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Parkland joining other two-year institutions in reassessing success

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CHAMPAIGN – A four-year university can be ranked by its graduation rate – the University of Illinois has graduated 82 percent of its starting freshmen after six years.

But how do you measure an institution where students may be getting a two-year degree, heading on to a lifetime of academic work, or simply taking Guitar 1?

That's the question for community colleges, which serve a disparate community rather than a select group of like students.

Parkland College is taking a leadership role in developing standards.

Thomas Bennett, a Parkland trustee who has served as national president of a community college group, said the task will run for two or three more years, but will probably never end.

"When it's done, it never will be done," he said. "It's a never-ending thing to keep up with changes in society, or in a community. We have to ask questions like, are these metrics still relevant? Are we doing the right thing? What's keeping us from doing the right thing?"

But Bennett said community colleges have to start somewhere and have done a couple of years of preliminary work. The goal for completion of the pilot program is fall 2012.

Parkland will be one of 40 community colleges in a program called Voluntary Framework of Accountability to redefine what "success" means for two-year colleges.

Parkland College President Tom Ramage, who credits Bennett with getting the college in the program, said community colleges have long been aware of a difficulty in finding meaningful standards of success.

"We have people who come in and want one community college class on Spanish. They're happy with the experience, but they count as a 'noncompleter.' Students come here for dual-credit, transfer to Northwestern or the UI, and they're 'noncompleters.' They do all their general education, and they're 'noncompleters.'"

Ramage said the college may have performed its function, but that doesn't show up in ratings.

"They're counting against graduation rate that we were happy to serve a group with different needs" from four-year students, Ramage noted.

He said it was important to create a system that compares apples to apples. Since the goal of a community college student may not be to continue at the same institution, it's unlikely that graduation rates are the uppermost measure.

Parkland needs to compare itself with Heartland or Lake Land colleges, he said.

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Bennett said finding some measure of satisfaction that can be applied widely is a goal of the pilot program.

The Voluntary Framework of Accountability program is being developed by the American Association of Community Colleges, in collaboration with the Association of Community College Trustees and the College Board.

There is funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education.

Ramage said there needs to be education about education.

"When people ask what's up with your graduation rate, it takes 10 minutes' explanation. We need to be clear what the goals for community colleges are," he said.

Bennett said the issues are getting out there, particularly since his October trip to the White House for the Summit on Community Colleges.