Quality Assurance and Improvement Interviews: A Summary of High-Level Findings

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I. Introduction

The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), in collaboration with the National Association of System Heads (NASH), engaged in a four-phase environmental scan of state-level approaches to assess and ensure the quality of higher education institutions and credentials. **Phase 1** was a convening of state higher education executive officers (SHEEOs), state system heads, national and regional accreditors, and U.S. Department of Education representatives on the topic of quality assurance and improvement (QAI). **Phase 2** surveyed SHEEOs and system heads about their organizations' definitions, activities, data use, and experiences regarding quality assurance and improvement. **Phase 3** consisted of interviews with higher education state agency and university system leaders. **Phase 4** will report on the first three phases, communicating findings on quality assurance and improvement from the state and system perspectives. This report communicates findings from **Phase 3**, in which SHEEO and NASH interviewed higher education state agency and university system leaders about their perspectives on quality assurance and improvement.

The primary areas of inquiry for these interviews included:

- How SHEEOs and system heads define quality in higher education;
- What they see as their main responsibilities in ensuring quality, and how these responsibilities differ from institutional and faculty responsibilities;
- Information about what data are being collected and used and what, ideally, should be collected to support quality assurance and improvement; and
- Identification of new frameworks, delivery systems, and areas of needed support to improve quality.

This report is organized around these broad areas of inquiry, and each section reveals the multi-faceted nature of state oversight of quality assurance and improvement. The report aims to communicate both the realities and the aspirational goals of state- and system-level quality oversight, and to identify potential strategies for deeper and more effective state and system engagement in quality assurance and improvement efforts.

II. Sample and Methodology

SHEEO and NASH conducted nine interviews informed by conversations at the convening in Phase 1 and survey results from Phase 2. They conducted these semi-structured telephone interviews with 13 SHEEOs, system heads, chief academic officers (CAOs), or agency staff from eight states. Interview participants

represented five state higher education agencies and four university systems. Positions included:

- Three SHEEOs;
- Three state higher education agency chief academic officers;
- Two state higher education agency staff members;
- One system head;
- Two system chief academic officers;
- One system executive vice chancellor; and
- One system vice provost for planning and effectiveness.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using an inductive analysis process reflecting rigorous qualitative research methods. The code list was derived from major themes identified in Phases 1 and 2 and was tested and refined on a subset of interviews. Findings were triangulated with survey findings.

III. Findings

A. Understandings and definitions of quality in higher education

Interview participants noted challenges in articulating broadly agreed-upon definitions of quality that could then be used for QAI. However, when asked how their state or system defines quality, the following trends emerged.

Understandings and definitions of quality higher education were complex and expansive. However, definitions can be bucketed into two broad categories: abstract definitions of quality that were more philosophical or aspirational, and operationalized definitions of quality that include the indicators states and systems use to assess the quality of programs and institutions.

- **Abstract definitions of quality higher education focused on concepts of personal and social betterment, which can be difficult to measure.** Participants acknowledged that these definitions were complex, evolving, and often in need of further refinement. Participants frequently mentioned personal growth; one explained that a quality higher education experience "is coherent, engaging, and transformational for all learners." Others saw personal growth tied to economic opportunities, with one participant stating, "A quality education is one that enables students to reach their full academic and intellectual potential and creates the springboard for them to enter the workforce, professional school, or whatever they want to do."
- **Participants also operationalized definitions of quality higher education in more concrete terms.** Definitions included complex sets of context-dependent indicators and outcomes. One system head explained how benchmarks of quality vary by context: "For example, let's say a persistence rate is 70%. Now, is that a good number? Is that a bad number? Is it below or above the system average?"

Indicators of quality can be organized around the themes of academic quality and institutional quality. Participants distinguished between these two types of quality in the following ways:

- **Academic quality**. Generally speaking, respondents defined academic quality as the core of quality higher education, occurring at the classroom or program level and evidenced by:

- Quality instruction;
- Student learning;
- Employability or workforce currency;
- Licensure attainment;
- Alumni satisfaction;
- Accomplishment of student goals (such as transfer or personal growth); and
- Faculty quality, faculty/student ratio and faculty diversity.

