



POLL #2: ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE OBAMA COLLEGE SCORECARD

What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. In our second poll, we focus on accountability.

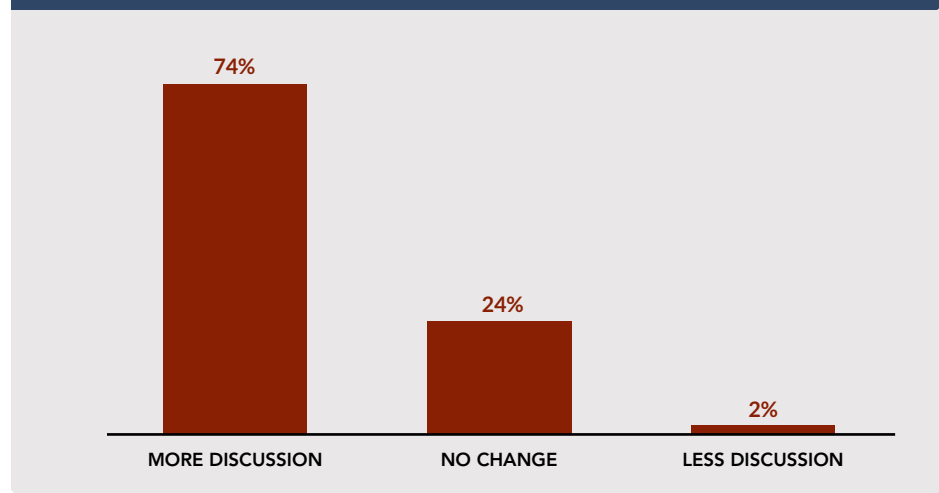
In August 2013 the Obama administration announced plans for a "College Scorecard" that would rate the accessibility, affordability, and outcomes of individual higher education institutions. The White House intends for this new rating system to be used initially to provide information to students and their families and then used to inform the distribution of federal financial aid. Although the details have not yet been finalized, this initiative raises (once again) questions about the accountability of higher education, where accountability is generally understood to mean the demonstration of responsible actions to external constituents.

The results of our poll suggest that although "accountability" is a more common topic of conversation now than a year ago on many campuses, there is less discussion specifically about the Obama scorecard. Responding higher education leaders perceive accrediting agencies to be an important source of accountability demands, even though many believe that the measures used by these agencies do not sufficiently indicate institutional quality. Some leaders are optimistic that an accountability scorecard will meet the informational needs of various stakeholders, especially the federal government. But many leaders believe that a scorecard will have no impact or even negative consequences. Leaders worry that selected indicators will not capture institutional diversity and mission or measure important outcomes.

There is more talk about accountability now than a year ago.

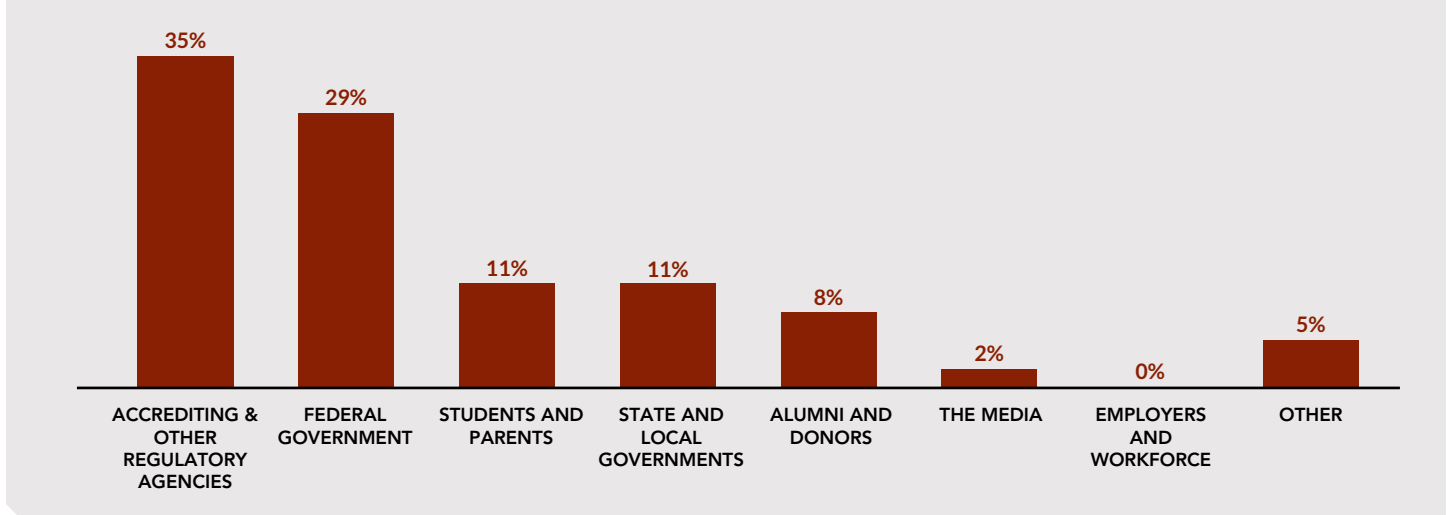
Three-fourths (74%) of responding higher education leaders report more discussion on campus about accountability now than a year ago. Just 2% report less discussion.

