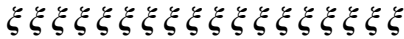


Maintaining Focus through the Challenges of Accountability

Maintaining the Momentum: Foundations of Excellence® Address

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What I would like to do this morning is to provide my historical context to the current cry for accountability in higher education, locate how assessment of student learning fits in that context, and ultimately counsel you not to let the inevitable and impending struggle over accountability deter you from moving forward with your important projects and work. As I will explain later in these comments, we are in for a very interesting summer. Not only is Congress perhaps rummaging together enough interest and energy to write and pass the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, but also it is doing so with an eye focused on the negotiated rulemaking process currently being conducted by the Department of Education. The summer promises to include some very major confrontations over who determines the purpose of higher education in the United States and, therefore, who establishes standards of educational performance.

Before I lose my head and launch into a rant about the current state of affairs, let me introduce briefly my understanding of unique nature of the current demands for greater accountability. Cries for accountability were loud and clear in the 1980s. Legislators and critics argued then that colleges and universities did not know whether students were really learning anything. They initiated a variety of programs to make colleges and universities accountable for the learning of students: major statewide assessment requirements and performance funding were two of the most visible endeavors. Together with a shift in federal regulations these initiatives prodded the Commission into doing something about assessment of student learning. We had argued then that our existing third criterion, which spoke to the achievement of the institutional mission, actually addressed student learning, but we knew that most institutions did little more than provide anecdotes about student success as they focused on other kinds of evidence of overall institutional performance. We adopted a statement on student academic achievement in 1989 and immediately called on all of our institutions to file an acceptable

assessment plan sometime within the next six years. Then we started to figure out what would actually constitute an acceptable plan.

For a whole variety of reasons, not the least of which was the cumbersomeness and expense of several state initiatives, the national conversation about higher education tended to move from accountability of learning into the crisis of fraud and abuse and student loan defaults. At that time, the Commission stepped back from making assessment of student learning primarily a tool for external accountability. Following the lead of assessment pioneers from places like Alverno College and others then providing leadership to the emerging assessment movement within AAHE, we structured our emphasis on student academic achievement primarily as a tool for educational improvement. Instead of advocating for a public reporting mechanism for administrators to use in making the case for educational efficiency and productivity, we started the arduous task of shifting the academic cultures within our colleges and universities to focus on learning of students rather than provision of education. In fact, we expressed concern that were assessment of learning to be used for external accountability, administrators would probably stunt any real faculty interest in any of this significant realignment of emphasis within the academy.

Twenty years later again we face a renewed cry for performance accountability. These are accompanied by mounting complaints that the higher education industry simply is incapable of or refuses to rise to the challenge of being publicly transparent about its productivity and effectiveness. Too expensive, too accepting of academic failure, too prone to being protective, reactive, and defensive: I heard all of that before in the 1980s. We in higher education argued then and argue now that higher education is too complex an industry for any simple, easily understood set of performance measures.

But there is an important difference in this version of accountability. The much-ballyhooed report of the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, often referred to as the Spellings Commission report but titled “A Test of Leadership,” is only the most highly visible call for accountability in the first decade of the 21st century. The Business and Higher Education Forum in early 2004 released its own forecast of the future challenges for higher education and entitled it “Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Options.” It served as the basis for a Wingspread Conference that fall where the

selected participants wrestled with how best to engage the higher education community in owning and responding to those challenges. BHEF is a kind of brain trust now with its own office and staff, and is composed of a self-selected group of industry and university chief executive officers. A little under a year later the State Higher Education Executive Officers, or SHEEO, published a report “Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education.” This report summarized the work of the SHEEO-founded, Ford Foundation-funded National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education the key members of which were public policy makers and SHEEO’s. Leaders of industry, of major research universities, of state higher education executive offices, and state governments all sang a very similar song in 2004 and 2005. Then came the Spellings report and soon thereafter a series of reports from various other groups including the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Center on Education and the Economy. ATS entered the accountability chorus with its own essay on the culture of evidence that essentially outlined the difficulties of creating trustworthy instruments appropriate to accountability.

At the risk of oversimplifying these reports, their diagnosis of the future challenges is pretty much the same:

- To provide higher education to more students, especially students of underserved groups because within a short period of years those students will be the majority of students seeking higher education;
- To ensure that higher education sets higher expectations for the learning achieved by all of its students;
- To ensure that more students complete degrees and acquire appropriate certifications;
- To create learning environments that support life long learning; and
- To do all of this with greater efficiency and productivity; in short, without more money.

The SHEEO report also shines a special light on the need for higher education to be more productive in conducting basic as well as applied research while the Spellings Commission drew attention to the need for strong STEM programs.

