



**Transparency by Design: A Four-Year Effort to
Improve Accountability in Higher Education
Executive Brief**

Prepared for

**The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative
for Educational Technologies (WCET)**

By

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January 13, 2013



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Outreach, Engagement, and Information Technologies

Transparency by Design: A Four-Year Effort to Improve Accountability in Higher Education

Between November 2008 and July 2012, a unique coalition of higher education institutions received funding from Lumina Foundation to create an improved system of transparency and accountability. This initiative, called Transparency by Design (TbD), involved 20 regionally accredited nonprofit and for-profit institutions that operated online programs focused primarily on educating adults. Managed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), program evaluation was used to assess TbD's implementation experience, identify improvement opportunities, and evaluate the overall impact of the initiative. This brief provides an overview of TbD's purpose, context, design, achievements, and lessons learned.

What was the purpose of Transparency by Design?

The goal of TbD was to help adult learners become knowledgeable consumers of online higher education. Providing useful information about institutions and specific degree programs, including comparative information about student success, can help adult learners align their personal and professional goals with available educational opportunities. TbD addressed this goal by developing a website that provided student learning outcome information and tools to compare this information across institutions and programs.

Why was it begun?

The past four decades have witnessed a growing skepticism by the American public of higher education as an unquestioned public good. This skepticism has its roots in the 1970s, a decade that saw a recession and resulting decline in public revenues as well as concern over anticipated enrollment declines resulting from the end of the baby boom.¹ It grew in the 1980s with the release of *A Nation at Risk*² and that report's focus on the lack of learning in public schools, a focus that quickly expanded to include colleges and universities. During the 1990s the publication of *Reinventing Government*³ shifted attention to measuring institutional performance a movement fueled in part by growing doubt over higher education's ability to prepare its students for the knowledge economy.

When Education Secretary Margaret Spellings convened her Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005, another recession and rising Medicaid costs had combined to further reduce public funding for higher education, while the demand for workforce development and teacher training was growing. Students and their families were expected to pay a rising share of their college education, yet there was little performance or outcome data available to help them select an institution. It was no surprise when, in the fall of 2006, the Spellings Commission called for a more rigorous system of accountability for American higher education:

Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families.... This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities.⁴

¹ Burke, J.C. (Ed.), 2004. *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

² National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

³ Osborne, D. & Gaebler, T. (1992). *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming Public Government*. New York: Plume.

⁴ Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006). *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, September 2006.

Anticipating a move by the U.S. Department of Education to strengthen accountability among institutions of higher education, a small group of colleges developed their own approach to prove their value and effectiveness in educating students. Their approach combined data that could be compared across institutions, such as that from the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Educational Testing Service's Measurement of Academic Proficiency and Progress, with cost and student outcome information at the program level. These program-specific outcomes were intended to help prospective students answer the question "Are you teaching me what I need to know?"⁵

How was TbD different from other accountability efforts?

Many efforts have arisen since the Spellings Commission to increase accountability and transparency in higher education reporting. In October 2011, 22 national efforts involving learner outcome measures and other accountability metrics were identified by the TbD evaluator and program staff. Four characteristics distinguished TbD from most of the other accountability efforts:

1. TbD's members were a mix of community college, graduate-only, public, private non-profit, and private for-profit institutions, making the inter-institutional comparability more complex.
2. The students served by these institutions were primarily adult learners with different needs and circumstances from younger college students who enrolled directly from high school.
3. TbD members submitted their data voluntarily.
4. Program data provided to TbD was reviewed by WCET to ensure that they were consistent and upheld the mutually agreed upon reporting standards.

Who was involved in TbD?

Twenty one colleges and universities were instrumental in the governance, design, and implementation of TbD. They included:

American InterContinental University Online*
American Public University System*
Argosy University
Ashford University
Cambridge College
Capella University*
Charter Oak State College*
Colorado Technical University*
ECPI University
Excelsior College*
Fort Hays State University
Franklin University*
Kaplan University*
New Charter University
Nazarene Bible College
Regis University*
Rio Salado College*
Southwestern College Professional Studies*
Union Institute & University*
Western Governors University*
Western International University
*Charter member

⁵ Lederman, D. (September 17, 2007). College accountability movement moves online. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from www.insidehighered.com/print/news/2007/09/17/adult

Lumina Foundation provided funding for TbD that substantially augmented the membership fees paid by participating institutions. WCET provided project management and third party quality assurance for the website. Both the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies provided program evaluation services.

What did TBD accomplish?

