Chapter 8

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE 1980s

The first seven chapters have argued for the need for more comprehensive accountability of public funds. Several examples have been provided to illustrate how effectiveness measures can and should be required in order to ensure that the funds are appropriately spent. Barriers to such accountability have been discussed and strategies to overcome these barriers have been suggested. The more direct approach to justifying existing and future appropriations is to demonstrate positive client outcomes as a result of services provided.

The last half of the 1980s will offer an opportunity for state government to become the focal point for complete accountability. In part, the Reagan administration is necessitating this shift by reducing the requirements and funding through block grants. The new federalism places responsibility on the states for both additional funding and the establishment of appropriate requirements.

The states have always had the responsibility to hold agencies accountable. This will become even more important as the federal government reduces its role in the management of public programs. There are several reasons why states should systematically require program accountability:

- The public is demanding more accountability through such taxpayer proposals as Proposition 13 in California and Proposition 2.5 in Massachusetts.

- Under conditions of economic scarcity there is a need by legislators and administrators to make reductions somewhere. They are more acutely aware of the limits of the current accountability mechanisms and the need for more systematic measures of bottom-line effectiveness. There will be internal agency pressures to make reduction decisions based on more appropriate indicators of program success.
- Accountability is the most appropriate way to manage any type of business and both private and public agencies are moving in this general direction in order to survive.

If state leadership does not force agency administrators to move in this direction, there is no reason why agency administrators cannot take on this leadership role now. Several states have already moved in this direction (i.e., Michigan, Texas, and Colorado).

There are limits to the impact of accountability information. If available, decision makers can have the best basis for making budget choices — the impact of programs on the clients they serve. This represents one of many criteria for making such choices. Other criteria will be provided by various vested interest groups.

David Stockman's socialization into the limits of accountability data is a good example of how decisions within the political arena are made:

> "I now understand that you probably can't put together a majority coalition unless you are willing to deal with those marginal interests that will give you the votes needed to win. That's where it is fought — on the margins — and unless you deal with those marginal votes you can't win."
>
> In order to enact Reagan's version of tax reduction "certain wages" had to be paid, and, as Stockman reasoned, the process of brokering was utterly free to principle or policy objectives. The power flowed to a handful of representatives who could reverse the majority, regardless of the interests they represented [Greider, 1981: 53].

It is impossible to eliminate the role of interest groups in influencing legislators; in many ways it is a very important source of information for legislators. Our democratic process provides this opportunity. Their influence needs to be balanced with the provision of the best possible information on the efficiency and effectiveness of programs. Only with the total picture can legislators make the best possible decisions for us.

The 1980s will provide us with this unique historical opportunity to revise the way we make decisions to fund public programs. By making such decisions based on the answers to the important questions we can:

- maximize the use of scarce resources by funding the best programs;
- increase the confidence of taxpayers that their tax monies are spent appropriately;
- increase the pride and job satisfaction of state employees by publically presenting their results;
- increase the likelihood that clients will be provided the most efficient and effective services; and
- eliminate programs that do not meet performance standards, thus reducing misused public funds.

In order to bring about this new way of doing business, it is necessary for a large number of actors to participate actively in the process:

- taxpayers must pressure legislators to be accountable;
- legislators must hold agency administrators accountable;
- public agency administrators must hold their employees accountable;
- clients, through client advocate groups, must hold agencies accountable;
- the press must become more persistent and more detailed in their presentation of long-term client outcomes;
- schools of public administration and social work must prepare their graduates by educating them (future agency administrators) in appropriate forms of accountability.

The Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 initiated extensive cuts in both the services programs and the income maintenance programs (i.e., ADC, food stamps). This has been an impetus for a large number of research projects as well as efforts to document the negative consequences of these cuts on the lives of clients. Administrators in human service agencies have been confronted with the very difficult choices regarding which programs to reduce or eliminate. They have been acutely aware of the general absence of good efficiency and effectiveness data to help make these tough decisions.

The good news from the bad economic news is that the human service agency administrators have had to ask and answer the question of which programs can demonstrate that they are effective. Economic problems provide an important reason to make changes that in the long run make organizations operate better and provide better products and services. Ultimately the taxpayer and the consumer benefit. This seems to be true for both the private and public sectors.

