

# 8

*Policymakers, administrators, and institutional researchers should recognize the critical stakeholders in the area of institutional effectiveness at the community college, their differences in perceptions about institutional effectiveness, and ways to negotiate these differences in perception.*

## Stakeholders in the Institutional Effectiveness Process

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This chapter identifies the different stakeholders in the community college, notes how each views institutional effectiveness, and comments on opportunities arising from their different perspectives on institutional effectiveness. For this chapter, a stakeholder is broadly defined as a person or entity with an interest in some process, concept, or object.

This definition enables us to identify the basic kinds of stakeholders in institutional effectiveness. For simplicity, these stakeholders can be enumerated as members of two major groups: the on-campus group and the off-campus group. In the on-campus group are administrators, administrative staff, institutional researchers, faculty, students, and local trustees (trustees can also be considered to be in the off-campus group). In the off-campus group are accrediting commissions, government oversight and funding bodies, potential students, employers, baccalaureate institutions, K-12 officials and staff, external researchers (in either policy groups or university departments or programs), taxpayers (and their advocacy groups), and the news media. Although I could probably expand this enumeration to cover other parties (for example, a state's governor and legislators), this list covers the individuals who usually have the most interest in the concept of institutional effectiveness.

These identified groups need additional breakdown because individuals within them tend to have different levels of interest in institutional effectiveness. It is helpful to categorize these parties according to their

**Table 8.1. Categorization of Stakeholders**

<i>Categorization</i>	<i>High Authority</i>	<i>Low Authority</i>
High interest	Community college administrators Trustees State oversight and budget bodies Accrediting commissions	Institutional researchers
Medium interest		Students (current and potential) Administrative staff Employers External researchers Baccalaureate institutions
Low interest		News media Faculty K–12 officials Taxpayers

levels of interest and their levels of authority over institutional policy to help us in understanding the viewpoints of different stakeholders. In general, stakeholders who have a low level of interest in institutional effectiveness tend also to have the least detailed and the least informed perception of institutional effectiveness. Table 8.1 shows the resulting categorization. The category for parties who presumably have both a high level of interest in institutional effectiveness and a high level of authority to affect institutional effectiveness includes community college administrators, trustees of local governing boards, state oversight and funding bodies, and accrediting commissions. The category with high interest but low authority includes institutional researchers at the community college.

Potential students, current students, administrative staff, employers, external researchers, and baccalaureate institutions are parties with typically medium levels of interest but low authority. These parties have a medium level of interest because as individual actors, they can benefit from knowledge about institutional effectiveness, but each one has many other sources of concern (that is, institutional effectiveness generally does not dominate their individual agendas). At the same time, none of these stakeholders holds any formal authority over institutions to influence their effectiveness. For example, an employer must focus on its revenue stream (its markets), and it generally has options other than the nearest community college for obtaining a labor force and a greater interest in a specific program (such as culinary arts) at a college than in the community college as a whole. In addition, an employer lacks formal authority over the institution; it influences institutional policy only through advisory groups and its labor market practices (that is, the hiring of community college students).

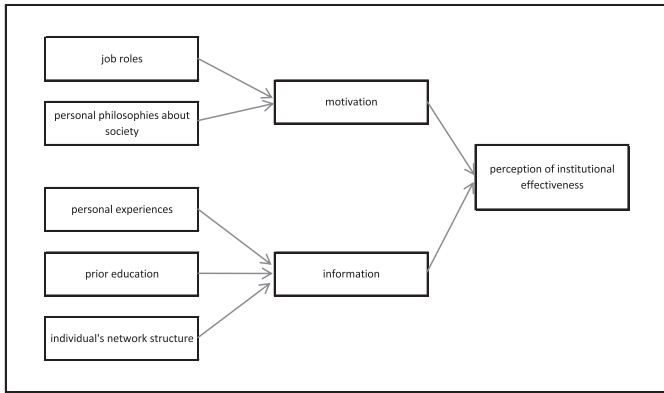
The category of low interest and low authority includes faculty, the news media, K-12 officials, and taxpayers. The faculty are in this category because instructors generally focus their attention on their immediate discipline rather than the entire institution. Faculty (aside from those who become involved in institution-wide groups like academic senates and accreditation teams) generally feel insulated from any commotion over the broad concept of institutional effectiveness, and individual instructors usually lack authority to alter institutional effectiveness, especially when the measurement of institutional effectiveness has an esoteric nature for them. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many faculty members may also hold unique perceptions about institutional effectiveness. For instance, many would place less weight on traditional quantitative measures of educational outcomes (such as degrees completed or transfers) and more weight on qualitative feedback (such as personal growth, intellectual growth, and civic engagement). At the same time, other faculty members would argue that institutional effectiveness is a holistic concept that should include hard-to-measure properties such as contributions to community culture and health and that it is impossible to achieve an accurate and affordable measure of institutional effectiveness.