- **Institutional quality.** While academic quality is seen as part of institutional quality, the latter is defined more broadly to encompass:
  - Institutional performance, including:
    - Rates of student enrollment, retention, and outcomes,
    - Presidential/leadership quality,
    - Technology and facilities,
    - The financial health or sustainability of the institution; and
    - Affordability or manageable debt-to-income ratio for students.
  - Sector-specific indicators of quality, including:
    - Research production for research universities, and
    - Alignment to local workforce demands for comprehensive universities and community colleges.
  - Quality contributions to the state or community, including:
    - Equitable student access and outcomes for underserved student populations,
    - Economic mobility for students,
    - Civic engagement of alumni,
    - Economic contributions to the state or community, and
    - Commitment to community well-being.

Some participants created definitions of quality that varied by sector. They argued that definitions of quality should be aligned with institutional mission. A state CAO explained, "With institutional quality, it depends on which sector you're talking about. With the public sector, we're dealing with all regionally accredited institutions. Likewise, the nonprofit sector. But when you talk about the proprietary sector, that's a different story." One SHEEO explained the importance of purpose or mission in assessing quality: "Institutional quality gets really challenging because it also has to be attached to the individual missions and purposes of the institutions which, with a research university, can be diverse and complex." A university system leader referenced their unique angle on quality: **"**As regional public comprehensive universities, [to be quality institutions] we have a responsibility to help serve the economic and workforce needs of our region."

Participants identified accreditation as the minimum threshold for quality. One participant reported this minimum threshold was adequate, while others felt it was their responsibility to encourage quality above accreditation standards. One system leader explained, "And this is where we disagree probably some with our campuses; to me, that's sort of a floor, not a ceiling." A SHEEO reported a declining reliance on accreditation as a measure of quality, stating, "Now that accreditation has come under so much scrutiny…we're looking for new ways [to ensure quality]."

Some participants report that they no longer define quality by institutional selectivity and reputation. Instead, definitions of quality have become broader and more outcomes-focused. A system

head explained, “For decades, I think we've looked at quality related to input measures such as enrollment or the admission profile of students.” That system head went on to explain that the system is now looking at student outputs as a measure of quality. Likewise, a SHEEO explained how reputation is not a factor when judging the quality of an institution or degree: “I know if you've got them in a private room [a selective research university] would say that their bachelor's degree is different than [an open-access regional university’s] bachelor’s degree, and it’s higher quality. We're like, well, you're welcome to have that opinion, but that's not how we're looking at the world.”

B. Roles and responsibilities in ensuring quality

Interview participants represented a variety of states and systems with a range of legislatively mandated responsibilities, governance structures, and approaches to working with institutions. Although each state or system was unique, the following trends emerged:

Program approval was the most commonly cited responsibility. Representatives from state agencies and systems reported having oversight over the program approval process, generally reviewing bids for new programs, then passing solid proposals on to review boards to vote on approval. While states and systems required institutions to demonstrate “evidence of need and evidence of ability of the institution to offer the program meaningfully and well,” initial program approval often focused more on preventing unnecessary duplication or establishing relevancy to the job market than on ensuring quality.

SHEEOs and state agency staff frequently viewed academic quality as a primary responsibility of faculty and accreditors. State agencies were more likely to view themselves as guardians of institutional quality, not classroom experiences. One state CAO explained, “I will let faculty do what faculty do. I'm not trying to do their job. My job is to be of service to them.” A SHEEO stated, “That’s [faculty members’] job, and we think you're really good at it. We also believe that accreditors kind of help to keep [faculty] on the right path, and accreditation is a way of checking in.” Conversely, participants representing systems reported more responsibility for academic quality.

However, participants representing state agencies did note that intervening in cases of extreme or persistent lack of academic quality was a responsibility of the state office. While state agencies reported less responsibility than systems for overseeing academic quality, they described a willingness to intervene if necessary. One state agency CAO explained, “There are occasions that arise that cause us to take a look at different programs. That happens when something [concerning] comes along that triggers a wider look.” A SHEEO described a scenario that might require state intervention, stating, “If we found patterns of significant under-employment, or low wages coming out of expensive and debt-ridden programs, that would be deeply concerning.”