FIG. 1 The extent to which discussion about accountability on campus has changed from one year ago



Higher education leaders perceive accrediting agencies and other regulatory agencies to be the most influential source of accountability demands.

FIG. 2 The most influential source of accountability demands

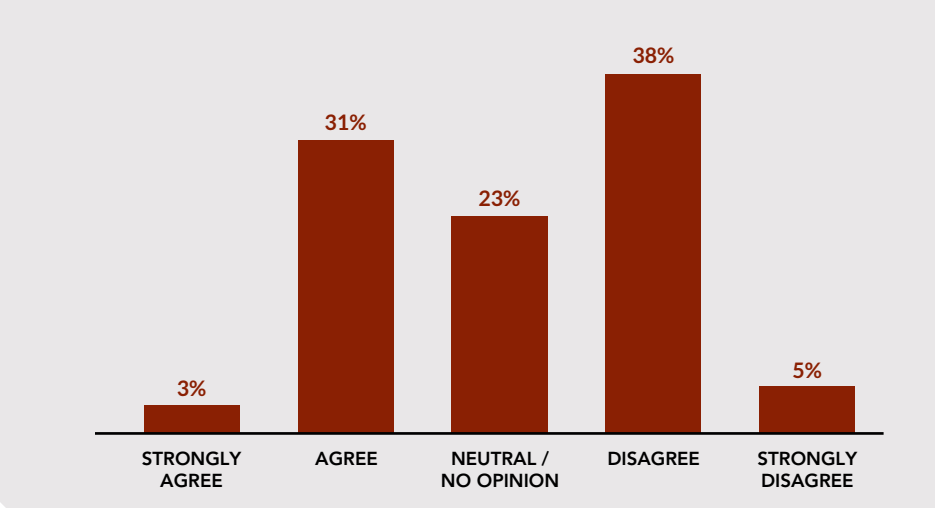


The most influential sources of accountability demands, in the order ranked by responding higher education leaders, are: accrediting and other regulatory agencies, the federal government, students and parents, and state and local governments. Alumni and donors, the media, and employers and the workforce are perceived to be less influential. Responses contributed for the “other” category include board of trustees, system office, faculty and internal demands, creditors, and religious sponsors.

Many higher education leaders disagree that accrediting agencies have sufficient indicators of institutional quality.