When the long-promised economic recovery takes place there will be a tendency to return to the previous approach to the management of human service programs. There will be pressure to restore the funding to the previous levels or higher, with little or no regard for their effectiveness. The "ethic of intrinsic goodness" will return with renewed vengeance, and we will not have learned a very valuable lesson — we must be able to prove our effectiveness in good times so that we can better defend our programs in bad economic times.

This book has drawn together some of the many initiatives for complete accountability through the development of institutionalized client-outcome monitoring. For years the federal government and private foundations have been very influential in subsidizing demonstration studies to develop appropriate research instruments and data collection techniques. There has been a tendency to seek a degree of academic rigor that has been admirable and yet at the same time has been a deterrent to implementation. In the pursuit of validity and reliability these experiments have neither satisfied the academic community nor expedited the development of accountability in the operations of most human services agencies. The few exception have been discussed in this book. Two in particular have been recognized for their contribution (i.e., Kellogg Foundation support of the CARF evaluation standards and the Office of Human Development Services support of the Urban Institute/APWA creation of the training manual entitled *Developing Client Outcome Monitoring Systems).*

It is time now to supplement this development of measurement instruments with the establishment of clear outcome expectations for specific programs. In order to approximate consensus on outcomes it is necessary for professional organizations to propose recommended outcomes and instruments in order to standardize and encourage accountability efforts in human services agencies. It would be appropriate for the following organizations to take a strong leadership role: the National Association of Social Workers, the American Public Welfare Association, the National Governors' Conference, and the Department of Health and Human Services. States, local communities, individual agencies, managers, and workers should continue to develop their own accountability measures in order to create an internal environment conducive to utilizing client-outcome information.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: YARDSTICKS OF MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE

The measure of success used by *Forbes* to assess the performance of corporations included the six defined below.

RETURN ON STOCKHOLDERS' EQUITY

Companies obtain their capital from two sources: stockholders and creditors. Return on stockholders' equity is the percentage return on the stockholders' portion of the capital. Earnings per common share is a percentage of the stockholders' equity per share assuming conversion of all convertible preferred shares at the start of the year. The five-year return is the average of the returns calculated for the four years 1978 through 1981 and the twelve-month period ending with the most recent quarterly report.

RETURN ON TOTAL CAPITAL

This figure is the percentage return on a combination of stockholders' equity (both common and preferred) plus capital from long-term debt including current minority stockholders' equity in consolidated subsidiaries, accumulated deferred taxes, and investment tax credits. The profit figure used in this computation is the sum of net income, minority interest in net income, and estimated after-tax interest paid on long-term debt — in other words, income before charges (primarily, interest payments on long-term debt) relating to the nonequity portion of the capital.

The return on total capital is a basic measure of an enterprise's profitability. For companies that derive all of their capital from common equity, the two profitability measures will be identical. But a company that employs debt wisely can thereby boost its return on stockholders' equity well above the return on total capital. The time periods employed for this calculation are the same as those for return on stockholders' equity.

DEBT-TO-EQUITY RATIO

This ratio tells us to what extent management is using borrowed funds (leverage) in an attempt to increase profits. It is calculated as of the end of

TABLE A.1 Yardsticks of Management Performance
(1002 corporations with sales of over $450 million; in percentages)

	Profitability (1978-1982)				Growth (1978-1982)	
	Return on Equity 5-Year Average	*Debt to Equity Ratio*	*Return on Capital 5-Year Average*	*Net Profit Margin*	*Sales 5-Year Average*	*Earnings Per Share 5-Year Average*
All Industry Medians	15.9	0.4	11.0	3.4	13.3	12.3
1. Financial Services	14.2	1.0	9.5	3.3	15.7	15.5
2. Banks	14.4	0.3	11.6	5.4	20.5	11.3
3. Thrifts	3.7	0.5	4.6	deficit	18.6	−16.7
4. Insurance	17.9	0.1	15.2	7.0	13.9	17.2
5. Brokerage	18.3	0.4	15.4	4.3	33.8	19.3
6. Energy	18.8	0.5	12.7	3.6	19.7	12.9
7. Natural Gas	15.7	0.7	8.9	4.0	20.7	9.3
8. Oil Drillers & Services	21.9	0.4	15.4	11.5	22.8	19.5
9. Electric Utilities	12.3	0.9	6.9	11.2	14.7	3.4
10. Forest	12.6	0.5	9.0	3.3	11.1	6.0
11. Steel	9.0	0.4	7.6	0.7	8.7	−3.7
12. Nonferrous Metals	11.2	0.5	9.4	deficit	11.3	8.9
13. Chemicals	15.2	0.3	10.5	4.6	11.3	9.0
14. Electronics	18.5	0.3	14.9	5.0	15.6	17.1
15. Computers	17.9	0.3	15.6	5.9	22.7	21.6
16. Office Equipment & Services	19.7	0.3	15.8	3.4	19.9	14.7
17. Construction, Mining, Rail Equipment	12.8	0.5	7.8	1.6	10.2	6.3
18. Industrial Equipment & Services	16.5	0.3	13.4	3.9	13.2	13.0
19. Electrical Equipment	18.6	0.2	16.6	5.5	15.8	15.2
20. Building Materials	11.4	0.4	9.1	1.3	9.5	5.3