The news media are in this category with faculty because these media (excluding industry-specific media like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) have many stories and topics to cover with their limited resources and the effectiveness of community colleges is not sensational enough to capture the attention of the general public. Nonetheless, both the news media and faculty can wield immense influence (that is, informal power), rather than authority, to alter institutional policy and behavior despite their placement in Table 8.1. Thus, our categorization of the faculty and the news media may understate the potential influence of these two groups. K-12 officials are in this category because they generally must focus on their own system of institutional effectiveness. Although these officials may have an interest in community colleges, their interests tend to be narrow in scope for programs such as concurrent enrollment and occupational programs. Taxpayers and their advocacy groups fall into this group because they must allocate their attention and resources to a multitude of other public agencies that tend to consume a larger share of tax dollars. In addition, taxpayers, unless they or their family members enroll at a community college, tend to have little concern about institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, taxpayers tend to have only modest indirect authority through their votes on college trustees, community college-related bond measures, and state elections and state referenda.

## **Forces Behind Variation in Perceptions of Institutional Effectiveness**

Thus far, our attention has focused on the identification of different stakeholders. We now look at how these different stakeholders may perceive the

**Figure 8.1. Factors Influencing the Perception of Institutional Effectiveness**



concept of institutional effectiveness. Based on my experience with these stakeholders, I propose a model of perception formation that appears in Figure 8.1. The most basic factors in this model are motivation and information.

For motivation, the subfactors are job role and personal philosophies about society. Job role theoretically has a salient effect because an individual usually adopts the perception that agrees with the assumptions of a specific job. For example, a job role of counseling for transfer would tend to give that counselor strong motivation to view the performance of the institution mainly in terms of its success in transferring students to baccalaureate institutions. Personal philosophies about society theoretically will shape the perception of institutional effectiveness because these beliefs tend to define for individuals the ideal roles for the community college. For example, a personal philosophy about society, such as a belief in the public's obligation for service to the disadvantaged, will tend to make an institution's performance in advancing the education of people with severe challenges the focal point of a perception about institutional effectiveness. Similarly, someone whose educational philosophy embraces progressivism would be more interested in the students than the curriculum, whereas one embracing realism would be more interested in the dissemination of knowledge.

For the information factor, the subfactors are personal experiences, prior education, and network structure. Personal experiences will shape a person's perception of institutional effectiveness because these experiences raise awareness for certain factors in an individual's perception of institutional effectiveness. Prior education will shape perception because it can create preferences for certain kinds of evidence, such as quantitative evidence or economic data. Finally, an individual's network structure will

shape perception because a communication network can bring about peer influence and access to institutional data.