The major achievement of TbD was the design, launch, and maintenance of the College Choices for Adults (CCFA) website. Two key features of the CCFA site were side-by-side comparisons of institutional and specific degree program data that included learner progress and outcome information, and a guide to online learning intended primarily for adult students who were returning to college.

This achievement is significant in light of the diversity of institutions involved in TbD with respect to student age, relationship to the labor market, learning objectives, public/proprietary status, and type of credential offered. Although it required countless hours of discussion and consensus-building, a common set of learner outcome metrics and a single methodology for measuring them were achieved. This was due in large part to committed institutional leadership and is a promising example for future efforts to define an overarching accountability structure that accommodates all learners and institutions.

A related achievement is the institutional learning that occurred for many of TbD members. The process of generating consensus around common learner outcome measures solidified a community of practice of like-minded institutions. Institutional representatives described five benefits as resulting from their involvement in TbD:

- Collect and integrate consumer information into website design and functionality
- Identify motivators of higher education institutional engagement
- Clarify institutional visions for assessment standards
- Brand and market opportunities and challenges in online education
- Create a public face for institutional data⁶

What implementation challenges did TbD face?

TbD faced three major challenges. One was the worst economy since the Great Depression that coincided with TbD's launch. In 2008-2009, as higher education grappled with the effects of a constricting economy, TbD was focusing on project design and early implementation. While a core group of committed institutions was intensely engaged in this, many other prospective institutional members were preoccupied with economic survival and opted not to participate in TbD.

A second challenge was the rapid proliferation of higher education accountability initiatives during the same period in which TbD was operating. This landscape created a fractured and confusing backdrop to the national higher education accountability conversation, and created a complicated context in which to differentiate TbD from related initiatives so as to garner attention and support.

The third challenge was the prohibitive cost of online marketing. Significant efforts were made to drive Internet traffic to the CCFA site through search engine optimization tools and social media marketing. However, site visits remained relatively flat at approximately 1,000 unique hits per month. Lead generation sites and institutions with large marketing

⁶ Robinson, D. (2011). Year Three Evaluation Findings: Transparency by Design, November 1, 2010 through October 31, 2011. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies.

budgets had driven up the cost of advertising to a level that TbD couldn't afford and directly affected the project's ability to attract students in the online market.

What effect did these obstacles have on TbD?

A unanimous decision was made in July 2012 by the TbD Executive Committee to close down the CCFA website at the end of the calendar year. This decision was driven by three considerations, all of which stemmed from the implementation challenges described above.

1. The inability of TbD to attract significant new institutional members despite concerted recruitment efforts by the WCET project manager and Executive Committee members.
2. A plateau in TbD website traffic notwithstanding continued efforts to enhance its value for adult consumers of higher education.
3. The existence of numerous higher education accountability frameworks combined with the absence of national or federal direction on alignment or consolidation. This made it difficult for TbD to differentiate itself in a crowded accountability landscape.

What can future accountability efforts learn from the TbD experience?

Clarifying the purpose and audience of the accountability initiative is paramount. TbD's first progress report stated "While the primary audience is adult learners, there is a significant secondary audience of policymakers, including accreditors, lawmakers, State Higher Education Executive Officers, and government regulators."⁷ As the project continued, another audience of the participating institutions themselves emerged. Building a website to serve multiple audiences with different interests, purposes, and perspectives was not the intent of the project, yet it influenced the design and implementation of CCFA.

The other major lesson learned from the TbD experience is that clear and strategic communication is essential to success, particularly at the beginning of a new initiative operating in a crowded field. The challenges that TbD faced in its first year of operation hampered its ability to differentiate itself from similar efforts and gain a foothold in the broader accountability landscape. Difficulties in distinguishing the CCFA site from lead generation and marketing sites, and separating TbD from other voluntary accountability initiatives in higher education, resulted in missed opportunities for needed exposure and attention.

While the CCFA site will be closed down, WCET has agreed to redirect any TbD website traffic to its own website⁸ so that important information about the initiative will continue to be available. This information will include a history of TbD and its main accomplishments, including complete data methodologies, representations of the data and functionality of the site using fictional data, and videos demonstrating the site's functionality.

The decision to close down the CCFA website, although unanimous, was a difficult one. Considerable time, creativity, and hope for a unified and student-centered accountability framework were invested in this initiative. However, TbD's considerable achievements - an innovative consumer-focused website, common ground among diverse higher education stakeholders, and deepened insights by participating institutions about student learning outcome and assessment needs and opportunities - have offered useful lessons for future transparency and accountability efforts.

⁷ Paulson, K. (2009). *Transparency by Design Year One Evaluation Report*. Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

⁸ <http://wcet.wiche.edu/advance/transparency-by-design>.