By and large these reports, although differing in the solutions they provide to these challenges, share a specific view about the purpose of higher education in the United States.

Namely, that in this global economy, this newly flattened world, the United States is reliant on its colleges and universities to ensure that the nation is not only highly competitive but continues to be the recognized global leader in most aspects of the knowledge economy. These reports, therefore focus on how colleges and universities must provide the nation with both sufficient and necessary intellectual capital by providing the learning required by a high level workforce in a high tech global economy.

In all of these documents, the term “accountability” is linked directly to the achievement of these broad national goals. Despite the various differences within these reports, one significant thread of consistency among all of them is the prevailing view that colleges and universities must be measured by how they meet these national goals, not solely or even primarily by how they meet their own institutional goals.

So where does assessment of student learning, as we have come to love it, fit into this definition of accountability? The SHEEO report noted explicitly that the institution-based, mission-focused approach to assessment of student learning quite simply failed to meet the needs of accountability. The Spellings Commission report dismissed assessment in a couple of sentences. In fact, it has been a major source of frustration among the regional agencies that so little is known or understood about the nature, purposes, and goals of assessment of student learning. During its year of study the National Commission hosted a whole series of hearings across the nation and still walked away apparently with no real sense as to what the assessment movement is about. Moreover, almost all policy makers on the Hill, we have discovered, are equally clueless. Regional accrediting agencies find that our claims about our diligent efforts on assessment either fall on deaf ears or come across as self-serving or, I fear, just seem like one more secretive, private aspect of higher education that results in almost nothing actually useful to the general public. In not small part this is because altogether too often within our colleges and universities, assessment of student learning is viewed as a compliance activity for accreditation, not as an exercise of self-understanding fundamental to the educational quality of the institution.

For almost twenty years the Higher Learning Commission has been preaching, cajoling, and demanding attention to the fundamental importance of assessment of student learning in the management of institutions of higher education. Back in the early 90s we understood that if we wanted these tools to have any meaningful impact on the institution, we were really talking about shifting the educational culture from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning, a shift

that in the long run should redound to the benefit of students and the ultimate educational performance of the institution. By focusing the emphasis on assessment of student learning we took on the larger task of making assessment a vital tool in that realignment of the educational culture in each college and university.

I would like to argue that our emphasis on student learning and our goal of shifting the culture within institutions continue to be correct even in the face of the pressures on accountability. But let me turn for a few minutes, though, to the Commission's relationship with the Policy Center for the First Year of College. Within the past few years we have found in the Policy Center an exceptional partner in shifting the educational culture of a college or university. If the Commission approaches assessment from the 10,000 foot level, the Foundations of Excellence programs of the Policy Center bring home in unmistakable ways how assessment of student learning is key to creating first year programs that make the first year enough of a transformational educational and social experience to give students the drive to continue and the intellectual foundation on which to build.

Assessment of student learning is just one of several tools and conceptual approaches we share with the Policy Center. The Foundations of Excellence program embodies much of the learning of the Commission over the past few decades. In many respects, the Commission's focus on assessment simply reflects the growing sophistication of how the Commission understands its best role in stimulating institutional improvement. Only in the 1960s did we start our program of decennial reviews built around the institutional self-study and a team site visit. The Commission concluded that institutions were changing with some speed—new types of institutions, new types of programs at all levels, and so forth, probably all related in one way or another to the baby boomers. Self-study was the tool by which to encourage institutional practices of gathering data and engaging in institutional evaluation and planning. By the late 70s and into the 80s, we really pushed strategic planning, an initiative not unlike the one we launched on student learning at the end of the 80s. Each of these emphasized the importance of self-evaluation for the purpose of improvement: how do you know what to improve unless you know what you want to do and then what is or is not working in achieving your goals? In short, strategies for institutional and education improvement are best supported by institutions that value a culture of evidence.

My sense is that so much of what we believe is key to effective self-study probably makes more sense to all who participate in the Foundations of Excellence program. The audience for the Foundations of Excellence program is the institution while most of the time the audience for the self-study is understood to be the accrediting agency. It is not lost on me that in many institutions faculty and administrators begin to understand the power of creating a culture of evidence better when they wrestle with a concrete issue rather than measure themselves against accreditation standards. To fulfill institutional goals as well as the emerging national agenda, each of your colleges must be about the task of figuring out how best to provide your students with a fighting chance to succeed in college, and everything tells us that if students are successful in the first year, their chances of completing their educational goals rise dramatically.

