

INSIDE
HIGHER ED

Accreditation and Student Learning

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ETS on helping institutions position themselves for the future

Change is occurring in all corners of the higher education landscape and is likely to continue in the near future. Amid this change, the dialogue regarding the need for evidence to support learning and institutional effectiveness is becoming more and more prevalent — and all types of institutions are involved in the discussions. It doesn't matter if an institution is a four-year college, community college or distance learning program. Today's environment presents complex challenges in measuring student outcomes and supplying appropriate information for accreditation — including how to adapt to the mix of on-campus, off-campus and online learning environments, as well as how to address the changing demographics of students

themselves. The change is profound. According to APSCU, “More than sixty percent of students enrolled are over twenty-five years old and sixty percent of students are working full-time while pursuing their education.”*

Educational Testing Service (ETS) understands the myriad challenges that institutions are facing, including the heightened pressure for accountability, the need for robust student learning outcomes, and the need to assess an expanding number of students in varied locations and types of learning environments. Valid outcomes assessments are more important than ever. And, institutions need to demonstrate that their students are developing the essential skills needed for success in order to meet their accreditation requirements.

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As the conversations around the changes in higher education and need for accreditation continue, we're constantly looking for new ways to help position institutions for the future. As part of this commitment, we've collaborated with *Inside Higher Ed* to bring you this booklet on accreditation.

We hope these articles and essays written by respected experts provide you with a greater understanding of the increasing need for accreditation and its role in helping both institutions and students succeed.

Sincerely,

David G. Payne

Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Higher Education Division
ETS

* Source: William Clohan, “What Does It All Mean,” session at the APSCU (Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities) Symposium 2010, Washington, DC, December 9, 2010.

For more information on the ETS Proficiency Profile and *iSkills* assessments, visit ets.org/highered.

Introduction

Accreditation has been part of American higher education for more than half a century, but the nature and expectations of accreditation have changed substantially in recent years, putting new pressure on colleges and accreditors alike.

Given that students can obtain federal financial aid only if they attend institutions accredited by recognized accreditors, it is not an overstatement to say that just about every student and every institution depends on accreditation – even if many are unaware of its intricacies.

Historically, a major criticism of accreditation has been that it was too focused on inputs (How many books are in the library? How many faculty members have Ph.D.s?) than on outputs (What, and how much, are students learning?). In recent years, that has changed substantially. Accreditors – prodded by federal officials, regardless of political party – are demanding evidence of student learning and student success.

In turn, that shift has raised many other questions: How can colleges best measure student learning? Should measures focus on subject-matter knowledge, skills such as critical thinking, or both? What roles do faculty members and administrators play in determining the measures? How can students be better prepared to learn well? What is the role of motivation in student learning – and in measuring student learning?

This compilation of articles and opinion essays from *Inside Higher Ed* offers a range of ideas and perspectives on these issues. *Inside Higher Ed* welcomes reactions to these articles and suggestions for future coverage of this important topic. Send ideas and reactions to editor@insidehighered.com



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News

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

More Cracks in the Credit Hour

The Carnegie Foundation, which created the credit hour, considers a redesign so the standard could better fit with emerging approaches to higher education.

By Paul Fain

The foundation that created the credit hour in 1906 now wants to rethink it, with a shift that might help competency-based higher education.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching announced in December 2012 that it would use a \$460,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to study the Carnegie Unit, which forms the basis of a time-based measurement of student learning. The credit hour calls for one credit per hour of faculty instruction and two hours of homework, on a weekly basis, over a 15-week semester.

A virtual gold standard in higher education, the credit hour is deeply ingrained as a measuring stick for academic quality, accreditation and access to federal financial aid.

But it is viewed by many as outdated and inadequate as a measure of student learning. Critics say the focus on “seat time” has stymied progress on promising approaches like online programs that are self-paced and competency-based -- where students earn credits for proving what they know, not for how long they spent on course material.

For example, a recent report from the New America Foundation and Education Sector described the credit hour’s deficiencies and linked it to several of higher education’s problems, such as inefficiency in the transfer of credit between institutions, which can waste students’ time and money.

The report noted that the Carnegie Foundation did not intend for its definition of the credit hour to be used as a yardstick for learning, having originally created the unit to help professors earn pensions. The foundation has long warned about problems arising from an overreliance on the standard, and it said those issues have become more urgent.

“As expectations for schools and students have risen dramatically and technology has revealed the potential of personalized learning, the Carnegie Foundation now believes it is time to consider how a revised unit, based on competency rather than time, could improve teaching and learning in high schools, colleges and universities,” the foundation said in a written statement.

Thomas Toch, a senior managing partner at Carnegie, said the credit

hour “seems increasingly antiquated” due to advances in technology and emerging methods of content delivery.

Accreditors and the U.S. Department of Education are working through how to regulate institutions that want to move beyond the credit hour. It’s unclear how much the Carnegie Foundation’s new tack might help them in those efforts, but it probably won’t hurt.

Competency-based education is expanding both among upstart institutions and traditional players. Western Governors University has led the charge. But others with plenty of experience in the space include Excelsior College, Thomas Edison State College and Charter Oak State College. The University of Wisconsin System and Northern Arizona University are two traditional institutions with ambitious new programs.

But those institutions currently link their competency-based offerings to the credit hour. And there is hardly a consensus that the standard should be dismantled. Some faculty leaders, for example, have argued that the credit hour provides a “means of identifying

accomplishment and progress toward a degree.” When used in concert with others measures, the credit hour plays a vital role, some say.

Any reforms to the credit hour will need to be thoughtful and deliberate, according to Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher education at the New America Foundation and author of its recent credit hour report. The reason, she said, is that releasing federal financial aid to institutions without a standard for measuring learning could encourage diploma mills and a flood of unearned credits for cash.

The Carnegie Foundation said it would lead a program of research and analysis to “lay the groundwork for a potential redesign of the Carnegie Unit.” The project will include input from a broad range of sources, according to the foundation. It will culminate in a report that looks at the value of the unit in “today’s educational context and examines the potential consequences of creating a new unit of learning.”

The foundation said it would not take a heavy-handed approach with the research. “We don’t have a clear sense of where we’ll end up,” Toch said.



Southern New Hampshire University’s president, Paul LeBlanc, said the foundation’s announcement is part of a “growing call” to decouple seat time from measures of learning. The Lumina Foundation and many supporters of the national college “completion agenda” are part of that push.

LeBlanc’s institution recently received approval from its regional accreditor for a competency-based

program that does not rely on the credit hour, with an approach called “direct assessment.” Southern New Hampshire also applied to the Education Department to try to get the program approved to participate in federal financial aid programs. The university’s application got an initial positive review from the department, LeBlanc said, which is now considering how financial aid would work in the program.

The Education Department has said it supports competency-based education. That message has been mixed at times, however. The department reiterated and clarified the credit hour a couple years ago, as part of a broader set of rules aimed at protecting the integrity of federal financial aid programs, but drew plenty of criticism for instead muddying the water.

The department released a “Dear Colleague” letter in March 2013 that was perceived as giving an encouraging nudge to competency-based education. ■

Where are All the Adults?

Colleges fail to track adult student retention and graduation rates, survey finds. But one accreditor will now require those data. Will others follow suit?

By Paul Fain

Colleges generally do a lousy job of keeping tabs on the graduation rates of their adult students. But that

may change if accreditors follow the lead of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

Nontraditional students who are adults and attend college part-time are a large, growing segment of American higher education. They will also play a big role in the success of the national college “completion agenda.” Yet most colleges do not track the graduation or retention rates of adult students, in part because nobody makes them, according to the results of a new survey.

WASC, however, is in the process of requiring institutions to report detailed information about those two key measures of student success, for all student populations, including the nontraditional ones.

That requirement would be a major shift for colleges. A whopping 77 percent of institutions do not know the graduation rate for their adult students, according to the results of the survey, which was conducted jointly by InsideTrack, a student coaching service, and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association Center for Research and Consulting.

Furthermore, only 16 percent of the 77 colleges that responded (which represented a spectrum of institution types) said they have a good understanding of the root causes of why their adult students drop out.

That means colleges are failing to collect information that would help them do a better job of serving nontraditional students, said Dave Jarrat, vice president of marketing at InsideTrack. And by failing to collect information, colleges lack reference points.

“There’s no way for them to compare to others,” Jarrat said.

Another finding from the survey helps explain why colleges have generally turned a blind eye to whether adult students get to graduation: 43 percent of colleges said their central administration values the money that adult programs bring in, but that the administration provides little support to those programs.

Jarrat said adult students “tend to be viewed as cash cows” by colleges.

As a result, colleges are content to keep enrolling adult students, who enroll part-time and are cheaper to serve than the labor-intensive, high-touch business of teaching traditional-aged students on a residential campus, even if those adult students aren’t earning degrees. And institutions would collect more tuition revenue if a larger number of adult students stuck with it. But because accreditors and the federal government do not require them to collect graduation and

77% of colleges do not know the graduation rate for their adult students.

retention rate data for part-time, adult students, there is little impetus for colleges to take the lead.

It also doesn’t help that data on the segment are hard to collect, and generally compare unfavorably to completion rates for traditional students, said Barbara Karlin, provost at Golden Gate University.

Many adult students arrive with credits, sometimes earned at multiple institutions or from prior-learning assessment – credit for college-level learning outside of the academic setting, such as for work experience or military training.

“No one even understands them,” Karlin said.

Adult students often “stop out” multiple times, and bounce around several institutions before earning a degree. Even a determined part-time, adult student can take eight years or more to earn a bachelor’s degree. As a result, an institution that serves a large number of adults would likely see its six-year graduation rate take a dip if it begins tracking and reporting numbers for adult students. That’s because even a 35 percent six-year rate wouldn’t be bad for this population, at least compared to most institutions today.

Quality Control

The completion agenda may be helping end some of the indifference in higher education about the success of adult students.

WASC has taken a substantial step in this direction with the recent release of a template for tracking undergraduate retention and completion rates, which also includes metrics for measuring adult student performance. A template for graduate programs is also in the works.

