

Higher Education, Government and Expectations of Academic Quality and Accountability: Where Do We Go from Here?

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While higher education, the federal government and the states have sustained a robust and valuable partnership to provide education to millions of students each year, that partnership is sometimes strained by differences around the key issues of academic quality and accountability. In the current climate, higher education seeks to sustain important traditional notions of academic quality (talented faculty, challenging curricula) accompanied by attention to accountability primarily through self-regulation and self-responsibility. Government officials at the state and federal levels see academic quality primarily in terms of how well higher education performs and continues to press for greater accountability based on expected results of higher education performance. At the same time, there is a growing tendency for government at both levels to prescribe how higher education operates in the academic sphere.

While the partnership and differences continue, four emerging trends are influencing the current climate of academic quality and accountability: universalization, globalization, electronically-delivered distance learning, and electronic technology's impact on the availability and sharing of information. Both higher education and government would benefit from reflection on these trends as a means to examine how they will address academic quality and accountability in the future, and how they might enhance their partnership through diminution of differences.

Introduction

Higher education, the federal government and state government have long been joined in a common enterprise: the education of society such that individuals can lead productive and satisfying lives, contribute to the common good, participate in government and civil society, and enrich the social and cultural fabric of the country. Higher education institutions provide the education which government subsidizes considerably. If individuals can achieve their educational goals, the nation and the various states also prosper.

At the same time, the participation of higher education and government in this common enterprise is punctuated with some differences of opinion about two

concepts fundamental to higher education and government alike: academic quality and accountability. Higher education, the federal government and the states sometimes agree about what constitutes quality and accountability. At other times, their respective expectations vary considerably. The situation is complicated by the interrelationship of quality and accountability: the definition of quality can drive the expectations of accountability, and setting accountability expectations is often tantamount to defining quality.

To examine these issues, we will look at higher education and the defining features of academic quality and accountability. First, how do higher education leaders approach these vital matters? Second, we will examine government and perspectives of higher education: What do government officials expect with regard to higher education's responsibility for academic quality and accountability? Third, we will spend some time exploring the emerging trends that affect academic quality and accountability: What is driving these issues at this time? Finally, what recommendations can we offer about these emerging trends and how higher education and government can address academic quality and accountability in the future?

Current Higher Education Views of Academic Quality and Accountability

Academic quality

Faculty and administrators, when asked about academic quality, usually refer to the resources and processes needed for a vibrant learning environment. For many, a traditional view of higher education academic quality is about a credentialed and talented faculty, robust academic standards, research productivity, and rich and diverse curricula. These characteristics of quality are buttressed by adequate financial resources and physical facilities. In this context, there is often discussion about fundamental academic values such as responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and commitment to a mission-based system as vital to the academic success of higher education.

This view of higher education rests on an acknowledgment that critical academic decisions should be and have been, for centuries, the province of faculty. Faculty decide the content of curricula and academic standards. Faculty develop new programs and revise existing programs. Faculty are responsible for deci-

sions about transfer of credit. Faculty are pivotal in decisions about the organizational structure of a college or university through which academic programs will be offered. Faculty, through these acts, define the academic quality of the higher education enterprise for millions of students.

Accountability

For those in higher education, “accountability” is often about self-responsibility and self-regulation of academic quality. Higher education is responsible for assuring that institutions and programs meet threshold quality expectations and improve over time. Faculty and administrators also maintain that they are being accountable when they engage in periodic accreditation—a standards-based, trust-based, judgment-based system of peer review of the quality of institutions and programs. These same individuals believe that assuring the quality of higher education in this manner means that they are also accountable to students and the public. Accountability is about professionals judging professionals.

Institutional self-responsibility for quality dates back to the oldest of U.S. colleges and universities. Self-regulation through accreditation of institutions and programs has been in place for more than 100 years. Based on this self-responsibility and self-regulation, U.S. higher education has enjoyed significant independence and self-determination of action throughout its history.

Current Government Views of Academic Quality and Accountability

Federal Government

Academic quality

While the federal government does not have an official description of “academic quality,” it does have expectations of the results associated with students entering and completing a higher education program, usually captured by calls for reporting on graduation rates, job placement rates, transfer rates, and attrition and retention. Officials tend to focus on these results to assess the performance of colleges and universities, yet have traditionally deferred to the higher education community about the role of faculty in determining how these results are achieved.

As the federal government continues to expand its financial support for higher education—e.g., providing \$69 billion in student grants and loans through the

Higher Education Act in 2002¹—this deference to higher education’s judgment about academic quality is diminishing. Federal officials are becoming more and more engaged in what they seek from higher education—going beyond their interest in results to make judgments about how they want higher education to operate in the academic arena. In the current reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that has been in underway since 2003, for example, some members of Congress are quite prescriptive about how higher education should address academic matters such as transfer of credit, academic standards for distance learning and student achievement, rather than deferring to higher education.

Accountability

For the federal government, accountability is about performance and results (e.g., graduation, job placement), now accompanied by increasing attention to how higher education carries out its academic responsibilities. Some members of Congress and the executive branch are starting to display impatience with faculty academic decision-making and the factors to which higher education points as evidence of quality (e.g., the credentialing of faculty, structure of curriculum). While these officials may acknowledge the value of this evidence, they continue to expect higher education to also provide evidence of the results that government officials think are more important. This approach to accountability is not confined to academic quality; it permeates the government’s approach to financial and other areas of operation (e.g., research) as well.

The federal government’s emphasis on results is affecting self-regulation through accreditation as well. Government has relied on self-regulation of higher education through accreditation for more than 50 years. However, there is an increasing tendency for federal officials to pursue accountability by additionally regulating accreditation itself through the federal recognition process.² Federal officials are placing more and more pressure on accreditation to play a harder-edged accountability role. For example, in the current reauthorization, members of Congress are seeking significant additional controls on accreditation, using these bodies to assure that congressional prescriptions for academic matters such as those mentioned above (e.g., transfer of credit and student achievement) are realized.