21. Contractors	16.0	0.3	11.1	1.7	15.4	18.2
22. Auto Suppliers	12.8	0.4	10.3	2.9	9.6	5.6
23. Truckers & Shippers	18.3	0.7	10.0	3.0	11.8	10.7
24. Autos & Trucks	8.6	0.3	7.3	1.3	9.3	–5.1
25. Airlines	2.8	1.6	4.5	deficit	16.1	–14.3
26. Aerospace & Defense	17.7	0.3	13.3	3.2	14.0	12.1
27. Railroads	11.0	0.5	7.3	6.3	13.2	12.4
28. Household Goods	13.5	0.4	9.2	2.3	10.7	8.0
29. Food Processors	14.2	0.4	10.9	1.8	10.5	11.3
30. Branded Foods	15.4	0.4	12.2	2.9	11.4	11.4
31. Beverages	17.1	0.3	11.0	5.2	12.3	13.2
32. Health Care	20.4	0.3	13.8	6.8	18.2	20.4
33. Drugs	20.2	0.2	15.5	9.6	11.8	11.0
34. Apparel	11.1	0.3	8.8	2.9	7.3	12.9
35. Toiletries & Cosmetics	19.1	0.2	15.3	6.7	12.0	12.0
36. Tobacco	21.7	0.3	13.5	5.8	15.1	18.5
37. Packaging	11.8	0.4	8.7	2.5	10.8	8.4
38. Wholesalers	16.5	0.6	11.9	1.3	13.6	12.7
39. Supermarkets	16.4	0.9	10.3	1.1	13.1	14.0
40. General Retailers	12.0	0.8	8.6	2.3	11.0	7.0
41. Specialty Retailers	18.1	0.5	13.2	2.5	17.0	16.1
42. Leisure	17.5	0.4	11.4	5.3	12.9	12.4
43. Telecommunications	14.5	0.9	7.6	8.7	13.3	7.7
44. Broadcasting	20.3	0.2	16.8	6.2	13.5	18.8
45. Publishing	20.5	0.2	17.4	6.3	15.5	16.4
46. Diversified Companies	15.6	0.4	10.4	3.4	10.4	12.4

SOURCE: "The Forbes Yardsticks 1982," *Forbes*, January 3, 1982. Reprinted by permission.

the last reported fiscal year by dividing long-term debt (including current maturities) by the sum of stockholders' equity, minority stockholders' interest, and accumulated deferred taxes and investment tax credits. A high debt-to-equity ratio makes earnings more volatile and is usually considered prudent only in relatively stable industries.

NET PROFIT MARGIN

This measure is calculated by dividing net profits for the latest twelve months by net sales. It reveals what percentage of each dollar of revenue is available for payment of dividends and reinvestment in the business.

EARNING PER SHARE GROWTH

To present a clear picture and even out short-run distortions caused by very poor or very good years, *Forbes* calculated earnings per share growth by comparing the most recent five years with the previous five years. *Forbes* expressed the change in terms of a five-year compound annual rate of growth.

SALES GROWTH

This measure compares the average sales for the company's most recent five years against the average for the preceding five years. It is expressed in terms of a five-year compound annual growth rate.

APPENDIX B: CLIENT OUTCOME MONITORING SPECIALISTS

There are relatively few client-outcome specialists. Fortunately, they generally know each other and are in frequent communication with each other. Many gather in Washington at the APWA National Research, Demonstration and Evaluation Conference each year. The following list provides you with a starting point in your state. If these specialists are not available then you should contact schools of social work or public administration at your local university.

Arkansas
Elizabeth Scesniak
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