System heads and system CAOs reported oversight of program reviews but variation in their use. In the four systems studied, institutions were required to conduct re-occurring program reviews every 5-7 years, depending on the system. One participant described program reviews as a tool to improve institutional self-awareness of program quality and productivity. Another described a program review process that involved a competitive grant, allowing programs to receive a bonus to their operating budgets to support innovation.

Some participants have the authority to cancel programs, but none reported exercising that authority. Rather, states or systems encourage institutions to take responsibility for closing a program. One system head explained, “We have not formally discontinued a program. We have used the information in program reviews, or even some ongoing studies of low-enrollment programs, and talked to institutions about eliminating the program. So it's done through negotiation rather than strict action that says we're

rescinding the approval to operate." A SHEEO described the same scenario in her state: "The legislature expanded our approval process to include a disapproval process. Now, it was our thought then, and it's continued to be, that it would be exercised very conservatively. What's happened so far is that schools are taking care of that themselves."

Participants described an increased interest in non-degree or certificate programs and noted the variation in credentials and approaches to ensuring their quality. Some participants had long-standing responsibilities in ensuring community college certificate quality, but other non-degree programs, such as badges, were of more recent interest. One system head explained, **"**There's lots of conversation about badges and the like, but I don't know that we're actually pursuing those with any real vigor. Now, certificates at both undergraduate and graduate level and stackable credentials–those are very much alive and well on the campuses." When asked about the quality of non-degree credentials, participants discussed confirming that they are aligned to workforce needs, and they reported that ensuring degree quality is the safeguard for ensuring certificate quality. One university system CAO explained that, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, courses a student would take for a certificate program were the same courses offered for degree programs: "We feel like the mechanisms that are in place to [ensure] quality of the courses in the degree programs are sufficient to ensure the quality of the certificate as well."

C. Data use and data needs

Data access and use emerged as a complex and ongoing issue. Major themes are as follows:

There is wide variation in the types and quality of data that state agencies and systems have access to—and how they use that data. Some participants noted a lack of access to quality student, program, or institution-level data, relying instead on large aggregate data sets like IPEDS or the National Student Clearinghouse. One system head explained the limitations of IPEDS, stating, "At one of my universities, for example, 93% of the students started as transfer students. So, how relevant is that [tracking first time full-time students]?" Leaders in these states and systems primarily utilize data to monitor trends in student outcomes.

Other participants described access to sophisticated statewide student-level data that links K-12, higher education, and workforce outcomes. These participants reported using data to "increase the accessibility and transparency of the information that's available to students and employers" and to "catalyze improvements and hold institutions accountable for quality outcomes." Participants mentioned numerous data sources used, or that could potentially be used, to track aspects of quality (Table 1). This list is not intended to be a comprehensive list of potential data sources, simply the ones that participants mentioned by name.

Table 1. Indicators of quality matched to data points discussed by participants

INDICATORS OF QUALITY	DATA POINTS/SOURCES
Academic Quality	
Quality instruction	Accreditation reports, program review reports, NSSE, VALUE Rubrics, California Critical Thinking Skills Test, ETS Proficiency Profile
Student learning	CLA+, NSSE, institutional learning assessments
Employability, or workforce currency	Unemployment or wage data, Equifax Graduate Outcomes Metrics, loan default rates
Licensure attainment	Licensure exam data (i.e. Praxis)
Alumni satisfaction	Gallup Alumni Survey, other alumni surveys
Accomplishment of student goals	Gallup Alumni Survey, other alumni surveys
Faculty quality, faculty/student ratio, and faculty diversity	Program reviews, accreditation reports
Institutional Quality	
Rates of student enrollment, retention, and outcomes	IPEDS, SLDS, NSC
Presidential/leadership quality	System created annual evaluation of presidents
Technology and facilities	Accreditation reports, program reviews
The financial health or sustainability of the institution	Composite Financial Index (CFI)
Affordability or manageable debt-to-income ratio for students	Loan default rates, Equifax Graduate Outcomes Metrics
Research production	Externally funded research dollars
Alignment to local workforce demands	BLS, states' labor department data
Equitable student access and outcomes for underserved student populations	IPEDS, SLDS, NSC
Economic mobility for students	Employment and income 10 years after graduation
Civic engagement of alumni	(No data point mentioned)
Economic contributions to the state or community	Economic impact studies
Institutional commitment to community well-being	Economic/social impact studies

