

## Convening on “Quality Assurance and the Role of State Systems and SHEEOs”

### Summary Notes

#### ***Quality Assurance to Advance Equity Goals***

- Many states and state systems have set goals for increasing attainment rates and closing equity gaps. More attention to issues related to the quality of credentials is needed as states work to meet these more ambitious goals.
- Quality assurance and the furtherance of equity are interdependent. (See “Lumina’s Core Commitments to Quality and Equity,” <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/equity-imperative-2017-01-25.pdf>) Authentic quality assurance must promote equity. Authentic equity must incorporate quality assurance. And we must aggressively dispel the canard that expansion of access is synonymous with lower quality. To the contrary, claims for “academic quality” must be regarded as inconsistent with significant equity gaps.
- Proven strategies to promote student success must be made available to all students in all institutions. Strategies that offer “the best to the best” (honors programs, enhanced advising, other high impact practices) may in fact perpetuate inequity.
- Many minority serving institutions outperform outcomes that traditional measures of inputs might project. Strong leaders, supportive boards, administrative-faculty rapport, and a commitment to mentoring and other nurturing interventions express a “students first” commitment. How might postsecondary education more generally extrapolate from this example to strengthen the quality|equity dyad in all institutions?
- Institutions, systems, policymakers, and other stakeholders share a “concern” with quality but consider that concern “one priority among many” are likely to regard equity, similarly, as “one priority among many.” Both priorities should be conspicuously and consistently asserted and pursued.

#### ***Quality Assurance for Non-Degree Credentials***

- There is wide variation in the extent to which different states seek information on non-degree programs—and equally wide variation in the kind of data that is sought.
- Because in many instances non-degree credentials serve as points of departure for the pursuit of degrees, commitment to quality assurance in this sector must be consistent with the commitment to quality assurance so far as degree programs are concerned.

- Comprehensive data on non-degree program performance must be used to test assumptions and to prompt reforms. E.g., high attrition rates in many apprenticeship programs represent a daunting but rarely acknowledged challenge.
- Existing data is far from sufficient, but even existing data might be used more resourcefully.
- States could assume greater responsibility for clarifying the diverse “pathways” that may enable students to link the pursuit of non-degree credentials to their broader educational and career goals.

### ***Shifting Responsibilities of Federal and State Quality Assurance Actors***

- The federal role has become more significant over time as federal investments have grown, but there was common agreement that unabated growth of that role is likely undesirable (and unpredictable, given changing administration priorities and the pending policy changes through negotiated rulemaking sessions and possible statutory change).
- Given these shifts in the federal role, states have an opportunity to show that they can do more. Hence the roles of the states in assuring quality and furthering equity must be seen as increasingly significant—notwithstanding a wide disparity among SHEEOs regarding their obligations to quality assurance.
- One opportunity for change in existing state responsibilities could involve program review. For example, states might exercise greater oversight and clarify expectations with respect to institutions’ expression of clear, assessable learning outcomes and to the demonstration of student accomplishment of such outcomes through more effective program review processes. At the same time, states should take care not to add new processes and review requirements without understanding first what review processes already exist and for what function.
- Given their authority over both K-12 and public higher education, states are in a position to address a significant source of inequity, i.e., wide variances in the quality of secondary education. “The seeds of disparities in credential completion are planted in the high schools.” Such variances arise from many sources: inequitable distribution of resources, segregated classrooms, and a disconnect between secondary and postsecondary education that may discourage disadvantaged students in particular. States could seek and pursue a mandate to address all of these sources.
- States—specifically SHEEOs and system heads—are well positioned (though rarely generously resourced) to pursue important emerging opportunities, e.g.

- To create more fruitful connections among postsecondary education, employers, and communities and to foster discussions among principals in these sectors.
  - To draw on institutions so as to enrich state-level data concerning performance and to articulate both quantitative and qualitative perspectives with regard to the use such data.
  - To examine and improve alignments between (a) educational programs and licensure requirement, (b) curricula and workforce needs, broadly understood, and (c) economic priorities and opportunities to achieve improved equity.
  - To offer—and perhaps to mandate—improved metrics that would make possible consistent institutional reporting on student success, gains in equity, and financial sustainability. Such data could offer “the data we need to make the arguments we want to make.”
- At the same time, the “state” role is played by many state actors. Greater coordination is needed between state agencies, state system heads, attorneys general, and accrediting organizations to identify potential problems early enough for interventions to occur and to better protect students from low-quality programs and/or from precipitous closures.
  - Effective state-level leadership rests on its own set of relationships (e.g., with faculty bodies, students, institutional leaders, boards, etc.) and requires clear setting of expectations and incentives while communicating respect for the most critical stakeholders, e.g.
  - State and state systems are developing new accountability dashboards through which they track their progress on key student success, equity, and quality goals. These systems can and should continue to be refined and improved as new data sources become available.
  - States and state systems also need to pay attention to the capacity of institutions to deliver on quality/equity goals as new “promise” programs may drive up enrollment numbers especially at community colleges.

### ***Shifting Roles for Accreditors and their Member Institutions***

- Accreditation represents and must operate as a cooperative enterprise joining institutions, programs, and accreditors in a shared commitment to quality assurance and equity.
- Accreditation offers itself as a reliable ally to institutions in their pursuit of quality and equity, but too many institutions and programs that might take greater responsibility for their quality instead rely on and defer to accreditation as their guarantor.

- While accreditation should mandate an institutional commitment to quality and equity, accreditors should make it clear that institutions should not depend primarily on this mandate as their incentive to draw on and express their institutional values.
- Accreditation could play a role in educating students to recognize (and thus demand) quality and equity.
- Accreditation must engage the faculty in addressing cultural impediments to improved effectiveness and more fully achieved equity. “Culture eats strategy!”
  - The paradigm shift from “what I teach” to “what our students learn” is well advanced but far from complete.
  - “For too many faculty, quality should be assumed rather than considered or—God forbid!—questioned.”