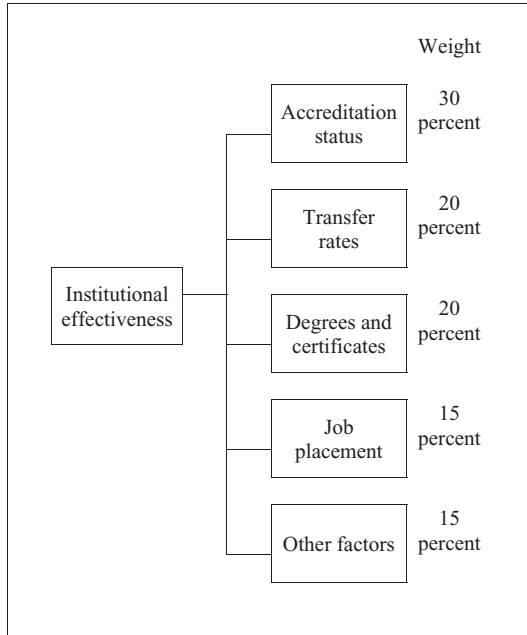
This basic model simplifies reality in a variety of ways. An individual can readily have more than one stakeholder role. For example, a faculty member may simultaneously serve as a dean of an academic program, prompting this individual to hold multiple perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Even when an individual maintains only one stakeholder role, he or she may harbor multiple perceptions of institutional effectiveness at a given point in time. An individual who has both multiple stakeholder roles and multiple perceptions of institutional effectiveness can switch to the specific perception that agrees most with the stakeholder role that he or she has at a particular time and place. For example, we can envision a college president who chooses to espouse a particular measure of institutional effectiveness because it may result in a more positive reputation for the college than he or she would conclude with other available measures of institutional effectiveness. This would agree with the president's job role to promote the community college, which entails securing public support and funding. This same individual may also hold a different perception—one that is critical of and negative to other community colleges—if he or she is serving on some oversight or accrediting body. Of course, some individuals may consider one specific perception as dominant in its weight such that he or she will maintain that perception regardless of different job roles. Finally, a subfactor may influence another subfactor, and a subfactor for information could influence motivation (and vice versa) as well. The model in Figure 8.1 therefore is a simplification of the real world.

## Comparison of Stakeholder Perceptions

Psychological research provides a model that can help capture the complex nature of perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Multiattribute utility technology (MAUT) structures how individuals can evaluate a product or service by integrating evidence about different dimensions (multiple attributes) of a product or service (Edwards and Newman, 2000). I will avoid a technical discussion of MAUT because I borrow only the basic concept for this discussion. The following paragraphs demonstrate how individuals tend to consider a set of attributes when they judge the value or performance of something like a community college. As a didactic exercise, consider a hypothetical MAUT model for a college president and then, for comparison, a hypothetical MAUT model for an employer.

The MAUT model uses a graph known as a value tree to display its result, and this discussion will use such a display. Figure 8.2 is the value tree for a hypothetical college president. It presents this hypothetical case for didactic purposes only, and the choice of attributes and attribute weights is simply my guess of how a president may think. A value tree

Figure 8.2. Value Tree for a Hypothetical College President

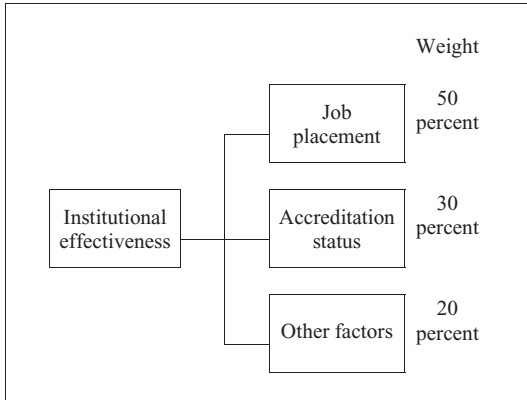


includes weights for each attribute, and Figure 8.2 includes hypothetical values for this example. It shows four major attributes and a set of other attributes that are too small to display separately. The value tree shows that the attribute of accreditation status carries the most weight in this hypothetical president's perception, at 30 percent of the total influence. Figure 8.3 is the corresponding value tree for a hypothetical employer. This hypothetical employer considers only two major attributes, job placement and accreditation, and weighs them at 50 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

A comparison of these two value trees shows how these two kinds of stakeholders differ in their perception of institutional effectiveness. The biggest difference lies in the attributes that each stakeholder considers. The other major difference lies in the weights that the stakeholders allot to the attributes that both individuals share (accreditation status and job placement).