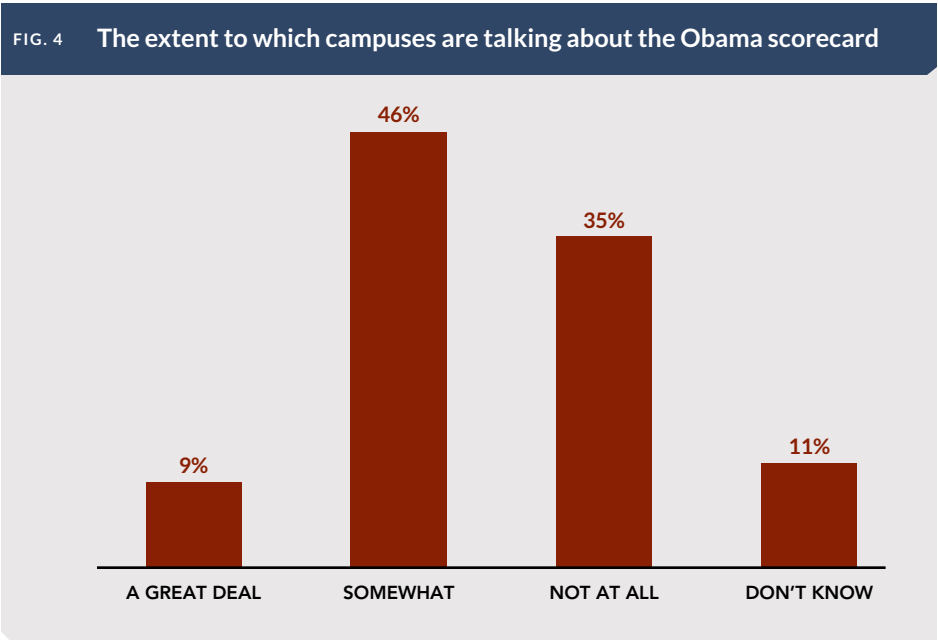
Only 34% of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that the measures of higher education performance that are collected by accrediting agencies sufficiently indicate the quality of their institutions.

FIG. 3 Level of agreement that the measures collected by accrediting agencies provide sufficient indicators of institutional quality



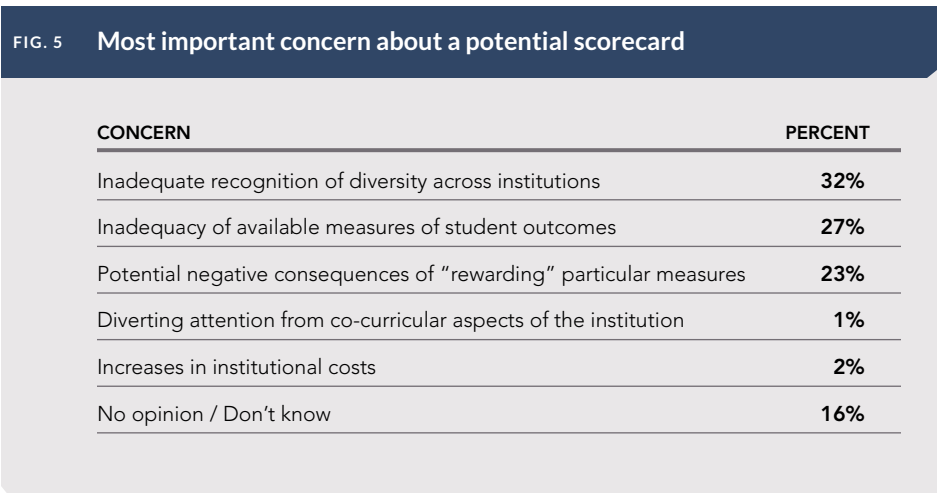
There is limited attention to the Obama scorecard on many campuses.

Only 9% of respondents reported that their campuses are talking about the Obama scorecard a great deal. About half (46%) report either not knowing of these discussions or that there is no discussion on their campus.



Higher education leaders have several concerns about an accountability scorecard.

When asked for their top concern about a potential scorecard, respondents were divided. The most commonly reported concerns pertain to recognition of institutional diversity, measurement of student outcomes, and unintended consequences of selected measures.



Respondents offered comments that shed additional insight into the concerns some have about a potential scorecard. Articulating the perceived challenges associated with accounting for institutional diversity and the suitability of available measures, one respondent stated:

Value in higher education is a very nuanced activity. You can receive high value at a low-cost community college if your goal is to learn a trade or prepare to transfer to a university or state college. Or, you can receive high value from a high-cost, highly-selective school if that is indeed your goal. The scorecard doesn't factor in these aspirational aspects of our students, nor does it take into account regional economic factors that may influence employability scores. The socio-economics of education are not fully accounted for in these measures.