The accreditor has begun a pilot program in which eight of its accredited institutions will use the template next fall, said Teri Cannon, executive vice president of WASC’s Senior College Commission. Over the next three years, however, WASC plans to require all of its four-year institutions to collect the information to maintain their accreditation. And that means graduation rates for all students, including adults, will be part of the mix.

“We’re going to be asking every

institution whether they have a review or not,” Cannon said.

WASC has created a new panel of experts on student retention to review the reports. They will determine what is acceptable on graduation rates and retention, which is no easy task.

The panel “will identify institutions that can do better,” Cannon said. And in those cases, a problem with graduation rates – including with adult students – could be integrated into a college’s comprehensive review.

“We’ve long seen this as a key indicator of institutional effectiveness,” said Cannon, who added that the national policy focus on completion also helped motivate WASC to ask for the new information.

A group of experts from private, nonprofit colleges banded together to

advise WASC on what metrics work for tracking adult student completion. Golden Gate, which enrolls a large number of adult students, played an active role in that effort.

Definitions are particularly slippery when talking about adult students, Karlin said. For example, part-time students typically can enroll at multiple dates during the year. And some may only take one course per year. So it is difficult to determine what constitutes an adult student cohort.

Golden Gate recently conducted a major review of how it tracks adult students, and the college now measures the segment’s performance in several areas around retention. Not all the numbers are flattering.

“We are getting some stuff that’s helpful,” Karlin said, but also “scary in

some areas.”

Those new data, however, have helped the university make several improvements.

For example, Karlin said Golden Gate has begun a program

in which faculty members reach out to its online students to boost their level of engagement. And the university now requires that all incoming students take a gateway course that helps them navigate college life.

Graduation rates are going to lag for adult students, because the pressures of work and raising children often interfere with their studies. But with better measurement, colleges can improve how they serve this often mysterious group, experts said.

“Some of this we can’t control,” said Karlin. “Some of it we can.” ■

Public University Accountability



Reboot of Voluntary System of Accountability aims to give institutions more flexibility in reporting student learning -- but new options (including non-standardized one) may not have expanded enough to win many converts.

By Doug Lederman

The Voluntary System of Accountability was born six years ago as a defensive act, seeking to demonstrate to politicians and critics that colleges and universities were willing to show the public how they were performing in key ways.

But the two college groups that created the VSA, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, are now revising it, in large part to encourage more public universities to participate.

The biggest change expands the ways in which institutions can report their student learning outcomes, to try to make it more useful for campuses themselves. But that adjustment

seems unlikely to be significant enough to overcome the objections that have led scores of colleges to opt out of the voluntary reporting system, primarily because they did not like the system's dependence on standardized measures that allow for comparability across colleges.

And the discussion about the accountability system says a lot about what has changed -- and what has not -- since the debate about student learning outcomes roared into public view at the prodding of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings in the mid-2000s.

While campuses are engaged in significantly more activity around assessing how much their students are learning, the fundamental tension remains: Is measuring student learning important primarily to help professors teach better and students learn more, or to give students and parents more information about which institutions are performing better?

The VSA Is Born

M. Peter McPherson was just three months into the presidency of the land-grant association when he told Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education that public colleges would band together to create a way of informing the public about their performance in terms of graduation rates, graduates' plans, and the like. The Spellings panel had been beating colleges up for their perceived recalcitrance to be more precise and public about how well they were educating their students, and the

panel appeared -- to some -- hell-bent on establishing a federally mandated system to force them to do so.

McPherson's proposal -- and the Voluntary System of Accountability's formal release a year later -- seemed to take the steam out of the drive for a compulsory reporting scheme.

But the approach also received pushback from campus leaders and faculty groups blasting its requirement that participating campuses use one of three mechanized measurements -- the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (from ACT), the Educational Testing Service's Proficiency Profile) or the Collegiate Learning Assessment -- to report their progress in student learning.

In selecting those three tests and requiring participants to report the difference in how freshmen and seniors performed -- to try to measure the "value added" contribution institutions made to their students -- critics said the groups were buying into the argument that learning had to be measured in ways that were comparable across institutions to be useful.

"The university has concluded that using standardized tests on an institutional level as measures of student learning fails to recognize the diversity, breadth, and depth of discipline-specific knowledge and learning that takes place in colleges and universities today," the University of California's then-president, Robert C. Dynes, wrote to the organizers of the accountability effort in 2007.

UC and its 10 campuses were among



M. Peter McPherson

the highest-profile non-participants, but they were far from alone. About two-thirds of the roughly 500 members of the APLU and AASCU participated in the voluntary accountability system, and of those, only half reported scores using one of the three measures.

"The VSA continues to be unique among higher ed accountability systems in seeking to get substantial reporting on educational outcomes," said McPherson. "But we want a larger group to report" their learning outcomes.

Why were relatively few institutions doing so? A 2012 analysis by the National Institute on Learning Outcomes Assessment of the VSA's four-year pilot project on student learning outcomes cited two reasons: the data presented are not particularly useful to users, and there was a lack of support within higher education for the the measures used in the VSA.

"We ... found that the standardized tests of student learning originally approved for inclusion in the pilot lack

credibility and acceptance within a broad sweep of the higher education community which, in turn, serves to undermine institutional participation in the VSA,” the report said. “Institutions participating in the VSA and other non-participating institutions would like to expand the number and nature of the student learning measures in order to more accurately portray student attainment and provide more useful and meaningful information for multiple audiences.”

Stanley O. Ikenberry, a co-author of the report and former president of the University of Illinois, says the VSA had a huge political impact, in terms of showing that colleges and universities were not afraid of reporting on their performance. He also credits APLU and AACSC with “jumpstart[ing] the assessment movement across the broad scope of higher education.”

Colleges (and their faculties) are engaged in much more experimentation in measuring student learning now than they were just a few years ago, and the VSA (and the push from the Spellings Commission) played major roles in that change.

But Ikenberry said the original vision of the VSA also embraced what he called an “overly simplistic” view (favored by many members of Spellings) that “we could find a single test score that could be comparable across the incredible diversity of institutions and students that would be meaningful.

“The evidence we’ve found since then is clear that that’s not a very realistic vision of what the field ought

to be trying to accomplish,” Ikenberry said.

Much better, the NILOA report argued, would be for the VSA to “expand the range of accepted assessment tools and approaches,” such as portfolios and the Association of American Colleges & Universities’ VALUE rubric, and to allow colleges to report data on student learning at the program level rather than solely at the institutional level, since that sort of information may be most helpful to students and to the colleges’ faculty members themselves.

“[R]estricting the reporting of student learning outcomes to a test score may have led campuses to ignore the many other relevant indicators of student learning that might have been shared,” the report said. “The next version of College Portrait should serve to advocate for “alternative assessment methods that use authentic student work to make judgments about the quality of student learning.”

Rebooting the VSA

In reworking the VSA to make it more useful to colleges and students, the public college groups have taken the advice from the NILOA report to heart -- to a point.

Beginning this year, public colleges and universities will have more options for fulfilling the VSA’s student learning outcomes reporting requirement. They can continue to report “value added” scores for the three standardized measures (CLA, CAAP and ETS Proficiency), and they can also report senior-only scores for those three exams, as long as they compare the

results to peer institutions.

In addition, they can, for the first time, report institution-level results for the AACU’s VALUE rubrics for critical thinking or written communication, either comparing their own freshmen and seniors or for seniors only (benchmarked to peer institutions). Unlike the other tools included in the VSA, the VALUE rubrics are not standardized, though the results can be reported using a numerical scheme.

But that’s as far as the groups were willing to go to accommodate those who want to be able to use measures (such as electronic portfolios or home-grown tools created by individual departments) that focus more on what and how much students learn within a particular program or college alone, without some way of comparing those results beyond the institution’s own borders, says Christine M. Keller, executive director of the VSA and associate vice president for academic affairs at the land-grant association.

“I don’t buy the argument that you can’t use outcomes measures for institutional accountability and for internal purposes, and we decided that going down to the program level, or allowing measures that could not be benchmarked against other institutions, would be going too far afield from the original intent of VSA,” Keller said. “Everyone we spoke with felt the VSA just can’t go there -- it needs some kind of comparison.”

Some Won Over

VSA officials hope the inclusion of the VALUE rubrics will, entice more universities to participate (or do so

more fully).

It is likely to do so in the University of Kansas' case, says Paul Klute, special assistant to the senior vice provost there. Kansas has experimented with the Collegiate Learning Assessment and ETS's proficiency profile, but found that neither of the metrics was "useful for describing student learning" there, mainly because of concerns about how representative the data were, Klute said. So while the university joined in the VSA, it has not reported data for student learning during the pilot.

But the university has been pleased so far by its experimentation with the VALUE rubric for written communication, and in its own pilot project, "every department that teaches undergraduates used them in some way," he said. A majority used the rubric in its original form, some adapted it in minor ways, and the rest "threw it out and created their own."

Kansas plans to "roll up" to the university level the scores that instructors in its various departments

assign to students based on how well they fulfill the requirements of the VALUE rubric in written communication. And those institutional scores, will be comparable to the VALUE rubric scores that other colleges report to the VSA -- allowing for the comparability that APLU desires, but in a way that Kansas faculty can live with.

"There's a level of comfort that's there with this [form of assessment] that wasn't there with the others," said Klute.

"There's less of an imposition that somebody's going to come in and commandeer your class to give this exam" that isn't connected to the material.

Progress, But Not Enough?

Although the University of California has been a high-profile demurrer from the VSA, there are many things about the accountability system that the university likes -- so much so that it has copied many of them in its own accountability system, said Hilary Baxter, interim director for academic planning, programs and coordination for the UC system.

UC's main objection all along has been the attempt to standardize something -- the quality and degree of student learning -- that varies enormously from student to student and program to program, let alone university to university, Baxter said.

Adding the VALUE rubric is a definite step in the right direction for VSA, Baxter said, "because it's a little more flexible, and welcomes faculty prerogative" more than the other methods VSA recognizes.