Figures 8.2 and 8.3 elucidate how different stakeholders formulate divergent perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Some qualifying comments are in order, however. These models are static, but real-life perceptions can change as a function of the level of crystallization of individual beliefs and opinions and the change that may occur in the environment for an individual. Under certain circumstances, strong and sudden convergence in perceptions of institutional effectiveness can occur among different stakeholders. For example, if a college were to handle a serious campus security threat successfully, then almost all of the stakeholders will at least

Figure 8.3. Value Tree for a Hypothetical Employer



temporarily consider campus security a critical attribute in institutional effectiveness and assign a positive rating to that attribute. Finally, these examples of value trees are only didactic exercises; researchers who explore specific perceptions of stakeholders will need to survey the stakeholders of interest to them.

### General Implications

The preceding discussion explains why and how different stakeholders develop different perceptions of institutional effectiveness. The existence of this spectrum of varied perceptions can hinder institutional improvement as well as help it. In terms of hindrance to improvement, differing perceptions of institutional effectiveness can act as potential obstacles to planning, decision making, and implementation. If stakeholders cannot reach agreement, then a group (such as a college's executive team or a board of trustees) may suffer gridlock by failing to define institutional effectiveness—a situation that would stymie coordinated efforts at institutional improvement. Even if stakeholders adopt a group-approved definition for institutional effectiveness (possibly by a majority vote), the underlying differences in perception that may linger despite a group decision can eventually lead to the subversion of resulting plans by dissident stakeholders. On occasion, if different conclusions about institutional effectiveness are publicly voiced by parties within the same college, this may weaken the credibility of the college, another administrative concern. In the special case where a college produces a numerical indicator of institutional effectiveness that differs in definition from that used in another study by a party that is independent of the college, allegations of deception or spin may arise if the college-produced indicator has a more positive result than the independently produced indicator.

One trend across the nation may also cause concern. Off-campus stakeholder pressure to make community colleges accountable may burden these institutions when oversight bodies require different measures of institutional effectiveness. With overloaded staff in research units and data processing units becoming the norm, this burden of multiple accountability reports can result in the neglect of other work that would benefit the college. And in some cases, there could arise a stressful competition for local resources between oversight stakeholders (accrediting commissions, boards of trustees, and state budgeting officials) because they all demand evidence to fulfill their separate accountability missions. At some point, this dilemma could result in a failure to satisfy the demands of one or more of these off-campus stakeholders. So divergence in perception can directly hinder administrative effort in a variety of ways.

Different perceptions of institutional effectiveness have special implications for analytical efforts that can indirectly hinder administrative effort. When different bodies use different perceptions of institutional effectiveness (and consequently different definitions), conflicting conclusions about institutional effectiveness may surface. For example, if a college did poorly in transferring students to baccalaureate institutions while it did well in job placement of associate degree or certificate completers, some of the college's trustees might consider the college as low performing (if they assumed that transfer was the primary mission) while others might view it as high performing (if they assumed that workforce development was the primary mission). It would not be surprising then that when legislators, trustees, or voters see such conflicting evidence, they may choose to delay or deny their support for an institution on the basis of their uncertainty about its effectiveness. If public officials evaluate institutional effectiveness through a comparison of similar colleges (a peer group comparison), then the use of different perceptions of institutional effectiveness can lead to erroneous and unfair conclusions (Hom, 2008). This is one pitfall that can make the peer group comparison risky. If the measurements of institutional effectiveness depend on different assumptions for institutional effectiveness, then the peer group analyst will probably stray into the swamp of comparing apples to oranges.