Self-reflective kinds of questions and data-informed decision-making are imbedded in the Foundations of Excellence program. That is why the Commission has agreed to partner with the Policy Center, allowing institutions that choose to let participation in the First Year program serve as the primary emphasis of the self-study process for PEAQ or action plans for AQIP. But I am probably telling you what you already know. And the Foundations of Excellence program actually points all of us to other tools that will inevitably come into the toolbox of accreditors such as benchmarking and responsive feedback, both already evident in AQIP but not yet in PEAQ.

The Commission shares a history with the Policy Center that you might not know. In the late 90s, Russ Edgerton was the chief education program officer for the Pew Charitable Trusts, and he decided that he wanted to seed a variety of programs the ultimate goals of which would be to strengthen and raise the quality of undergraduate education in the United States. The Commission's AQIP program got its start with a \$1.5 million grant from Pew over three years. John Gardner got the seed money for the Policy Center around the same time. NSSE, the National Survey of Student Engagement, was nourished by Pew money. I'll not go on with the list. But every year for about four or five years, Russ Edgerton brought together in the Pew Forum the leaders of his multi-various projects to share their learning, to determine opportunities for collaboration, and to learn about the shifting potential for philanthropic support for new endeavors that might together address some of the national challenges we now have before us. But Edgerton was not driven by the applied nature of higher education; he was driven by a profound commitment to the transformational potential of quality undergraduate education. Or

so I think. It was in those annual gatherings that John and I got to know one another. Our decision to partner came later after the Policy Center created the Foundations of Excellence program in which you participate.

So now let's try to connect or disconnect accountability as I have defined it and what you are trying to achieve through Foundations of Excellence and Commission accreditation processes. I assume that before me is an audience of people for whom broad institutional indicators of performance, indicators such as retention rates or degree completion rates or job placement rates, while perhaps responsive to accountability and maybe even to some of the political pressures felt by your institution, fail to contribute meaningfully to understanding and thereby strengthening learning environments. Key to the success of any participation in the Foundations of Excellence programs is the need to know what is happening, the better to adjust, adapt, revise, or simply re-engineer the learning environments provided first year students. Retention rates might suggest a problem of institutional performance; in and of themselves they give no clue as to the reasons and, therefore, the solutions.

From the very first time we talked about collaborating, the staff at the Policy Center made it clear that their purpose in all of this was much more than strengthening retention rates. Instead, it was to lay an educational foundation that would equip a successful student to grow and flourish in higher education, to appreciate learning for the sake of learning and, thereby, to understand how learning will be integral to the rest of life.

This conceptual framework of the first year meshes excellently with the new criteria that emerged from our most recent process to revise our accreditation standards. It should be clear how closely the Foundations of Excellence program fits with our third criterion on teaching and learning. Despite my earlier emphasis on linking our shared commitments to assessment of student learning, you will find other vitally important shared commitments. We both value the depth and breadth of learning defined in our fourth criterion. We both value the power of service learning and community engagement as outlined in our fifth criterion. In short, we share lots of common ground as both organizations try to help institutions address expectations for improved learning performance for greater and greater numbers of students. And I would argue that this is ground we must continue to walk.

It is highly conceivable, however, that out of our current DOE-created round of negotiated rulemaking about accreditation, the Higher Learning Commission will be asked to

require each of you to set program performance standards for each of your programs, measure your achievement of those performance standards, and report them publicly.

So, I have to ask, “Does this kind of accountability trump assessment of student learning, or can we meet the expectations of public policy makers even as we refine and mature our efforts to assess student learning?” I have argued in other places that I worry that the roots of the assessment movement are still fragile enough that they will die quickly if not nourished or, to use the metaphor differently, can be easily cut off if the ground is hoed with a blunt tool.

We still have too many faculty members for whom the whole assessment movement is nothing but a slap in the face of their professionalism and their confidence in the value of individual commitments to quality. It has been an extraordinarily hard piece of work to convince faculty that they have a collective responsibility for student learning, not primarily because they have colleagues who fail to do good teaching, but because the unexamined collection even of effective courses does not necessary add up to a coherent learning experience that culminates in a student’s mastery of anticipated skills and knowledge. Nonetheless, I think we are making good progress in shifting the “effectiveness” conversations in many institutions from who does what to the difference it all makes on the learning achieved by students. I know that the Foundations of Excellence program succeeds to a large extent when that shift occurs.

Now our faculties, barely comfortable with questions about the effect of their learning environments on the learning of students, may well be learning that it is not enough to ask “Are my students learning what I want them to learn?” Accountability is driving another question: “Are we as an institution or program doing as good a job for our students as other similar institutions and programs are doing for theirs?” Even if benchmarking might be a valuable instrument for self-study and improvement and useful in the Foundations of Excellence program, I am not sure that most faculty are really ready to move very far away from the task of seeing if their students meet the learning goals they have set for their own courses, programs, schools, and institutions.