But Baxter left the clear impression -- though she declined to say so flatly, since that's ultimately a faculty decision at UC -- that the change would not be sufficient to draw the university into the VSA, primarily because UC officials would be disinclined to mandate use of one measurement tool, or to standardize reporting to make it possible to create one institutional number. "The faculty position on standardized approaches hasn't changed," she said.

The Spellings View

Six years after her commission lit a fire under colleges on student learning outcomes, Margaret Spellings herself is pleased to see it still smoldering -- though she wouldn't mind if it were raging a bit more intensely.

"I'm glad to see VSA taking this step, and if it gets more people interested in participating, it's a good thing," the former education secretary said.

Spellings said she recognized that student learning is a complex endeavor, and that it would be a mistake to "insist on one and only one way to evaluate it." After all, she said, even in gauging the quality of restaurants, "we have Zagat's, and we have AAA, and people can use the one they prefer."

But ultimately, Spellings said, the goal has to be to develop "tools and metrics, multiple or otherwise, that are comprehensible and actionable for consumers and policy makers," "to reassure them that institutions are doing what we need them."

"And we're still," she added, "a good distance away from that." ■



Margaret Spellings

More Accountable Accreditation

Higher ed group calls for refining, not revamping, system of quality assurance, with emphasis on transparency and independence from the government.

By Doug Lederman

WASHINGTON -- Two years ago, Molly Corbett Broad told a group of accreditors and campus administrators that as pressure mounted on colleges to keep prices down and productivity up, higher education leaders had better reform the voluntary accreditation system that serves as the enterprise's quality control mechanism -- or else.

"If we fail to act, it is likely that change will be imposed upon us, with potentially serious consequences for the governance structure that has allowed the United States to develop the best, most inclusive" higher education system in the world, Broad, president of the American Council on Education, told those assembled for a meeting of the country's largest regional accreditor in 2010.

A year ago, with that risk in mind, Broad appointed a panel of college presidents and other higher education leaders to, as she put it at the time, "see how much of this reform we can reach agreement on and do by ourselves, and to ourselves." The committee, Broad conceded at the time, had "a very tough assignment," given the intense differences of opinion that exist among higher ed officials about many accreditation issues, including how hard accreditors

should push institutions on student learning outcomes.

The report of the council's National Task Force on Institutional Accreditation offers evidence of just how fractious an issue accreditation is, and how difficult it might be to win agreement within higher education for the sort of major change that Broad suggested might be necessary (or that politicians might eventually impose).

ACE officials say they believe the document makes a persuasive case for the value of sustaining a voluntary, peer-review-based system of regional accreditation, and points the way for potentially significant changes by accreditors and colleges that would increase public accountability.

While the report doesn't challenge the basic setup of regional accreditation, it suggests that the accreditors move more quickly to take action against failing institutions, release more information to the public, and find ways to allow institutions with a long track record of good performance to avoid the time-consuming process of full reviews.

Those recommendations are likely to seem tepid or unspecific to those who think the accreditation system is broken or failing. And panel members acknowledge that the report mainly

lays a philosophical foundation, rather than recommending fundamental changes that they say would be impractical or unlikely now. But given the diverse views of the panel's members, its leaders say, this was an important beginning.

"This doesn't define the end point," said Edward Ayers, president of the University of Richmond and the panel's co-chair. "We felt that rushing to some action items wouldn't be efficacious."

An Unlikely Sexy Issue

Accreditation has long been a topic likelier to make eyelids droop than to inflame passion. But after years of quiet neglect from policy makers, it was thrust into the spotlight during the second Bush administration, when then-Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and a national commission she appointed sought to use accreditation to crank up accountability on colleges and universities. The Obama administration has largely embraced that approach, as the Education Department's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity is conducting its own review of the enterprise's effectiveness, with the idea of identifying approaches that might be considered when Congress next renews the Higher Education Act, possibly in 2014.

The fundamental tension is that the federal government has outsourced much of its authority for judging quality in higher education to a group of entities (accrediting agencies) that are run by the colleges themselves, and in recent years the government (through

administrations of both parties) has sought to increase its control and oversight of those agencies in ways that discomfit many campus leaders. This has been particularly true in the realm of student learning, where some college officials have complained about escalating directives.

Some critics have argued that that dynamic could be altered either by breaking the link that makes accreditation the main gatekeeper for colleges to gain access to federal financial aid funds (such that the federal government could stake less of a claim on accreditors) or by giving the government more direct responsibility for some of the roles that now fall to accreditors. The ACE report rejects those suggestions, focusing instead on strengthening the current setup that seeks to balance oversight and institutional autonomy.

The panel's report also argues for keeping rather than dismantling the regional structure through which the institutional accreditors operate, which has come under increasing question as geographic boundaries blur and arguments build for judging colleges by institutional type rather than where they reside.

"The current regional basis of accreditation is probably not the way America would structure the system if starting from scratch," the report states. "There has already been discussion about the possibility of creating new accreditors based on institutional mission. While these discussions will continue, regional accreditation is the system in place.

Completely replacing the current structure would be costly and would divert attention from the task at hand."

Instead, the panel -- whose own members were frequently at odds, with deep divisions at times about how aggressively to remake the system -- focused its deliberations on reaching agreement about the principles that should guide a system



Edward Ayers

of voluntary accreditation ("emphasize assuring quality, preserve institutional diversity and academic freedom") and a set of recommendations to better accomplish them.

In laying out the recommendations, the report alternates between language that is self-critical, acknowledging ways that higher education must improve, and defensive, warning against excessive regulation. (The latter is evidenced by this footnote related to the thorny topic of student learning outcomes: "We note that the over-specification of educational

outcomes by any central authority can too easily narrow the curriculum and undermine the institutional autonomy without providing useful information to the public. Many members of the Task Force believe the federal government is a significant threat in this regard.")

Most of the recommendations will sound familiar to those who follow these issues: increasing the transparency of the accreditation process, in large part by making public more information about its outcomes; focusing more on (and releasing more information about) student success and educational quality, though with lots of caveats about the dangers of oversimplification in doing so; taking stronger, quicker action against "substandard" institutions (in response to the criticism that clearly failing institutions sometimes keep their right to operate long past the point where their demise is assured); increasing the involvement of college presidents and other senior officials in accreditation; and making the process more cost-effective, as many college leaders complain about the rising costs of complying with accreditors' demands.

Perhaps the single most significant recommendation the panel suggests is to impose differing levels of scrutiny and oversight on institutions with different profiles. A streamlined but in-depth review of data and documents might suffice for colleges and universities with "an established history of success," while less-established or thriving institutions might require a full-blown traditional

review. “Such an approach would concentrate accreditors’ attention not on every institution equally and indiscriminately, or only on a handful of struggling schools, but rather on a range of institutions that cannot demonstrate a consistent record of success,” the report states. But its authors concede that creating a system of differentiated reviews might require a change in the law.

Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at

the American Council on Education, described the report as being written “from the academy to the academy,” with the goal of helping to build a common vision for regional accreditation’s future within higher education rather than responding to external critics. “There is nothing we could say that would satisfy critics of regional accreditation,” he said.

That may be true, but some of those critics said they had hoped that the panel might try to lead the way toward

more dramatic changes. Those hoping for that were disappointed, they say.

“This starts from a premise that accreditation is working well, and in my view, it’s not working well,” said Arthur Rothkopf, co-chairman of the Education Department’s accreditation advisory committee and a former president of Lafayette College. “It more or less accepts the status quo and makes some modest suggestions. It reads like academia circling the wagons.” ■

Profit and the Public Good

Higher Learning Commission puts “public good” into regional accreditation while considering probation of the U. of Phoenix. Will more for-profits stumble?

By Paul Fain

A common lament about higher education is that it has become more of a private good than a public one, with students as consumers and colleges as businesses focused on hawking their product. But that model won’t cut it anymore, at least not for the nation’s largest regional accreditor, which in January redefined what an institution’s philosophical bottom line should be.

“We felt it was important to make a statement -- that education is a public good,” said Sylvia Manning, president of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

As a result, the commission included language describing how colleges must first serve the public -- rather

than themselves or outside interests -- as part of its updated criteria for accreditation. The document lays out standards of quality that colleges must meet to earn accreditation or have it reaffirmed, which is required every 10 years.

The language reads: “The institution’s educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization or supporting external interests.”

The commission’s reaffirmation process is also getting a test, as a commission review team last month recommended a sanction of probation for the University of Phoenix, the nation’s biggest university. According

to a corporate filing from the Apollo Group, which is Phoenix’s holding company, what tripped up the university in its bid for reaccreditation was the site team’s belief that Phoenix lacks autonomy from Apollo.

The university, which produces 90 percent of Apollo’s revenue, also failed to meet aspects of a supplemental “minimal standards” document, the team found. But all of the identified concerns relate to the university’s administrative structure and governance, Apollo said.

The university has become more autonomous since its last HLC review, which was in 2002, company officials said. For example, the university’s president, William Pepicello, created his own, independent cabinet about two years ago.

Mark Brenner, an Apollo spokesman, said in a written statement that the review team included a number of positive findings in its report, including that the university is well-resourced and innovative, and had strengths in student services and technology.

“In fact, the University of Phoenix was found to be in compliance with substantially all criteria associated with academic matters.”

Meeting the Standard

Phoenix isn't the only institution paying close attention to how the commission applies its new criteria. Officials from other for-profits and some private colleges raised concerns about the standards as they were being developed, sources said.

However, the public good section appears to be aimed at the for-profit sector, or is at least particularly problematic for it. That's because for-profits by definition seek returns for their investors. And for publicly traded chains like the University of Phoenix, holding companies issue shares of stock. Financial regulators require public companies to try to earn money for shareholders. And investors regularly sue for-profits for allegedly failing to preserve their money.

Upping the stakes for HLC is that it accredits the bulk of the major for-profit college chains. The commission oversees institutions managed by DeVry University, Career Education Corporation, Education Management Corporation, Bridgepoint Education and Kaplan, Inc., to name a few.