In terms of institutional research, the use of different perceptions of institutional effectiveness (and subsequently different definitions of it) in different studies can hinder the advancement of knowledge in institutional effectiveness. In particular, researchers who conduct research synthesis (that is, meta-analysis) can face a big problem. In these analyses, they use statistical methods to combine the results of different studies to estimate an overall effect size for some program element or intervention (Hunter and Schmidt, 1990). If the researcher finds that many of the studies on institutional effectiveness use different definitions of institutional effectiveness (based on different perceptions of it), then that researcher may be unable to conduct the meta-analysis on the remaining small number of studies that do share a common definition of institutional effectiveness. Aside from the



practice of meta-analysis, the absence of standard methodology (consistency in definition for institutional effectiveness across studies) will impede the customary research goal of testing rival explanations for a specific phenomenon. Literature reviews in papers published in academic journals frequently include caveats about how prior studies have inconsistently defined a critical variable (which institutional effectiveness tends to be), making it necessary to conduct yet another study on a topic.

Situations also exist in which differing perceptions can help institutions. Divergent perceptions tend to highlight specific populations or specific needs that decision makers may overlook in the rush to act. In this respect, different perceptions of institutional effectiveness help to prevent the neglect of some stakeholders who may lack power or visibility. Divergent perceptions can reduce the risks of groupthink (Janis, 1982). The consideration of multiple views of institutional effectiveness can force decision makers to think more broadly about a situation, and this can possibly lead to a better decision than one relying on a single perception of institutional effectiveness. Finally, from a strategic planning perspective, divergent perceptions of institutional effectiveness can lead an institution to a new path for improvement if the divergent perceptions offer sound, innovative approaches to decision makers.

To some extent, divergent perceptions of institutional effectiveness can advance knowledge about institutional effectiveness as well. Researchers often try to see how robust a particular finding really is. That is, they seek to test the strength of a study result by comparing that one result to results of studies conducted under different assumptions (Cook and others, 1992). If such a comparison were to find strong agreement among all of the results despite differences in assumptions, then that one study's result would gain in terms of validity and credibility.

Despite instances where a lack of consensus helps advance research, the prevailing wisdom is that consensus plays a larger role than divergence. Pfeffer (2003) presents a strong argument about how the lack of consensus on models and methodology among researchers retards the advancement of knowledge in a discipline and limits the power that researchers in that field can attain. Although his immediate focus was the advancement of knowledge in the field of organizational behavior, he makes it clear how important a consensus can be for researchers in all disciplines—a principle that applies also to educational research and institutional research. He wrote, "An area of inquiry characterized by diffuse perspectives, none of which has the power to institutionalize its dominance, is one in which consensus is likely to remain elusive and the dispersion in resources, rewards, and activity will be great" (Pfeffer, 2003, p. 43). But Pfeffer qualifies this conclusion by warning about decreeing the use of one model or methodology when he says, "The question for organizational science is whether the field can strike an appropriate balance between theoretical tyranny and an anything-goes attitude" (p. 44).

## Responses

To take into account differing stakeholder perceptions and guard against some of the problems mentioned earlier, institutions should:

- Measure the differences or similarities in perceptions of institutional effectiveness that stakeholders may have (through focus groups or surveys, or both)
- Analyze the differences (perhaps with tools like the value tree)
- Where necessary, build consensus through tools like the Delphi method, cross-functional teams, and broadened frames of reference
- Use tools such as brainstorming in situations where the institution needs to rethink or broaden how it perceives and handles institutional effectiveness

The situation where college officials have little or no idea about the variation in perceptions on institutional effectiveness should warrant data collection (usually by surveys) so that officials can develop some idea of how divergent these perceptions really are among their relevant stakeholders. The absence of information about how different stakeholders view institutional effectiveness can have undesirable consequences. Stakeholders may believe that they share a perception when they actually disagree on one or more fundamental issues. In other situations, stakeholders may believe that their perceptions disagree when they actually agree. March (1994) concludes, “The former case leads to ‘unwarranted’ trust. The latter leads to ‘unwarranted’ distrust” (p. 112).