Clearly, the Spellings Commission was not particularly concerned with assuaging faculty sensitivities in all of this. So as long as accrediting agencies continue to emphasize the central role of faculty in creating successful programs through which to assess student learning, the Spellings Commission is fairly certain that unless we “transform” our work, we will not be helpful in pushing institutions to meet fundamental national goals. So it should not be surprising

that the Department of Education under Secretary Spellings, despite her frequent claims that she really wants creative partnerships in bringing about desired change rather than to enforce it, is evidently ready to attempt significant change in colleges and universities by transforming accreditation through new federal regulations.

When I accepted the invitation to give this talk, I did not intend to say much in detail about the Washington, D.C. scene except to highlight the important difference between assessment and accountability as I was coming to understand them. If colleges and universities cannot agree on best practices for transparency and comparability, then the Department will try to make sure that recognized accrediting agencies resolve that problem. The newest proposed changes to the federal recognition program for accreditors make that goal unmistakable. The question posed to accrediting agencies both in existing recognition procedures and very explicitly in the proposed new regulations is this: “When do you know that institutional performance is good enough?” The Department of Education, once arguing that agencies must set performance standards is now prepared to require only that agencies expect institutions to set those performance standard, to measure themselves against those performance goals, and then to have the accrediting agency determine whether the goals and the measurements are acceptable. For all vocational programs and those leading to licensure or certification, the measures must at least include course completion rates, job placement rates, and licensing or certification rates. But the accreditor, in order to determine whether institutional performance is satisfactory will still need to set the performance standards, if not a bright-line measures, then at least a range tied to other kind of variables such at type of institution, geographical location, type of students served, and so forth.

I am torn. It is difficult to dodge the question “When is good enough good enough?” Without some pretty clear guidelines, it is not very defensible to answer, “When peers make the judgment.” It is a fair question for our colleges and universities, too. In this regard, very important questions about accountability are appropriate questions to be asked and answered, both by institutions and the agencies that accredit them.

I fervently hope that the accountability deluge does not flood and obliterate all of the carefully laid, intricately webbed institution-specific irrigation systems that water the assessment initiatives in our colleges and universities. Sorry, but I cannot seem to escape the gardening

metaphor. Let me end, then, by reaffirming the importance of assessment of learning to the lives of our students and the benefit of our institutions.

- Education left the confines of the campus long ago. In fact, one could argue that a few institutions adopted early and fairly simple assessment tools in their efforts to prove that students learned as well off campus as they did on, or that they learned as well with technologically mediated instruction as in the standard classroom settings. Now as technology has the potential to reconfigure dramatically the learning environments we create for students, assessment of achieved learning must be seen as a basic research tool in helping faculty, students, and administrators understand the relationship between those environments and the learning achieved in them. This is tangentially about performance; really it is about making good judgments based on sound evidence.
- Institutional performance indicators might serve as useful gross measures of comparative institutional effectiveness, but they will never really tell the story of the quality of specific degree programs, specific learning pathways, and the value experienced by any given student. Assessment of student learning, effectively and conscientiously done, can lead to a much finer and more accurate understanding of how and what students actually learn. Faculty, administrators, and students should be advocates for accurate understanding. Obviously the Foundations of Excellence program values this as well.
- Student performance benchmarking is undoubtedly an underused tool in our colleges and universities, and I believe students would benefit from its inclusion in our self-study process, in institutional research efforts, and in assessment programs. But the Department is quite sympathetic to “reliable and valid measures,” a kind of code for nationally normed exams. Or so I think. What a loss it would be to advancement of student learning to have that kind of testing replace faculty-developed and faculty-owned methods of assessment including such things as capstone courses, portfolio processes, and so forth.
- Last, but certainly not least, while we all know that students probably want to be gainfully employed and aspire to be effective members of society, the practical aspects of higher education are not always their primary concern nor should it be the primary defining attribute of quality higher education. Colleges and universities clearly can always do a more effective job of stimulating and supporting the life of the mind. A well

crafted, faculty created program of assessment is necessary in identifying how best to do it. Faculty should not and must not let accomplishments on a few readily testable general education core competencies substitute for more profound intellectual goals the achievement of which good faculty know even if they cannot readily translate that knowing into comparative quantifiable measures.

I hope that five years from now I can look back and see evidence that assessment of student learning was either more firmly rooted than I had thought or that the leadership of higher education together with makers of public policy crafted a strategy for documenting performance that allowed for vital and healthy assessment to continue to provide the depth of evidence to support educational improvement. I wish I were the person to provide the vision of how that might be done, for I am convinced that it can be. But we do need vision, for we in the higher education community are not being given much time to create our response, nor will we be given much time to implement that vision. The future is upon us.