HLC extends over 19 states, more than any of the other five regional accreditors. It has long been a home base for big for-profits, because of geography and a belief that the commission had a relatively welcoming view of the sector. However, that perception has changed, partially due to the 2008 arrival of Manning, who

signaled a get-tough approach with for-profits after she was hired.

The high-profile woes of Phoenix raise a question: Is corporate profit-seeking a disqualifier under the commission's new standards? Accreditation by a federally recognized agency is a requirement for institutions to be eligible to participate in federal financial aid programs, which provide a high percentage of their revenue. So if HLC has a fundamental problem with the industry's business model,



Sylvia Manning

for-profits would be forced to seek accreditation elsewhere or risk going out of business.

However, that scenario appears unlikely. Manning said the section was not designed specifically to challenge for-profits, but rather to establish that every college must prioritize the education of students. For a for-profit holding company, or for a parent organization of a nonprofit college -- like a church -- that means allowing the institution to focus on education

rather than money or other concerns, she said.

Observers had varying takes on how aggressive the commission would be with its new standards. And officials at several for-profits said the “public good” language was vague enough that it could be either worrisome or a non-factor. However, most predicted that for-profits would be able to meet the criteria.

Kevin Kinser, an associate professor of education at the State University of New York at Albany who studies for-profits, said recent rhetoric from the industry matches up well with the public good language. The sector stresses how it contributes to work force development and enrolls underserved student populations, he said, in part by offering working adults an alternative to traditional, campus-based models.

Furthermore, over the last few years the major for-profits have been investing more in systems that measure their performance, Kinser said. Many are also spending more of their financial returns on scholarship programs and free orientation courses and trial enrollment periods.

“They have given up profit,” or at least some of it, he said via e-mail. “So it is more than just rhetoric.”

Phoenix is among that group. The company cited several recent actions by the university that demonstrate its commitment to the public good, such as tuition freezes and new scholarships. Chief among them is probably Phoenix's relatively new orientation program. About 20 percent

of students either choose not to enroll after the free trial period or are turned away by Phoenix – obviously a big, voluntary revenue hit for the university.

And at least one thing is clear: HLC didn't go as far it could have if the goal was to take a whack at for-profits. Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, said that's because regional accreditors "have the authority to exclude for-profits. They didn't do that."

In the Spotlight

Accreditors are taking a lot of heat these days. Both President Obama and Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, earlier this year called for an accreditation system that is more encouraging of emerging innovations in higher education, like prior-learning assessment and competency-based education. An Education Department panel has been studying the system of accreditation in advance of the pending renewal of the Higher Education Act.

But politicians have also loudly criticized regional accreditors for not doing enough to crack down on "bad actors" among colleges. Senate Democrats like Tom Harkin of Iowa and Dick Durbin of Illinois in particular have pushed for accreditors to turn the screws on misbehaving for-profits. Harkin gave Manning an earful during a Senate hearing a couple years ago, and Durbin has paid close attention to Phoenix's reaccreditation process.

For example, Durbin issued a news release last year urging HLC to be thorough in its review of Phoenix

and to make the results public. And he mentioned the proposed sanction during a Senate speech in March.

"The regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, announced it had some real problems with the way the University of Phoenix is running its business and treating its students," said Durbin, who represents the state where the commission is based. "More accreditors, both regional and national, should take a closer look at the schools they accredit and the standards used to accredit them."

Officials from several regional accreditors talked about the increasing scrutiny they face during a session at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Council on Education (ACE).

Terry Hartle, the council's senior vice president for government and public affairs, led the discussion. He said accreditors are tugged in two directions, with calls for more flexibility and innovation on the one hand and, on the other, for more rigor in watching for underperformance and misbehavior. And because regional accreditors can yank colleges' federal aid eligibility, they are under pressure to safeguard increasingly strained government coffers.

"This dramatically complicates the work accreditors must do," Hartle said.

A council task force recently published a report on suggested improvements for accreditors, including a call for more transparency, a focus on student success and strong "public action against substandard institutions."

The U.S. Department of Education requires regional accreditors to review their criteria every five years. HLC began working on revisions to its language four years ago. Manning said the chief goal was clarity because of a widely held view that the previous version was "too vague, too general."

The interest in more accountability in higher education was also a factor, as evidenced by the statement the commission decided to make with the public good language.

"It's not a new concept," Manning said, "But it's certainly something that's been articulated for the first time."

'A Tricky Business'

The commission did not hash out that language in secret. The lengthy rewrite of its standards included multiple drafts that were rewritten after HLC received public comments and held open meetings with its members.

"It was my first attempt at crowdsourced editing, and hopefully my last," Manning said.

The new criteria are part of HLC's broader revamp of its review process. As that effort began, the commission received a harsh reprimand from the Education Department. In 2009 it granted accreditation to American InterContinental University, a for-profit owned by Career Education that was troubled at the time. The department's Office of Inspector General said the commission had not adequately described minimum requirements for accreditation, such as definitions of program length and adherence to the credit hour.



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* Liu, O. L., Bridgeman, B., & Adler, R. M. (2012). Measuring learning outcomes in higher education: Motivation matters. *Educational Researcher*, 41(9), 352–362.

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In response, the commission created a “stopgap” set of definitions, Manning said. After revisions, that list has become the new “assumed practices” document, which also went live in January.

One part of that list of expectations that is more explicit than it was in the previous version deals with governing boards. The commission requires the inclusion of “public” board members who “have no significant administrative position or any ownership interest” in the college, parent organization or partner institutions.

That requirement could be an issue for some for-profits, as well as private nonprofits, such as religiously affiliated or tribal colleges, according to observers.

Manning said the commission had planned to spell out a minimum number of public board members, but “backed off” that idea.

Besides the public good section, the commission’s new criteria document includes other significant new requirements. In particular, Manning pointed to language on the ongoing assessment of student learning. “This pushes the envelope,” she said. “Very few institutions are really there already.”

But the biggest addition, according to Manning, is a requirement that colleges show they are attentive to boosting student retention and completion rates. That means defining goals, collecting data and using it to make improvements.

Eaton praised HLC’s new standards, which she called a “constructive and

very useful response to the calls for accountability, while at the same time respecting peer review” and industry self-regulation. “It’s a tricky business.”

Seeking Improvement

Only 1-2 percent of HLC’s more than 1,000 member institutions -- fewer than 20 colleges -- are facing sanctions, according to Manning. Yet she said there is a “fixation” on those cases.

Furthermore, during ACE’s recent panel discussion, Manning and her peers at a few other regional accreditors said lawmakers typically fail to recognize that a sanction generally means the accreditor is seeking for a college to do something better. If the college makes the fixes and a sanction is dropped, that’s a good thing, they said. But critics often view that outcome as letting an institution off the hook.

Lawmakers want bad actors to lose their accreditation, said R. Barbara Gitenstein, president of the College of New Jersey, who is also a board member and former chair of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. They don’t like to see colleges improve their way out of a sanction, she said, unless that institution is in their district.

Apollo officials said they are confident that the review team’s concerns would be addressed. But if the university is placed on probation, that period will last until fall 2014. Phoenix will need to cite its probationary status in every public communication that mentions its accreditation.

Meanwhile, the commission is

expected to make a decision on the probation recommendation this summer. HLC and Apollo have not released the review team’s draft report. That’s not surprising, however, as such reports are generally kept private during an accreditation review.

Phoenix went through an extensive review by the site team, which visited 148 of the university’s campuses and locations. It was required to pay for advertisements in the news media seeking feedback from Phoenix students for the reviewers. And approximately 160 reviewers participated in the campus visits.

Likewise, Phoenix is unlikely to take the possible sanction sitting down. Apollo said it plans to challenge and appeal the site team’s recommendation.

The specter of possible lawsuits filed by for-profits with deep pockets loomed large during the recent ACE session. Regional accreditors would likely need to spend a lot of money on lawyers if a for-profit challenged a sanction in court.

Manning didn’t duck a question about lawsuits, acknowledging that it is a real risk of the accreditation process. She said that HLC has an arbitration clause in effect, meaning that colleges and the commission must first try to work out differences with an arbitrator before going to court. And she said institutions might also choose to avoid the public relations challenge of suing an accreditor. “The issue of withstanding a suit has yet to be tested,” said Manning. “It hasn’t stopped us from moving forward.” ■

New Measure of Success



College associations create system to convey more information on completion than is provided by federal report.

By Scott Jaschik

Two issues on which many higher education experts agree are that completion rates matter and that the federal methodology for measuring graduation rates is seriously flawed. To date, however, no alternative system for measuring graduation rates has gained widespread currency in discussing the performance of colleges.

Today six higher education associations (representing two-year and four-year institutions, public and private) are endorsing a new system called the Student Achievement Measure, with the hope of changing the debate about measuring college completion. While individual colleges will have to decide whether to participate, the endorsement of associations representing every

nonprofit sector suggests at least the possibility of broad participation. The major financial backer for the new effort is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has in recent years played a prominent role in discussions of college completion.

The Student Achievement Measure (or SAM) involves looking at a number of student cohorts not measured by the federal rate and reporting on multiple success measures for each of them, using different time frames than the federal system.

The federal methodology examines whether first-time, full-time students have graduated with a bachelor's degree after six years or an associate degree after three years. Many say that the system works well for only some institutions -- generally residential

colleges that educate almost entirely traditional-age college students who enroll full time and stay at one institution. But for many colleges and universities, that population is practically nonexistent, and for many others, that population is shrinking.

So institutions that educate large numbers of students who move in and out of several institutions, or who transfer without a degree, can easily have a majority of their students not counted by the federal system. This is commonly the case at community colleges. Others have criticized the six-year time frame of the federal rate, noting that many students and parents consider success to be a bachelor's degree in four years.

SAM would consist of two systems, each of which would study two cohorts.

For bachelor's degrees, SAM would examine data on:

- Full-time students attending college for the first time.
- Full-time students who transferred in to the reporting institution.

For each of those groups SAM would record the students who:

- Graduated from the reporting institution.
- Are still enrolled at the reporting institution.
- Transferred to/graduated from one or more subsequent institutions.
- Transferred to/are still enrolled at a subsequent institution.
- Have unknown current enrollment or graduation status.