State agencies and systems are increasingly using data to identify and track achievement gaps, sometimes down to the program level. Examining outcomes among different student demographics helps to ensure that institutions are providing a quality education to all students. One system leader explained, "We are just now getting into which programs under-represented students either get into, or never get into, and whether or not they're successful." That system leader went on to explain that even if an institutional achievement gap appears to close, "if there's never been an African American male ever graduating from a particular program, we still have a problem." Other participants are tracking equity gaps at the state level and closely monitoring progress. One system CAO explained that their strategic plan breaks down student success goals into several demographics including low-income, under-represented minority, and rural students.

State agencies and systems are increasingly using, or aspiring to use, labor and employment data to measure program quality. As employment outcomes become a growing priority, states are expanding their ability to collect and analyze this data. One SHEEO described a "return on investment report, which follows the students, the cost, the debt, what they make one, five, and ten years out," to provide students with more information on the quality of institutions and degree programs. Another SHEEO described

movement in that direction: “We do have the ability, through our pretty robust employment data, to do that sort of matching. We've done it in an ad-hoc way, and I think over time we'll be doing it much more systematically by institution, program degree type, et cetera.” For other participants, using employment data was an aspirational goal. A SHEEO explained, “If we're being really aspirational here, we would look at IPEDS completions data; that data is available by zip code, and we can see how many degrees are being produced in zip codes that align to high-priority occupations according to our Department of Labor and Industries.”

Participants question the validity of student learning and engagement assessments, such as the CLA+, but recognize that better data on student learning and growth are essential for assessing quality. Participants view these assessments as necessary, but they provide an incomplete picture of what students learn. One state CAO explained, **“**I'm not putting [CLA] down; they tell us something. But, to me, it doesn't tell us how valuable that program is to those end users, whether it's students or employers or whoever.” A system CAO echoed a similar sentiment: “We had a brief engagement with the CLA. I'm not speaking for myself, but there is a bit of a healthy skepticism about the validity of some of those tests.” However, participants recognize that the ability to measure student learning is essential to assessing quality in higher education. One SHEEO said, “What we really care about is the extent to which students are making learning gains over their time in a college or university. That's what matters.”

Difficulty in measuring baseline capacities of incoming students makes it challenging to deliver tailored education and measure learning growth. Without an accurate understanding of students’ incoming educational knowledge, it is difficult for institutions to measure how much value they’ve added to student learning. One system leader explained how understanding a student’s level of preparation is critical to delivering a quality educational experience: “How do we calibrate our programs of study, understanding what people come in with, and what we might need to do, to offer supports and continue to move people towards a degree from a high-quality program?”

D. New frameworks, delivery systems, and innovative practices

SHEEOs and system heads described a range of innovative practices in quality assurance.

Supporting program-level quality improvement through a competitive grant process. One state uses this strategy to support a range of innovative programming. The system CAO explained, **“**As part of the program review process, the programs being reviewed are asked to identify investments in their programs that would take them to the next level or would fill some gaps in their programs.” Programs are awarded $25,000 to experiment. The system vice provost asserted that these resources help programs “step up and think about something that would really touch a lot of students or impact their program in significant ways.” Programs are required to submit a report at the end of the year that assesses whether the effort was successful and/or scalable.

Equity-focused diversity policy to improve the quality of education for historically under-represented students. As part of one state’s policy, the state agency reviews institutional data to identify gaps in enrollment and completion of under-represented students and requires institutions to create a diversity plan with strategies for improving services to these students.

Quality assurance funding. One state encouraged institutions to engage in continuous improvement in student learning by tying funding to internal and external academic program review, surveys of institutional satisfaction, adult learner success, job placements (for community colleges), and student access and success for focus populations, such as low-income, under-represented minority, and veteran students.

