

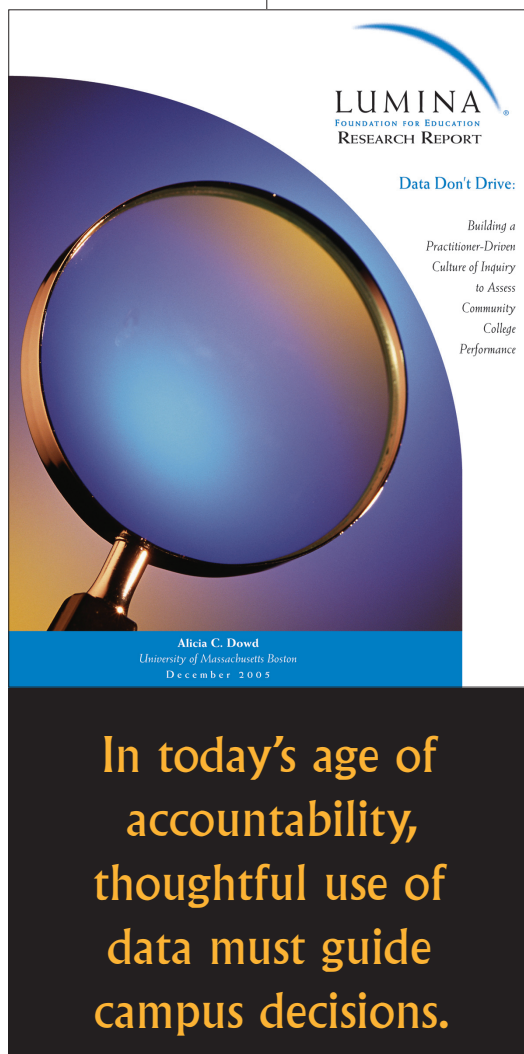
ILLUMINATIONSSM

Highlighting important research in postsecondary education

BACKGROUND:

A variety of formal benchmarking practices are used to assess the effectiveness of higher education institutions in fostering learning and in helping students complete their courses of study. These assessment efforts — whether made in response to external demands for greater accountability or as part of an internal drive to improve a college's performance — are growing in number, variety and sophistication.

A new report from Lumina Foundation for Education reviews these data-based benchmarking practices, particularly those being used at community colleges. The report, *Data Don't Drive: Building a Practitioner-Driven Culture of Inquiry to Assess Community College Performance*, classifies benchmarking efforts among three types — performance, diagnostic and process — and characterizes each by its typical use. The report, written by Alicia C. Dowd of the University of Massachusetts Boston, also attempts to gauge the practical value of these various methods by assessing their capacity to truly inform understanding of institutional productivity and effectiveness in serving students.



CONCLUSIONS:

Too often, accountability policies require institutions to report data that are never actually used to guide decisions. Therefore, the value of these efforts is often merely symbolic. To address this problem, the report says, data-based decision-making strategies must view campus-based practitioners not only as decision makers, but also as potential agents of change. In other words, data don't drive change — only people using data have that power.

The report's author urges institutions to develop and maintain what she terms a "culture of inquiry" — one that emphasizes, not merely the data, but also the practitioner's central role in thoughtfully interpreting and *using* that data. As Dowd states in the report: "The task of creating knowledge from data is best understood as a craft, and the practitioner's role as craftsman is critical." A culture of inquiry, she says, can best be built and maintained by those

who understand the theoretical and statistical underpinnings of the various benchmarking approaches, can interpret results in the appropriate context and can serve as change agents. Clearly, this requirement points out the need for effective and ongoing professional development for community college practitioners.

A BROADER CONTEXT:

This report raises and reiterates two crucial issues for all who are engaged in the important work of enhancing student success:

1. **Reliable research data must guide decisions about what types of services are offered to aid students.** Only by collecting and properly analyzing sufficient information (on student characteristics, institutional environments, instructional methods, student outcomes, etc.) can educators and administrators identify areas of greatest need and implement the most effective steps to meet those needs.
2. **People charged with collecting, analyzing and using the data must have the expertise and the resources to do their jobs effectively.** Institutions, states and funding organizations must do more to support on-campus research efforts, while insisting that these efforts be focused squarely on enhancing student success. Increasing support for research

is particularly important at community colleges, where funds are often most limited and students' needs are greatest.

As an organization, Lumina Foundation is addressing both of these issues in many aspects of its work, but most notably through its involvement in a major initiative called Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count.

Achieving the Dream is a multiyear, multimillion-dollar initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative — which involves 10 national partner organizations and is now at work on the campuses of 35 community colleges in seven states — works on multiple fronts and emphasizes the use of data to drive change. For more information about Achieving the Dream, visit the Web site: www.achievingthedream.org.

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— Alicia C. Dowd,
Graduate College of Education,
University of Massachusetts Boston

READ THE REPORT:

The full report — *Data Don't Drive: Building a Practitioner-Driven Culture of Inquiry to Assess Community College Performance* — is available for download in the "Publications" section of Lumina Foundation's Web site (www.luminafoundation.org). Free, printed copies of this *Illuminations* summary — as well as other reports — also

are available. To obtain printed material, please send an e-mail request to Amy Schramm at aschramm@luminafoundation.org.

Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based private, independent foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. Through grants for research, innovation, communication and evaluation, as well as policy education and leadership development, Lumina Foundation addresses issues that affect access and educational attainment among all students,

particularly underserved student groups, including adult learners. The Foundation bases its mission on the belief that postsecondary education remains one of the most beneficial investments that individuals can make in themselves and that society can make in its people. For more details on the Foundation, visit our Web site at www.luminafoundation.org.