And the data would be reported for periods of four, five and six years after enrollment.

For associate and certificate programs, SAM would offer data on:

- Full-time students attending the reporting institution for the first time (including both new students and students who transfer in from another institution).
- Part-time students attending the reporting institution for the first time (including both new students and students who transfer in from another institution).

For each of these groups, SAM would record the students who had:

- Graduated from the reporting institution.
- Are still enrolled at the reporting institution.
- Transferred to one or more subsequent institutions.
- Have unknown transfer, enrollment or graduation status.

The associate and certificate data would be provided only for periods of six years after enrollment.

Colleges are being invited to start submitting data this fall, and initial response is positive, said Christine M. Keller, associate vice president for academic affairs of the Association of

Public and Universities. “Everyone’s been frustrated by the federal rate for a long time.”

Keller said it was “really important” that the different sectors of higher education were moving on the issue together. “All of us had been



working on our own,” she said, and the common push means that policy makers, students and families can turn to a single location -- the new SAM website -- for full data on completion.

Down the road, she said, it is possible that additional cohorts of students -- such as part-time students in bachelor’s programs -- could be added to SAM. She said it was a “pragmatic decision” to start SAM without every possible cohort, and that she believed the organizers would soon look at other groups of students that could be counted.

Community colleges have been particularly vocal in recent years in criticizing the federal rate. “It is no secret that the federal graduation rate obscures as much as it reveals. This

effort will show that higher education is performing better than many people think -- even if graduating more students, particularly at community colleges, remains an imperative,” David Baime, senior vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, said via e-mail.

Baime added that “national policy is hopefully headed in the direction of these and related measures.”

The use of six years as the time frame for community colleges is designed to be consistent with the AACC’s Voluntary Framework for Accountability, in which community colleges report on various measures of performance. Baime said it was important that SAM be consistent so that colleges could be recruited to both efforts without having to recalculate data.

The college groups endorsing SAM are the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. ■

“It is no secret that the federal graduation rate obscures as much as it reveals.... This effort will show that higher education is performing better than many people think.”

Test With and Without Motivation



Study raises questions about reliability of popular assessment tools used to measure learning that takes place in college. And research finds that students might not be as “academically adrift” as much-discussed book suggested.

By Scott Jaschik

As colleges have faced increasing pressure in recent years to demonstrate that students learn something while enrolled, many have turned to tests of learning outcomes, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment. In that test -- and popular alternatives from ACT and the Educational Testing Service -- small groups of entering and graduating students are tested on their critical thinking and other skills. In theory, comparing the scores of new and graduating students yields evidence either that students are or are not learning. Many call the difference between the entering and graduating students' performance the “value added” by a college degree.

These test results may be high-stakes for colleges, many of which need to show accreditors and others that they are measuring student learning. But for the students taking the exams, the tests tend to be low stakes -- no one must pass or achieve a certain score to graduate, gain honors or to do pretty much anything.

A new study by three researchers at the Educational Testing Service -- one of the major providers of these value-added exams -- raises questions about whether the tests can be reliable when students have different motivations (or no motivation) to do well on them. The study found that student motivation is a clear predictor of student performance on the tests, and can

skew a college's average value-added score. The study, “Motivation Matters: Measuring Learning Outcomes in Higher Education,” recently appeared in *Educational Researcher*, the flagship journal of the American Educational Research Association.

The ETS researchers -- Ou Lydia Liu, Brent Bridgeman and Rachel Adler -- gave the ETS Proficiency Profile (including its optional essay) to 757 students from three institutions: a research university, a master's institution and a community college. (The ETS Proficiency Profile is one of the three major tests used for value-added calculations of student learning, with the others being the CLA and ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency.) The students were representative of their institutions' student bodies in socioeconomic, performance on admissions tests, and various other measures.

To test the impact of motivation, the researchers randomly assigned students to groups that received different consent forms. One group received a consent form indicating that their scores could be linked to them and (in theory) help them.

“[Y]our test scores may be released to faculty in your college or to potential employers to evaluate your academic ability.” The researchers referred to those in this group as having received the “personal condition.” After the students took the test, and a survey, they were debriefed and told the truth, which was that their scores would be shared only with the research team.

The study found that those with a

personal motivation did “significantly and consistently” better than other students -- and reported in surveys a much higher level of motivation to take the test seriously. Likewise, these student groups with a personal stake in the tests showed higher gains in the test -- such that if their collective scores were being used to evaluate learning at their college, the institution would have looked like it was teaching more effectively.

Liu, Bridgeman and Adler write that their findings suggest a serious problem in using such test scores to evaluate colleges’ teaching and learning quality. “An important message to policymakers is that institutions that employ different motivational strategies in testing the students should be compared with great caution, especially when the comparison is for accountability purposes,” they write. “Accountability initiatives involving outcomes assessment should also take into account the effect of motivation when making decisions about an institution’s instructional effectiveness.”

What about evaluating higher education as a whole? The authors note that the much-discussed *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011, University of Chicago Press) used CLA scores to argue that students learn very little in college. The small gains in learning in that book are “very similar to the small learning gain” the authors of the new study say they found in their control group. But when motivation was added, they found greater gains.

Richard Arum, a New York University professor who is co-author of the book, said via e-mail that the “methods employed in the study are so different from ours that the results are not truly comparable.” *Academically Adrift’s* study was based on the same students tested at multiple points in their careers, Arum noted, unlike the data in the new study. While he said he agreed that motivation affects student test performance, Arum added that “I personally don’t think the research design is similar enough to our longitudinal research methods to serve as an empirical critique.”

In an e-mail interview, Liu said that

77% of colleges do not know the graduation rate for their adult students.

the concerns go beyond standardized tests. “Colleges should be aware of the potential effects of motivation on low-stakes test scores,” she said.

“They should also try to use strategies to improve students’ test taking motivation. We think that the findings from our study not only apply to other standardized low-stakes tests, but also apply to the home-grown assessments employed by many institutions, as the nature of the motivation issue remains similar across the testing situations as long as students don’t see any direct consequence of the test scores.

The motivational strategies we used in this study produced significant impacts on students’ test scores on the ETS Proficiency Profile. One recommendation we have for institutions is to emphasize to students the importance of test scores to their home institution: the scores are likely to affect public perception of their institution and therefore affect the value of their diploma.”

She noted that ETS is adjusting its Proficiency Profile in part to deal with the issue of motivation. “Starting this month, individuals who take the ETS Proficiency Profile will receive certificates stating the performance level achieved on these tests. All test takers will receive an electronic version of the certificate, allowing the recipient to share the certificate with an unlimited number of academic institutions and prospective employers,” she said. “Now, their students will be more motivated to do their best since they earn a certificate designed to have value beyond the classroom.”

Roger Benjamin, president of the Council for Aid to Education (which runs the CLA), said via e-mail that the new study “raises significant questions.”

But he said that he believes that the CLA institutions have had success recruiting students with higher motivation levels than those reported by the new study. He also said that the CLA questions “are designed to be interesting to test-takers,” but that the new study’s conclusions are “worth investigating and we will do so.”



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Further, he noted that a new version of the CLA called CLA+ is reliable for measuring individual students, not just institutions, and so could be used as a “moderate stakes” test for students, potentially to “boost motivation” of those taking the test.

George Kuh, director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, called the new paper

“an important study, mostly because it empirically confirms what people on campuses know,” which is that “motivation matters big-time in terms of student performance.” He said he considered the findings significant for all of the general learning tests.

Colleges generally have not found a consistent way to assure that students taking these tests are motivated,

and that failure raises real questions about the results, he said. Issues of motivation affect who will agree to take the test in addition to their performance, Kuh said.

“One provost told me that students were offered \$75 to take the CLA and after 10 minutes several turned in their test and asked for the money,” he said. ■

Views

A collection of essays and op-eds

Engaged Students

Students may be more willing to welcome significant learning experiences than critics of academe realize, at least if professors make the right assignments, writes Robert M. Eisinger.

By Robert M. Eisinger

Books abound about student disengagement. We read about their apathy and indifference to the world around them. Data, sadly, support these claims. Youth voting rates are low, especially when President Obama isn’t on the ballot, and while there is some partaking in community activities, critics have noted that some of this engagement is the product of high schools “mandating” volunteerism as a graduation requirement.

My experiences – both as a political scientist and as a dean of the school of liberal arts at the Savannah College of Art and Design – suggest that we administrators and professors doth protest too much. Give our students a compelling text and topic, and they will engage.

I recently visited a philosophy class in which *Plato’s Republic* was assigned. The students were tackling Book Six, where questions spill off the pages about who should rule, and what qualities make for a viable ruler. Can a “rational” person, removed from impulses and passions, command and lead? How can, or should one remove oneself from temptation and emotion? Can the rational and emotive be separated? Do citizens trust those who are like them? How much of leading and governing is about the rational, and how much is about appearances and images?

As the professor and I raised these questions, I noticed immediately that the students had done the reading. We administrators read about how today’s students do not read. But these

students – all of whom were non-liberal arts majors – had immersed themselves in the text. They were quoting passages and displaying keen interest, both in the text itself and the questions that were being raised. It is not surprising that Plato enlivened the classroom. But these future artists and designers recognized the power of the text. They appreciated how the words had meaning, and the questions were worth exploring.

