employees to resist organizational efforts that might reflect poorly on their performance. For instance, individuals, when faced with the prospect of outcome evaluations, will present expected or actual poor performance due, as least in part, to those outside their sphere of accountability (Steele 1988). The need to view oneself as competent and adequate has been posited as a fundamental psychological motive for a wide range of behavior within an organizational setting (Bandura 1977; Steele 1988). People assert a level of competency by claiming that they are better than others in their environment or by asserting that while they may not be the best at a particular task, they are certainly better than some others (Svenson 1981; Van Lange and Rusbult 1995). Similar self-serving strategies can be used both to enhance the assessment of one's current performance and to buffer individuals from future performance evaluations (Rhodewalt and Tragakis 2002).

Implications for Planning and Management

If, as our research suggests, self-serving behaviors in a climate of external pressure for accountability are not uncommon, then individual reactions to a perceived external threat to self-integrity and competence should be expected. In response to such a climate, individuals may react in self-serving ways that thwart evaluative efforts while at the same time believing that they are not against improvements per se. These self-serving behaviors can have the effect of delaying and undermining efforts to measure organizational success. Alternatively, several avenues for mitigating self-serving behaviors and decreasing their effects are described in the next paragraphs.

Acknowledge individual needs for self-integrity. It is important to account for and to monitor individual perceptions and self-integrity needs when responding to external mandates and as internal initiatives unfold. Framing an initiative for organizational improvement in a positive way—whether brought about through external demands or internal needs—is not alone sufficient to mitigate perceptions of negative consequences for individuals.

As our research revealed, people's perceptions and reactions are not only an important indicator of how individuals are viewing a new work process or initiative, but they can also have a significant consequence on the effectiveness of the process. If such perceptions are not addressed, an escalating climate of accountability and evaluation can lead individuals to resist or even undermine efforts for improvement.

> Building from an understanding of the organizational context is one of the most important factors.

Methods for monitoring individual perceptions might include staff and faculty surveys, representative interviews and assessments, and debriefing sessions after meetings. In seeking to mitigate perceptions of threats to self-integrity, no single strategy is sufficient, but building from an understanding of the organizational context is one of the most important factors.

Respond to external demands in proactive internal ways. Responding to external accountability requirements in proactive internal ways requires, first, assessing the appropriateness of the external demands and reinterpreting them in terms of the organization's own mission and goals. The second step in the process, which is often overlooked, requires the organization to internalize the incentive structure for fulfilling the new demands. That is, it can be counterproductive to explain to administrators, staff, and faculty that an internal process derives from external demands—it is important to generate and seek support for the internal reasons why a new process or initiative should take place.

For instance, this district sought to internalize the accountability requirements of the statewide PFE initiative by requiring programs on its campuses to apply for PFE funding and to establish evaluation procedures for assessing results. But the district was not as successful in convincing these stakeholders why they should support the new internal processes. On the contrary, by holding a series of meetings with administrators, faculty, and staff to inform them of the statewide change initiative and obtain their reactions to it, the district clearly identified the new internal processes with external mandates. As a result, the district role was one that was reactive to external decision makers. When the legislature determined that the PFE funding would end and all funding would instead continue to be based on enrollment, the internal incentives for supporting the evaluation of PFE programs collapsed.

Increase access to data and information. It is crucial to involve a cross section of administrators, staff, and faculty in decision-making processes. It is equally important to ensure that deliberative bodies adequately represent those whose jobs would be improved by the initiatives under discussion, as well as those whose sense of power might be reduced. Increasing access to data and information can threaten those whose current sense of power and authority derives, at least in part, from how well they have controlled and selectively shared access to information in the past. But on the flip side, there are many others who might not be at such a high level in the organizational hierarchy, who are committed to running programs that effectively serve student needs, and who have not been able to access the data they need to better understand the relationship between program services and student results. These individuals—and the organization as a whole—stand to benefit enormously when they gain access to that information. It is important that they be at the table as well, and that during deliberations, leaders step forward consistently to keep the end goal in sight: improved student success.

Create a history of rewarding success. External demands for accountability can create an evaluative environment in which the consequences of poor performance are unknown. In such an environment, rumors and worst-case scenarios are typically generated and shared, which can be very threatening for individuals. It is important early in the process of responding to such external mandates to identify performance results with increased rather than decreased funding. That is, it is helpful to outline the kinds

of funding that would be available for improvement strategies if performance is found to be weak in specific areas and outline the kinds of funding that would be available to reward success. Such processes grow from long-term strategies to use data and information to improve results rather than punish poor performance. Moreover, these strategies build trust that internal, rather than external, leaders and deliberative bodies will be defining the standards for results and will be working diligently to reach them.

Be persistent and consistent. Organizational improvement is neither a static nor a linear process. Many college faculty, staff, and administrators have seen specific external requirements come and eventually go. In an environment in which the state fiscal picture and the attention of state legislators can change rapidly, internal delaying tactics, such as resisting efforts for a specific program assessment because it is assumed that the requirement will eventually be dropped, are quite effective ways of resisting change. This makes it all the more important to remain consistent in seeking to gain and retain support for those initiatives that will help the college, over time, to better reach its own mission.

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Conclusion: A Self-Reflective College

Several of the actions of the district and colleges suggest the presence of self-reflective inquiry throughout the organization. Staff and faculty have a history of reflecting collectively on their activities; requesting and examining data about student success rates; and implementing innovative solutions, such as in curriculum planning and other areas. Leaders on campus sought proactive rather than reactive ways to solve institutional challenges. Rather than merely complying with the external PFE mandates, they sought to align these demands with long-term internal goals and to revise internal structures and procedures to meet those goals.

However, responding effectively to external mandates requires a complex understanding of how individuals react within an evaluative climate. Although more research needs to be done in this area, our findings suggest that self-serving behaviors may be common individual reactions to perceived external threats to self-integrity and competence. Effective

planning and management is needed to minimize the perceived need for such behaviors and thereby improve the use of data and information to reach positive change and improvement. ▨

Responding effectively to external mandates requires a complex understanding of how individuals react within an evaluative climate.

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Noteworthy Quotes

Unless students are pursuing goals they consider important and valuable for their own sake, they don't work very hard, don't accomplish very much, and are unlikely to retain what they learn.

Tagg, J. 2004. Alignment for Learning: Reorganizing Classrooms and Campuses. *About Campus* 9(2): 11.

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