One way to inform decision makers would be a survey of stakeholders that leads to a value tree for each stakeholder (or stakeholder group if the researcher chooses to aggregate survey responses). If the survey results and value trees reveal a meaningful variation in perceptions, then the college should consider some sort of consensus-building process. If college officials decide that they want to build consensus, then they can consider the so-called Delphi method (Linstone and Turoff, 1975), which provides a systematic approach that can lead to consensus while limiting interpersonal friction in the process. In the first step in this process, a monitor or moderator polls a set of stakeholders for their ratings of a subject and tabulates the results. In the situation here, the monitor would ask stakeholders to offer a definition of institutional effectiveness. The monitor then sends this tabulation to the stakeholders, and each stakeholder gets an invitation to change his or her initial survey response. The monitor polls the stakeholders a second time in order to create a new tabulation that will integrate any changes that stakeholders may have made to their initial responses. Depending on time, cost, and topic difficulty, this process of tabulation, sharing, and adjustment may go through additional iterations. To reduce interpersonal conflict, the polling occurs such that each stakeholder can

privately submit the rating; therefore, the stakeholders do not even need to be in the same room for the Delphi method to work.

Colleges could improve agreement among stakeholders on the issue of institutional effectiveness by other common organizational practices. Giving stakeholders roles in different committees or groups, using cross-functional or interdisciplinary teams, emphasizing institution-wide success, and publicizing the interdependence of the organization's subunits, for example, often enable stakeholders to expand their perception of institutional effectiveness to become an institution-wide view rather than a subunit view. Although movement away from a subunit perception toward an institution-wide perception will not necessarily lead to a consensus on what institution-wide effectiveness means, at least the breadth of the perception may become broad enough to create some convergence of perceptions.

Although I recommend the focus group approach for collecting data on divergent perceptions among stakeholders, I recommend against this approach as a consensus-building approach. As Morgan and Krueger (1993) unequivocally state, "Do not use focus groups when the primary intent is something other than research. . . . Unfortunately, there is a constituency that wants to apply the term *focus groups* to other purposes, such as resolving conflicts, building consensus, increasing communication, changing attitudes, and making decisions" (p. 11). In essence, the focus group method is not designed to attain these other purposes, and the misapplication of the method will probably lead to disappointing results.

It is also possible to benefit from diversity in perceptions about institutional effectiveness. In some situations, colleges may seek to generate different perceptions. A common tool for eliciting and generating such diverse perceptions is brainstorming. In general, institutional leaders can promote a diversification of perceptions by ensuring that stakeholders who voice a different perception can do so in an environment that is candid, rewarding, secure, and respectful.

## Conclusion

The various stakeholders in the community college hold different perceptions of institutional effectiveness because the forces behind diversification in perception generally outweigh the forces behind consensus building in perception. However, a consensus may develop when a profound and tangible threat to this common interest arises. Two major threats that come immediately to mind are loss of accreditation and loss of public funding. Ironically, both threats may impose a single definition on the community college through the formal authority of off-campus parties. Whether the imposition of a single perception of institutional effectiveness is harmful or helpful to the long-term success of a community college could still benefit from an in-depth analysis.

In some respects, an imposed perception may integrate multiple perspectives so that the different perceptions of the different stakeholders can be leveraged rather than tolerated. California's state-run accountability system for community colleges takes such an approach (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2009). It considers a well-defined set of performance indicators in its annual review of institutional effectiveness, and these measures embrace the different interests connected to transfer, degree completion, career technical education, basic skills development, and English as a Second Language. Stakeholders may achieve some agreement on what counts as institutional effectiveness if that concept is inclusive enough to serve both their separate and common interests.

Finally, perceptions of institutional effectiveness grow enormously in importance when one compares how well an institution actually performs to how well stakeholders think it should perform. Even if all stakeholders can agree about what to measure and report in institutional effectiveness, a far greater challenge lies in deciding how well a college should perform. Expectations for the level of institutional performance, regardless of the set of performance indicators used, must reconcile diverse perceptions, and often competing ones, about how well a college should perform given community needs and the resources available. In a nutshell, knowing what a college has done will not tell decision makers what a college must do in the future. The institutional researcher can help address this greater challenge by providing analyses of performance in terms of inputs and outputs and by facilitating consensus building and stakeholder inclusion with tools like the Delphi method and the MAUT. But in the end, stakeholders will need to use value judgments, in addition to institutional research, in a political arena to shape perceptions and decisions about how well the community college must perform in the future.

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