Second, this experience, and others like it, gave me pause. We administrators may need to tweak our conceptions of our students. Sure, *Academically Adrift* is an important book, and yes, the data show that the degree of reading comprehension has declined. But we should not misconstrue that data as tantamount to

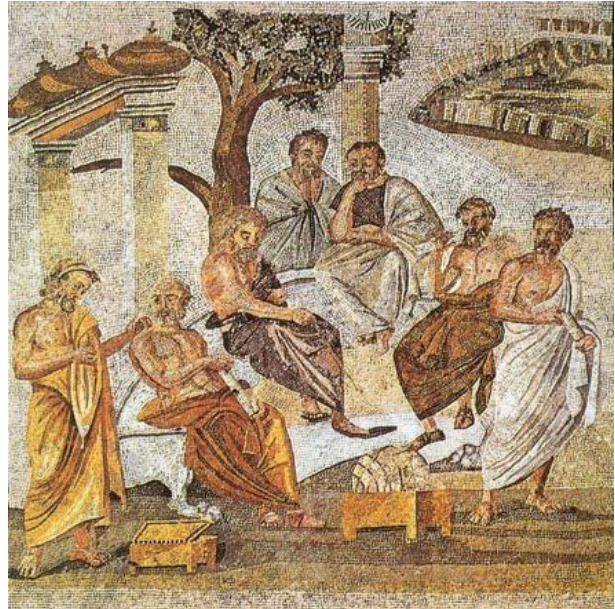
disengagement, nor should we assign fewer readings, simply because there are data that show many students do not complete reading assignments. This recommendation – of assigning less reading and teaching it in greater depth – was one of the suggestions made by José Antonio Bowen, author of *Teaching Naked*, in his dynamic and imaginative keynote address at this year's annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The point here is not to debate Bowen's recommendation – that is for another time and place. Similarly, I am well aware that this experience in Philosophy 101 may be unique, and is dubiously generalizable. (I should add that encountering students who are excited about discussing big ideas also occurs in other classrooms -- photography and art history, for example, that I have visited as well.)

This enthusiasm is not a recipe for assigning Plato in every class, although

that is an idea that most definitely would generate discussion. That written, I believe that we should reconsider how we administrators and educators think about student engagement. It is more than knowledge about civics and current events. It is bigger and deeper than service learning, or a passion to work in one's community.

Provide students with a compelling text and a professor who knows how to raise thought-provoking questions, and students will ponder, debate and imagine the world in new and different ways. They will learn how to think critically and creatively. Cultivating



that form of student engagement is no easy task, but it begins by exposing students to great texts and great ideas. Engagement is more than a form of political participation. It is the core of the liberal arts. ■

Robert M. Eisinger is dean of the School of Liberal Arts at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Process Over Product

Higher education is suffering from an identity crisis based on elevating the credential over learning, writes Doug Ward.

By Doug Ward

American higher education suffers from an identity crisis that threatens its long-term viability.

As costs have surged and free online courses have proliferated, colleges and universities have elevated image over substance and clung to an

antiquated structure that has left them vulnerable in an era of rapid change. Until they focus seriously on improving their core function – student learning – they risk foundering in a sea of mixed messages.

On the one hand, administrators

explain the immense long-term value of a degree and the immediate payoff in job opportunities and higher salary. On the other hand, they elevate sports teams to godlike status, pay coaches many times more than they do professors, reward volume of research over innovative teaching, and compete for students by promoting what Jose Bowen calls the “campus spa.”

Overcoming this identity crisis requires an understanding of what I argue are the three main components of higher education: promise, process

and product. Colleges and universities have long promised a path to broader thinking, an entree to a leadership class, and a means to bolster a democratic society.

They have done this through a process of learning that helps students hone their thinking, learn on their own and develop their independence. At the intersection of these two areas lies the main product of education: a credential that opens the door to better-paying jobs and a fulfilling life.

Those three elements worked together fairly well for decades, until the product began to overshadow the more important aspects of a college education.

Rather than focusing on education's core — pushing students out of their comfort zones, challenging them to think critically, helping them to become independent and adaptable — colleges and universities have promoted an idyllic lifestyle that has nothing to do with learning: sports teams, leisure activities, living amenities and social opportunities now, and higher salaries later. State universities, especially, have been forced to embrace the idea that they are job training grounds and engines of economic development.

None of those are necessarily bad. Learning has been mostly lost in the equation, though, tarnishing the reputation of higher education, disrupting an entrenched model, threatening the survival of some colleges, and leaving administrators unsure of how to regain a better balance.

How Process and Promise Work in Tandem

In an article about online universities, Cormac Foster offered a cogent statement that gets to the heart of much recent debate about higher education. Foster writes: “Ultimately, education is a promise, rather than a product.”

Foster is mostly right, even though many administrators, politicians, parents and students treat education as a product. There's a subtle but important philosophical difference: A product is fully formed and fully

Until colleges can better explain to students — and the public — why the process of education matters, they can only promote the product.

functional. It fills an immediate need or want. A coat keeps us warm. An automobile provides individual transportation. A box of cereal provides food. A television entertains and informs us.

A promise offers security and hope. It boosts confidence and allows people to move forward with a sense of purpose. In the case of education, that promise pays off gradually over a lifetime. It's not redeemable upon graduation for a specific job or a predetermined salary. As Josh Boldt

writes, “Often we don't realize until semesters or even years later how much value we actually received from a course we took.”

That promise is created through a process of learning. Higher education exposes students to a wide range of ideas, challenges their assumptions, pushes them to test their beliefs, and helps them dig beneath the surface of concepts, ideas and ideals. Learning — real learning — is hard work. It requires dedication, sacrifice and persistence by students, teachers and administrators. Students can't just buy a degree or the promise it represents. They must earn it.

That's a real challenge for administrators and professors. If they — and students — look at what they offer as a product, then the relationship changes. Students become customers, and customers demand satisfaction. Think grade inflation, courses clustered between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., and empty campuses on Fridays.

Where Does Process Fit In?

Unfortunately, the process of higher education — its most critical element — has been pushed into the background. Students who have grown up under No Child Left Behind have been exposed to a battery of tests that promote scores (a product) over learning (the process). When the process does become part of the conversation, it is too often couched in terms of preparing for assessment. Politicians and administrators like tidy numbers that make comparisons easy and that they can hold up as “proof”

of learning.

Colleges and universities have fallen into the same trap with SAT and ACT scores, and have been forced to play a fallacious ranking game that places them in a tidy descending order. They use a similar approach by demanding high G.P.A.s for students who receive scholarships or other financial aid, pumping more air into an already inflated grading system. Once again, these numbers offer tidy packages even as they focus students' attention on a product (test scores, rankings and G.P.A.s) rather than the process of thinking, reasoning and learning.

Sometimes the grades and the test scores do reflect well-prepared, deeply thinking students. Grading of things that really matter, though — writing, projects, portfolios — rarely has the tidiness of multiple-choice tests. Even with rubrics or other predefined scales, assessment is a highly subjective process better-suited to qualitative comments than to quantitative scales.

Swelling costs further distort the focus

As a process that builds to a promise, education pays off over many years. It doesn't provide instant success. That's a hard sell in tough economic times. As college prices skyrocket and students leave college with tens of thousands of dollars in debt, graduates — and parents — want to make sure a degree pays off immediately. Can they recoup the costs? Will they be able to afford loan payments?

Those are reasonable, practical

questions, yet they shift the focus away from learning, which in the long term provides the return that students and parents seek.

State legislators and government agencies have amplified the imperative for short-term payoff. Since 2008, half of states have cut financing for higher education by 10 percent or more, and three-quarters have made at least some cuts. At the same time, many states have demanded evidence of quality and proof that money spent on higher education leads to short-term economic gains. Some governors have also insisted that state universities focus on disciplines tied to today's economy. Will graduates be able to walk into jobs today rather than gain adaptable skills that will benefit them over the long term?

As William Baldwin writes in *Forbes*, the rising price of higher education creates a real risk “that students will think twice about pursuing leisurely degrees that don't confer automatic tickets to good careers.” On top of that, he says, universities may very well face a price war with “schools desperate to fill their classrooms.” No matter what happens, he says, the college system is contending with “a lot of excess capacity.”

George L. Mehaffy of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities explains the challenge this way: “Our university model is antiquated, we have too many similar traditional practices, our funding model depends on increasingly resistant consumers, our costs are rising at a rate greater than health care

costs, our business model supports fewer students, and our institutions are not producing more graduates with greater learning outcomes.”

Why a pure business model doesn't work

The terms “excess capacity,” “resistant consumers” and “business model” point again toward education as a product. Admissions officials talk in terms of “yield rates,” legislators demand “efficiencies” and “degree productivity” and want to see colleges run like businesses.

None of that is surprising. Colleges are businesses — although most are nonprofits — and must follow a business model if they are to survive. The biggest problem in this is that colleges are inherently inefficient, at least in their most important area, the classroom. The deepest learning takes place in small classes that allow direct contact with good teachers. Even so, the demands of efficiency push colleges to create enormous lecture halls that promote passivity, distance teachers from students, and diminish the incentive and opportunity to learn. They do this to free up professors for research or service.

Research and service are important components of education, but a tenure process that rewards research quantity over high-quality innovative teaching has begun to catch up to many colleges and universities. Once again the product (in this case research) overwhelms the process of undergraduate education, diminishing the potential for innovative techniques that improve student learning.

Students themselves have learned to pursue the product of education — primarily grades — over the process of learning. This semester when I asked students in my undergraduate classes to list their learning goals, many put down “get an A.” That didn’t surprise me. Like all professors, I’ve listened to the pleading about grades and have had students say bluntly, “Just tell me what I need to do to get an A.” Grades have become status symbols that boost the ego and focus attention on a symbol of achievement rather than a process of learning.

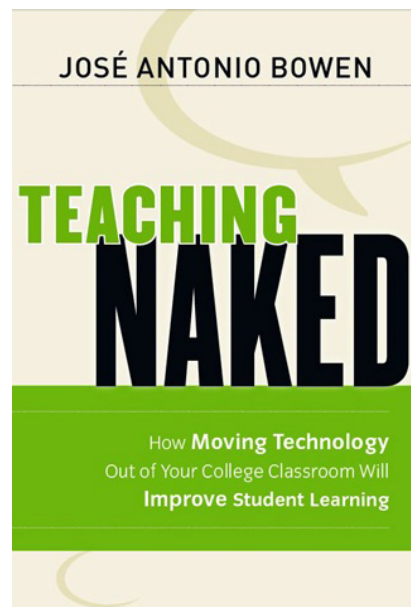
Turning the conversation back to what matters

Many universities seem taken aback by the assertions that they offer an education that is less than stellar. With a steady stream of students knocking at the door, they haven’t had to. They also lack the ability to make rapid, radical changes. In that regard, they are like most large organizations, whether in business or in government. The structures they have put in place are complex and inter-reliant, yet need constant remaking to remain relevant.