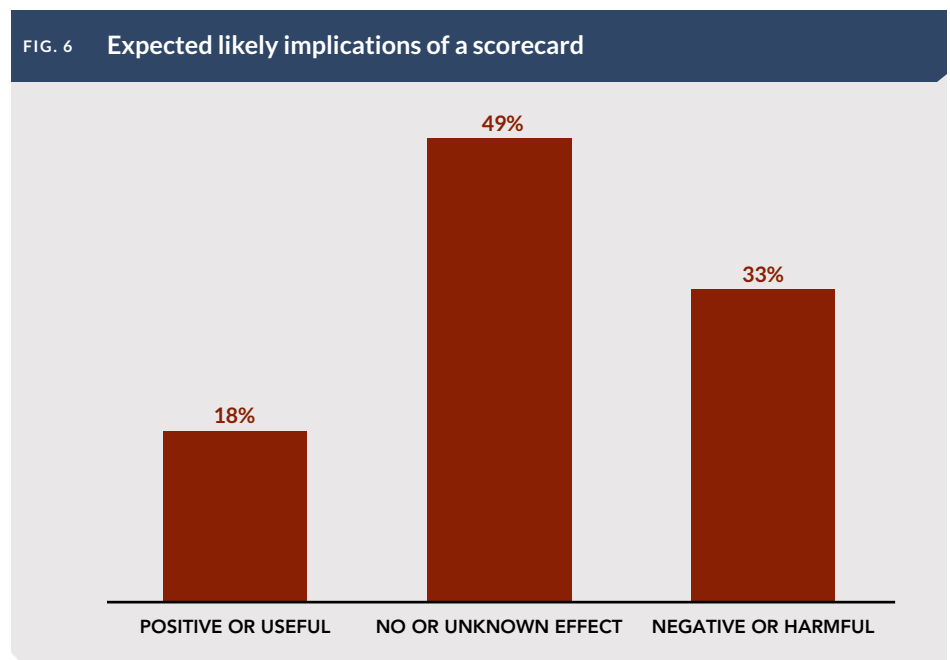
Many higher education leaders believe that a scorecard will have a limited or negative impact.

Half of responding higher education leaders report that a scorecard will have no effect, an unknown effect, or largely be ignored. About a third believe that there will be negative or harmful implications. Just a fifth (18%) believe that there could be positive or useful implications.

.....

Half of responding higher education leaders report that a scorecard will have no effect, an unknown effect, or largely be ignored.

.....



Respondents offered comments that provide additional insights into the expected consequences of a scorecard. Those who responded that the scorecard may have positive or useful implications explained that a scorecard may provide an opportunity for their institution to demonstrate its success, “raise awareness of the institution’s outcomes,” and “help focus the priorities and resources of [their] institution.” Those who reported that the scorecard would have “no or unknown effect” explained that their institution would “likely largely be immune to new scorecards,” a scorecard “would only be an ‘add on’ to current activities,” and that “other measures would be considered more relevant.” Respondents who reported negative or harmful implications include those who explained that a scorecard would create “added cost” and “administrative burden,” cause unintended consequences like raising admissions standards, focus attention on indicators that are difficult to collect or properly measure (such as net price) and may not be equally relevant to all populations (including adult learners), and promote unfavorable and inappropriate institutional comparisons.

A small number of respondents believe that a scorecard may have value because it creates a framework that “applies to all institutions, irrespective of the sector in which they are classified.” Nonetheless, more leaders report skepticism of a “one-size-fits-all approach,” with one leader explaining:

The scorecard effort is well intentioned and perhaps even laudable but I do not believe it will have the desired impact because it is a blunt instrument.

Higher education leaders perceive that the information provided by a scorecard will best meet the information needs of the federal government.