Quality and quality metrics in strategic plans. One state's strategic plan outlines core strategies, such as defining learning outcomes, measuring student learning, and encouraging competency-based approaches to learning. It ties these strategies to metrics, such as the percentage of students who feel their experience left them well-prepared, or the percent of students enrolled in competency-based education programs.

E. Additional challenges and areas of need

In addition to the data challenges discussed in the data use and data needs section, participants mentioned the following challenges and needs:

The need for more resources, such as funding, time, and staff capacity, to improve quality assurance and improvement efforts. Funding was the most commonly cited challenge; one system CAO stated, "Obviously—and everyone will say this to you—funding is an obstacle." One university system CAO explained, "My major problem is that I don't have enough people to even begin to scratch the surface of [quality assurance]. We are a very, very lean system office."

Creating widely agreed-upon definitions of quality that can be linked to measurable indicators. Higher education stakeholders have varying definitions of quality, and some are difficult to measure. To remedy this, one SHEEO suggested a need for guiding principles to inform discussions about quality and to demonstrate to the public that states and systems are working to ensure quality.

Ensuring proper institutional and academic supports for non-traditional students. A state CAO described the challenge in ensuring that institutions have the proper academic supports in place for adult students returning to college, as well as those from families with few financial resources or who are underrepresented in higher education. "Those students can succeed," stated a system CAO. "But they require additional levels of support and a slightly different approach, especially in the first year or two. That tends to be expensive."

Improving faculty self- and peer-assessments. Participants recognize that faculty are the delivery point for a quality educational experience, and that supporting their growth is a critical step in improving academic quality. One system CAO explained, "How do you train faculty to become good peer evaluators and assessors and then mentors? That's a huge obstacle…just the ability and the willingness of faculty to really put a hard light on some of this stuff, because in the end only they are going to be able to impact the quality of the education that happens in their classroom."

IV. Recommendations for Supporting QAI Efforts

SHEEO and NASH have an opportunity to take a leadership role in providing guidance on how SHEEO agencies and systems can ensure quality assurance and improvement. Participants expressed a need for ongoing and increasingly sophisticated conversations and support on this topic. Quality assurance and improvement efforts are not static; they require continuous attention and advancement, and national organizations, such as SHEEO and NASH, are well-positioned to accelerate efforts and share best practices between states and systems. Based on participants' comments, the following areas of needed support emerged:

SHEEO and NASH should consider developing a set of guiding principles that clarify why quality assurance and improvement efforts are important areas of oversight for states and systems. State and system oversight of QAI is distinct from faculty or accreditor oversight in that states and systems hold

institutions accountable for meeting state social and economic goals. Offering guidance or vision in state and system QAI could accelerate conversations and efforts, and doing so could help communicate to the public the important work that states and systems do to provide quality education to students.

SHEEO and NASH should develop a framework or rubric for aligning data to aspects of institutional quality, or share best practices from states with sophisticated approaches to measuring quality. Participants noted the difficulty in creating broadly agreed-upon definitions of quality that align to outcomes that can be measured and tracked with reliable data. SHEEO and NASH could create a set of definitions and indicators of quality higher education matched to data sources and data points, noting the strengths and weaknesses of data sources.

SHEEO and NASH could identify ways for state agencies and systems to partner with regional accrediting agencies to improve quality. Multiple participants discussed accreditation as the bare minimum effort of ensuring quality. However, accreditation could be a valuable tool to help institutions engage in continuous improvement. By providing guidance on how states and systems can build relationships with accreditors and work more closely together, SHEEO and NASH can strengthen these two areas of accountability simultaneously. One approach would be to support states and systems as they crosswalk indicators of quality for accreditation with additional indicators of quality identified by the state or system.

SHEEO and NASH should curate information on best practices in quality assurance and improvement to share with membership. Topics could include innovative state or system practices such as the competitive grants or quality assurance funding described above, effective data use, faculty self- and peer-assessment strategies, and recent literature on how best to academically support non-traditional students. Information could be targeted to a distinctly state or system perspective and packaged in an easily digestible format.