Universities have additional problems, though. They comprise semi-autonomous units (colleges and departments) that set many of their own rules and recruit students for specific disciplines. They are measured by levels of enrollment: more credit hours, more money. On top of that, they have semi-autonomous workers (faculty members) who are encouraged to work as independent contractors under the umbrella of academic freedom.

They are also locked into accreditation standards that change slowly and often hamstringing their ability to innovate.

In many ways, education is also the victim of a consumer society that demands instant gratification, that is trained to shop for bargains, and that has grown fickle in its affection for institutions of all types. That makes change all the more difficult, but if universities don’t remake themselves,



they run the risk of becoming irrelevant in an age of widely available information, alternative means of learning, and families unwilling or unable to accrue crushing debt that prevents rather than provides opportunities.

So what can we do?

In his book *Teaching Naked*, Jose Bowen emphasizes the importance of innovative teaching and interaction of

students and teachers. “If we are not focused on enhancing the experience of learning in every way,” Bowen writes, “then we should get online and start selling frozen food.”

Innovation — whether in using technology to enhance learning or in redesigning classrooms and class structure or in creating meaningful assignments — takes time and support, though. So does grading student writing and projects. Rarely, though, are professors rewarded for those efforts, at least not at research universities. That puts those of us who mentor students and experiment with learning techniques in a real bind, especially in an age of post-tenure review.

Bowen offers an excellent solution that will rankle many professors and administrators: Count innovative teaching in much the same way as research. That’s an easy and effective way for universities to break away from 19th-century teaching techniques, encourage educational leadership, and develop approaches that will engage 21st-century students. Doing so will require a shift in attitudes and roles among faculty members, though.

Good teachers also need good classrooms, yet most classrooms today have all the appeal of a 1960s warehouse. They were created for efficiency, with rows of seats — often bolted to the floor — and individual lap trays reminiscent of an early 20th-century schoolhouse. That setup promotes passivity among students and a top-down mentality among professors.

On the other hand, flexible, open spaces with movable tables and chairs and easy access to electrical outlets change the atmosphere of a classroom, promoting a collaborative environment that relaxes students and pushes them to act rather than sit. This sort of arrangement also helps make a teacher part of the class rather than just an authority figure.

Above all, we need to shift the conversation about colleges and universities to the process of education. Only then can we create a truly modern learning environment. We need to help students take on projects

that inspire them and build portfolios that help them — and potential employers — see their learning.

We need to break down disciplinary walls, help students understand the interconnectedness of ideas, and show them how their classes and subjects fit together. We need to de-emphasize grades and re-emphasize learning. We need to involve ourselves more in communities and popular media and explain what we do and why it's relevant.

All of those suggestions deserve far more detail than I can offer here. They all point to the need to change

the process of higher education, though. Colleges and universities have operated on automatic pilot for so many years that they have lost track of their mission.

Until they can better explain to students — and the public — why the process of education matters, they can only promote the product.

That's a losing proposition, and it's not what higher education is really about. As Bowen says, "the real product is learning." ■

Doug Ward is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Kansas.

Grades and Assessing Learning: Can't We Get Along?

Given how busy professors are, it makes sense to link outcomes assessment to grading, rather than create redundancy by piling the latter on top of the former, Mark Salisbury writes.

By Mark Salisbury

During a recent conversation about the value of comprehensive student learning assessment, one faculty member asked, "Why should we invest time, money, and effort to do something that we are essentially already doing every time we assign grades to student work?"

Most educational assessment zealots would respond with a long

explanation of the differences between tracking content acquisition and assessing skill development, the challenges of comparing general skill development across disciplines, the importance of demonstrating gains on student learning outcomes across an entire institution, blah blah blah (since these are my peeps, I can call it that). But from the perspective of an exhausted professor who has

been furiously slogging through a pile of underwhelming final papers, I think the concern over a substantial increase in faculty workload is more than reasonable.

Why would an institution or anyone within it choose to be redundant?

If a college wants to know whether its students are learning a particular set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, it makes good sense to track the degree to which that is happening. But we make a grave mistake when we require additional processes and responsibilities from those "in the trenches" without thinking carefully about the potential for diminishing returns in the face of added workload (especially if that work appears to be frivolous or redundant). So it would seem to me that any conversation about assessing student learning

should emphasize the importance of efficiency so that faculty and staff can continue to fulfill all the other roles expected of them.

This brings me back to what I perceive to be an odd disconnect between grading and outcomes assessment on most campuses. It seems to me that if grading and assessment are both intent on measuring learning, then there ought to be a way to bring them closer together. Moreover, if we want assessment to be truly sustainable (i.e., not kill our faculty), then we need to find ways to link, if not unify, these two practices.

What might this look like? For starters, it would require conceptualizing content learned in a course as the delivery mechanism for skill and disposition development. Traditionally, I think we've envisioned this relationship in reverse order – that skills and dispositions are merely the means for demonstrating content acquisition – with content acquisition becoming the primary focus of grading. In this context, skills and dispositions become a sort of vaguely mysterious redheaded stepchild (with apologies to stepchildren, redheads, and the vaguely mysterious). More importantly, if we are now focusing on skills and dispositions, this traditional context necessitates an additional process of assessing student learning.

However, if we reconceptualize our approach so that content becomes the raw material with which we develop skills and dispositions, we could directly apply our grading practices in the same way. One would assign a

proportion of the overall grade to the necessary content acquisition, and the rest of the overall grade (apportioned as the course might require) to the development of the various skills and dispositions intended for that course.

In addition to articulating which skills and dispositions each course would develop and the progress thresholds expected of students in each course, this means that we would have to be much more explicit about the degree to which a given course is intended to foster improvement in students (such as a freshman-level writing course) as opposed to a course designed for students to demonstrate competence (such as a senior-level capstone in accounting procedures). At an even more granular level, instructors might define individual assignments within a given course to be graded for improvement earlier in the term with other assignments graded for competence later in the term.

I recognize that this proposal flies in the face of some deeply rooted beliefs about academic freedom that faculty, as experts in their field, should be allowed to teach and grade as they see fit. When courses were about attaining a specific slice of content, every course was an island. Seventeenth-century British literature? Check. The sociology of crime? Check. Cell biology? Check.

In this environment, it's entirely plausible that faculty grading practices would be as different as the topography of each island. But if courses are expected to function collectively to develop a set of skills and/or

dispositions (e.g., complex reasoning, oral and written communication, intercultural competence), then what happens in each course is irrevocably tied to what happens in previous and subsequent courses. And it follows that the "what" and "how" of grading would be a critical element in creating a smooth transition for students between courses.

Now it would be naïve of me to suggest that making such a fundamental shift in the way that a faculty thinks about the relationship between courses, curriculums, learning and grading is somehow easy.

Agreeing to a single set of institutionwide student learning outcomes can be exceedingly difficult, and for many institutions, embedding the building blocks of a set of institutional outcomes into the design and deliver of individual courses may well seem a bridge too far.

However, any institution that has participated in reaccreditation since the Spellings Commission in 2006 knows that identifying institutional learning outcomes and assessing students' gains on those outcomes is no longer optional.

So the question is no longer whether institutions can choose to engage in assessment; the question is whether student learning, and the assessment of it, becomes an imposition that squeezes out other important faculty and staff responsibilities or if there is a way to coopt the purposes of learning outcomes assessment into a process that already exists.

In the end it seems to me that we

already have all of the mechanisms in place to embed robust learning outcomes assessment into our work without adding any new processes or responsibilities to our workload.

However, to make this happen we need to 1) embrace all of the implications of focusing on the

development of skills and dispositions while shifting content acquisition from an end to a means to a greater end, and 2) accept that the educational endeavor in which we are all engaged is a fundamentally collaborative one and that our chances of success are best when we focus our individual

expertise toward our collective mission of learning. ■

Mark Salisbury is director of institutional research and assessment at Augustana College, in Illinois. This essay is adapted from a post on his campus blog.

Making the Best of Assessment

Professors are right to doubt the motives of many of those pushing for precise measures of student learning, but that doesn't mean the ideas behind assessment are invalid or inconsistent with the liberal arts, writes Adam Kotsko.

By Adam Kotsko

My first encounter with assessment came in the form of a joke. The seminary where I did my Ph.D. was preparing for a visit from the Association of Theological Schools, and the dean remarked that he was looking forward to developing ways to quantify all the students' spiritual growth. By the time I sat down for my first meeting on assessment as a full-time faculty member in the humanities at a small liberal arts college, I had stopped laughing. Even if we were not setting out to grade someone's closeness to God on a scale from 1 to 10, the detailed list of "learning outcomes" made it seem like we were expected to do something close. Could education in the liberal arts — and particularly in the humanities — really be reduced to a series of measurable outputs?

Since that initial reaction of shock, I have come to hold a different view of assessment. I am suspicious of the broader education reform movement of which it forms a part, but at a certain point I asked myself what my response would be if I had never heard of No Child Left Behind or Arne Duncan. Would I really object if someone suggested that my institution might want to clarify its goals, gather information about how it's doing in meeting those goals, and change its practices if they are not working? I doubt that I would: in a certain sense it's what every institution should be doing. Doing so systematically does bear significant costs in terms of time and energy — but then so does plugging away at something that's not working. Paying a reasonable number of hours up front in the form of data

collection seems like a reasonable hedge against wasting time on efforts or approaches that don't contribute to our mission. By the same token, getting into the habit of explaining why we're doing what we're doing can help us to avoid making decisions based on institutional inertia.

My deeper concerns come from the pressure to adopt numerical measurements. I share the skepticism of many of my colleagues that numbers can really capture what we do as educators in the humanities and at liberal arts colleges. I would note, however, that there is much less skepticism that numerical assessment can capture what our students are achieving — at least when that numerical assessment is translated into the alphabetical form of grades. In fact, some have argued that grades are already outcome assessment, rendering further measures redundant.