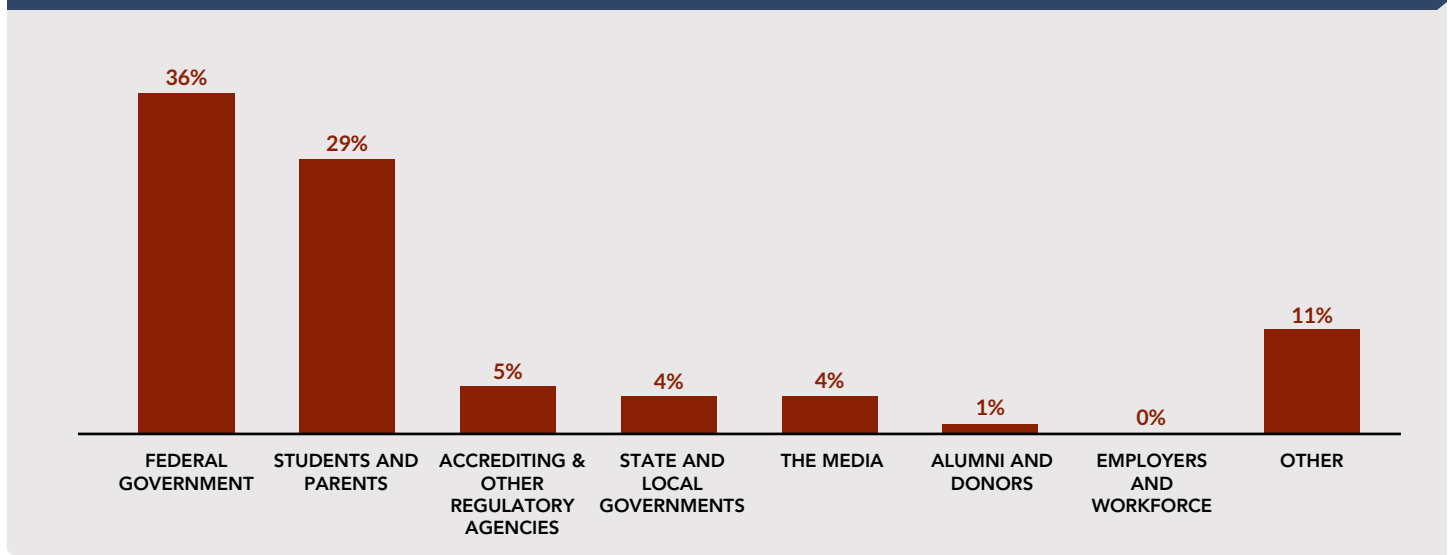
Of potential audiences, higher education leaders perceive that some version of the Obama scorecard may be most effective for providing information to the federal government, as well as students and parents. One respondent suggested the potential value of a scorecard to these groups, stating:

Higher education needs to become more accountable for graduating students. A scorecard will also rein in for-profit institutions that create financial burdens for first-generation and low-income students.

Leaders indicating “other” include those reporting some version of: “This institution does not believe [a scorecard] to be an effective mechanism for any group.” One respondent articulated the skepticism of many respondents:

Concerns exist about how to deal with incoming student quality and how to create a measure that is useful for all types of institutions. All here agree that we need to acknowledge and hold accountable those institutions who have poor graduation rates, default rates, performance, etc., but a uniform set of measures that fails to appropriately address the diversity of institutional type/mission/program could backfire and risks further confusing an already overwhelmed area of inquiry. The apparent desire of the White House to proceed in the face of a fair bit of questioning by higher education advocacy groups begs the question (for me personally, not necessarily institutionally) about the intended outcomes.

FIG. 7 Audience whose information needs will be best met by some version of an Obama scorecard



About This Poll

We invited alumni of the Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania to participate in the poll (n = 247); 156 individuals responded during the eight-day period in which the poll was open (May 13 to May 21, 2014). The poll included nine questions and was estimated to require no more than 10 minutes to complete.

This report describes responses from 133 individuals holding senior level positions at higher education institutions in the United States. Most of these individuals (68%) are leaders of private not-for-profit four-year institutions. About one-fifth (19%) are leaders of public four-year institutions, 4% are from private for-profit four-year institutions, 6% are from public two-year institutions, and 3% are in administrative units (e.g., system offices). Half (49%) are in administrative roles, 32% in academic positions, 6% in finance positions, and 13% in student affairs.

Suggested citation

Perna, L. (June 2014). *Accountability and the Obama College Scorecard* (What's AHEAD: Trends in Higher Education No. 2). Philadelphia, PA: Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, Penn Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.

About AHEAD

The Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) is dedicated to promoting the public purposes of higher education in fostering open, equitable, and democratic societies. Located within the Graduate School of Education of the University of Pennsylvania, AHEAD applies what is known from our research and others to improve institutional practice and public policy through technical assistance and professional development activities. For more information see: www.ahead-penn.org