I believe the argument for viewing grades as a form of outcome assessment is flawed in two ways. First, I simply do not think it's true that student grades factor significantly in professors' self-assessment of how their courses are working. Professors

who give systematically lower grades often believe that they are holding students to a higher standard, while professors who grade on a curve are simply ranking students relative to one another.

Further, I imagine that no one would be comfortable with the assumption that the department that awarded the best grades was providing the best education — many of us would suspect the opposite.

Second, it is widely acknowledged that faculty as a whole have wavered in their dedication to strict grading, due in large part to the increasingly disproportionate real-world consequences grades can have on their students' lives. The “grade inflation” trend seems to have begun because professors were unwilling to condemn a student to die in Vietnam because his term paper was too short, and the financial consequences of grades in the era of ballooning student loan debt play a similar role today. Hence it makes sense to come up with a parallel internal system of measurement so we can be more objective.

Another frequently raised concern about outcome assessment is that the pressure to use measures that can easily be compared across institutions could lead to homogenization. This suspicion is amplified by the fact that many (including myself) view the assessment movement as part of the broader neoliberal project of creating “markets” for public goods rather than directly providing them. A key example here is Obamacare: instead

of directly providing health insurance to all citizens (as nearly all other developed nations do), the goal was to create a more competitive market in an area where market forces have not previously been effective in controlling costs.

There is much that is troubling about viewing higher education as a competitive market. I for one believe it should be regarded as a public good and funded directly by the state. The reality, however, is that higher education is already a competitive market. Even leaving aside the declining public support for state institutions, private colleges



and universities have always played an important role in American higher education. Further, this competitive market is already based on a measure that can easily be compared across institutions: price.

Education is currently a perverse market where everyone is in a competition to charge more, because that is the only way to signal quality in the absence of any other reliable measure of quality. There are other, more detailed measures such as those collected by the widely derided U.S. News & World Report ranking system — but those standards have

no direct connection to pedagogical effectiveness and are in any case extremely easy to game.

The attempt to create a competitive market based on pedagogical effectiveness may prove unsuccessful, but in principle, it seems preferable to the current tuition arms race. Further, while there are variations among accrediting bodies, most are encouraging their member institutions to create assessment programs that reflect their own unique goals and institutional ethos. In other words, for now the question is not whether we're measuring up to some arbitrary standard, but whether institutions can make the case that they are delivering on what they promise.

Hence it seems possible to come up with an assessment system that would actually be helpful for figuring out how to be faithful to each school or department's own goals. I have to admit that part of my sanguine attitude stems from the fact that Shimer's pedagogy embodies what independent researchers have already demonstrated to be “best practices” in terms of discussion-centered, small classes — and so if we take the trouble to come up with a plausible way to measure what the program is doing for our students, I'm confident the results will be very strong.

Despite that overall optimism, however, I'm also sure that there are some things that we're doing that aren't working as well as they could, but we have no way of really knowing that currently. We all have limited energy and time, and so anything that

who give systematically lower grades often believe that they are holding students to a higher standard, while professors who grade on a curve are simply ranking students relative to one another.

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Accreditation in a Rapidly Changing World

Regional accreditors must respond to the rise of competency-based education or risk becoming less relevant, writes Paul LeBlanc.

By Paul J. LeBlanc

Historians of this period, possessing the clear-sightedness that only time provides, will likely point to online learning as the disruptive technology platform that radically changed higher education, which had remained largely unchanged since the cathedral schools of medieval Europe -- football, beer pong and food courts notwithstanding.

Online learning is already well-understood, well-established and well-respected by those who genuinely know it. But what we now see in higher education is a new wave of innovation that uses online learning, or at least aspects of it, as a starting point. The meteoric growth of the for-profit sector, the emergence of MOOCs, new self-paced competency-based programs,

adaptive learning environments, peer-to-peer learning platforms, third-party service providers, the end of geographic limitations on program delivery and more all spring from the maturation of online learning and the technology that supports it. Online learning has provided a platform for rethinking delivery models and much of accreditation is not designed to account for these new approaches.

Until now, regional accreditation has been based on a review of an integrated organization and its activities: the college or university. These were largely cohesive and relatively easy to understand organizational structures where almost everything was integrated to produce the learning experience and degree. Accreditation

is now faced with assessing learning in an increasingly disaggregated world with organizations that are increasingly complex, or at least differently complex, including shifting roles, new stakeholders and participants, various contractual obligations and relationships, and new delivery models. There is likely to be increasing pressure for accreditation to move from looking only at the overall whole, the institution, to include smaller parts within the whole or alternatives to the whole: perhaps programs, providers and offerings other than degrees and maybe provided by entities other than traditional institutions. In other words, in an increasingly disaggregated world does accreditation need to become more disaggregated as well?

Take the emergence of competency-based education, which is more profound – if less discussed – than massive open online courses (MOOCs). Our own competency-based program, College for America (CfA), is the first of its kind to so wholly move from any anchoring to the three-credit hour Carnegie Unit that pervades higher

education (shaping workload, units of learning, resource allocation, space utilization, salary structures, financial aid regulations, transfer policies, degree definitions and more). The irony of the three-credit hour is that it fixes time while it leaves variable the actual learning. In other words, we are really good at telling the world how long students have sat at their desks and we are really quite poor at saying how much they have learned or even what they learned. Competency-based education flips the relationship and says let time be variable, but make learning well-defined, fixed and non-negotiable.

In our CfA program, there are no courses. There are 120 competencies – “can do” statements, if you will – precisely defined by well-developed rubrics. Students demonstrate mastery of those competencies through completion of “tasks” that are then assessed by faculty reviewers using the rubrics. Students can’t “slide by” with a C or a B; they have either mastered the competencies or they are still working on them. When they are successful, the assessments are maintained in a web-based portfolio as evidence of learning. Students can begin with any competency at any level (there are three levels moving from smaller, simpler competencies to higher level, complicated competencies) and go as fast or as slow as they need to be successful. We offer the degree for \$2,500 per year, so an associate degree for \$5,000 if a student takes two years and for as little as \$1,250 if

they complete in just six months (an admittedly formidable task for most). CfA is the first program of its kind to be approved by a regional accreditor, NEASC in our case, and is the first to seek approval for Title IV funding through the “direct assessment of learning” provisions. At the time of this writing, CfA has successfully passed the first stage review by the Department of Education and is still moving through the approval process.

The radical possibility offered in the competency-based movement is that traditional higher education may

Competency-based education may also provide accreditors with a framework for more fundamentally rethinking assessment.

lose its monopoly on delivery models. Accreditors have for some time put more emphasis on learning outcomes and assessment, but the competency-based education movement privileges them above all else. When we excel at both defining and assessing learning, we open up enormous possibilities for new delivery models, creativity and innovation. It’s not a notion that most incumbent providers welcome, but in terms of finding new answers to the cost, access, quality, productivity and relevance problems that are reaching crisis proportions in higher education, competency-based education may

be the most dramatic development in higher education in hundreds of years. For example, the path to legitimacy for MOOCs probably lies in competency-based approaches, and while they can readily tackle the outcomes or competency side of the equation, they still face formidable challenges of reliable, trustworthy and rigorous assessment at scale (at least while trying to remain free). Well-developed competency-based approaches can also help undergird the badges movement, demanding that such efforts be transparent about the claims associated with a badge and the assessments used to validate learning or mastery.

Competency-based education may also provide accreditors with a framework for more fundamentally rethinking assessment. It would shift accreditation to looking much harder at learning outcomes and competencies, the claims an entity is making for the education it provides and for the mechanisms it uses for knowing and demonstrating that the learning has occurred. The good news here is that such a dual focus would free accreditors from so much attention on inputs, like organization, stakeholder roles and governance, and instead allow for the emergence of all sorts of new delivery models. The bad news is that we are still working on how to craft well designed learning outcomes and conduct effective assessment. It’s harder than many think. A greater focus on outcomes and assessment also poses other important questions for accreditors:

How will they rethink standards to account for far more complex and disaggregated business models which might have a mix of “suppliers,” some for-profit and some nonprofit, and which look very different from traditional institutions?

Will they only accredit institutions or does accreditation have to be disaggregated too? Might there be multiple forms of accreditation: for institutions, for programs, for courses, for MOOCs, for badges and so on? At what level of granularity?

CBE programs are coming. College for America is one example, but other institutions have announced efforts in this area. Major foundations are lining up behind the effort (most notably the Lumina and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations), and the Department of Education appears to be relying on accreditors to attest to the quality and rigor of those programs. While the Department of Education is moving cautiously on this question, accreditors might want to think through what a world untethered to the credit hour might look like. Might there be two paths to accreditation:

the traditional “institutional path” and the “competency-based education path,” with the former looking largely unchanged and the latter using rigorous outcomes and assessment review to support more innovation than current standards now do? Innovation theory would predict that new innovative CBE accreditation pathway would come to improve the incumbent accreditation processes and standards.

This last point is important: accreditors need to think about their relationship to innovation. If the standards are largely built to assess incumbent models and enforced by incumbents, they must be by their very nature conservative and in service of the status quo. Yet the nation is in many ways frustrated with the status quo and unwilling to support it in the old ways. Frankly, they believe we are failing, and the ways they think we are failing depend on whom you ask. But never has the popular press (and thus the public and policy makers) been so consumed with the problems of traditional higher education and intrigued by the alternatives. In some

ways, accreditors are being asked to shift or at least expand their role to accommodate these new models.

If regional accreditors are unable to rise to that challenge they might see new alternative accreditors emerge and be left tethered to incumbent models that are increasingly less relevant or central to how higher education takes place 10 years from now. There is time.

As has been said, we frequently overestimate the amount of change in the next two years and dramatically underestimate the amount of change in the next 10. The time is now for regional accreditors to re-engineer the paths to accreditation. In doing so they can not only be ready for that future, they can help usher it into reality. ■

Paul J. LeBlanc is president of Southern New Hampshire University. This essay is adapted from writing produced for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges as part of a convening to look at the future of accreditation. WASC has given permission for it to be shared more widely and without restriction.



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