State Government

Academic quality

State governments spend \$70 billion annually in support of instruction, research, public service and student aid.³ States, too, have evolved in their expectations of academic quality, moving from deference to higher education's own definition of quality to additional state-level prescriptions about the contribution public institutions must make to meet state needs and goals. At the state level, we hear more and more about higher education in the service of state priorities, and especially the need for alignment of public higher education with a state's needs.

Accountability

States are using mechanisms such as performance funding, performance reporting and "report cards" to hold higher education accountable. In this context, accountability is about appropriate use of state funds to meet state priorities and the importance that states attach to higher education as a resource for economic development. Arizona, Connecticut, Iowa, Kentucky, North Dakota and South Dakota are among the states that have developed and are refining accountability systems using these concepts.⁴

Higher education institutions and government, then, find themselves united in commitment to higher education and its importance to society. They are sometimes at odds, however, with regard to norms of academic quality and what counts as accountability. This is driven to a significant degree by a shift in government attitude: higher education may be too important a resource to leave judgment of its effectiveness solely to higher education professionals. The key features of the current climate of academic quality and accountability are (1) the preference for higher education to sustain valuable traditional notions of academic quality with attention to accountability primarily through self-regulation and self-responsibility, (2) a preference at the state and federal levels to press for greater accountability based on expected results of higher education performance, and (3) a growing tendency for government at both levels to prescribe how higher education operates in the academic sphere.

Emerging Trends Affecting Academic Quality and Accountability

Four emerging trends are influencing the current academic quality and accountability climate. These are: (1) the universalization of higher education, (2)

internationalization of higher education, (3) the expansion of electronically-based distance learning, and (4) electronic technology's expansion of access to information and communication. These trends punctuate the perspectives of higher education and government. They have the potential for reshaping how higher education and government address the vital issues of academic quality and accountability in the future.

Universalization

Universalization of higher education refers to the ongoing expansion of participation in higher education. In the U.S., universalization is, in many ways, a product of the 1960s and the post-World War II baby boom. Universalization also involves a well-documented sense of students, employers and the public that some education after high school is essential to economic and social well-being. As of 2000, 63 percent of high schools graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education or training in the United States immediately following graduation.⁵ In the current climate, this percentage is likely to continue to grow.

Universalization encourages a pragmatic view of higher education as valuable primarily because it provides a credential and leads to desired employment. This is in contrast to a more traditional view of higher education as valuable based, first and foremost, on its pivotal role in individual intellectual development. Universalization has reinforced the vital importance of equity issues in higher education. On the negative side, the demand for higher education associated with universalization has also been a factor in the growth of fraudulent providers of higher education—degree mills and accreditation mills—that can coarsen the value of legitimate degrees and the earning of accredited status.

Impact on academic quality and accountability

The higher education community has responded to universalization by expanding access, diversifying programs and other offerings, and enriching its capacity to serve more types of students more of the time, most recently through electronic delivery. A powerful example of higher education's response to universalization has been the establishment of the open admission institution, especially the two-year community college. These colleges, as well as open admission four-year institutions, have been the most responsive to universalization. Demand associated with universalization has also been met through continuing education programs, electronically-based distance learning and higher education-

business partnerships focused on education for work.

In the main, colleges and universities have addressed academic quality by continuing to set high academic standards in the context of universalization, focusing on institutional mission and the student population being served. For example, the graduation rates expected of open admission institutions are quite different from the rates expected of highly selective institutions. At the same time, the community has retained its commitment to core academic values of responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and a mission-based system.

For government, universalization has tended to reinforce a pragmatic and market-driven view of the quality of higher education. Federal officials often speak of universalization when they speak of higher education as a consumer good that has value primarily when it results in a credential. Because of the demand for higher education, it should be subject to market forces and thus consumer protection is important. Higher education for work is more significant than higher education for individual intellectual development.

Universalization lends weight to the quality and accountability perceptions of government, both federal and state. Universalization reinforces government arguments about quality defined as results and accountability. In this context, the goal of universalization is about an educationally prepared citizenry. Attendance at colleges and universities, however valuable, is not enough. Acquisition of credentials is essential. This approach supports the call of both federal and state governments for higher education aligned with federal and state priorities. It underscores the need for attention to equity issues.

Internationalization

The internationalization of higher education is about expansion of curricula to include additional language preparation, emphasis on studies that address a diverse array of societies and cultures, and increased study abroad. The centuries-old international community of scholars and researchers is growing, through faculty exchanges and appointments of faculty from countries outside the U.S.. Internationalization is also about institutional expansion: creation of programs and campuses to operate in other countries, partnerships with colleges and universities outside the U.S., and joint degrees.

Internationalization has been buoyed by the availability of electronically delivered distance learning. This has had both positive and troublesome consequences. On the positive side, countries with significant distance delivery capacity (U.S., United Kingdom, Australia) have played a valuable role in expanding higher education opportunity. On the other hand, the plethora of distance learning providers are not all legitimate and there are few cues to potential students in especially developing countries about how to distinguish reliable from unreliable providers.

Internationalization has put a spotlight on private higher education. First, the tradition of private nonprofit higher education, so familiar and respected in the U.S., is relatively uncommon in other countries. They have little experience and thus understanding of the legitimacy of these types of institutions for their countries—although they view, e.g., Harvard, Stanford and Yale in the United States as flagships of international quality. Second, there is a tendency internationally to think that all “private” higher education is for-profit education—accompanied by significant distrust of this phenomenon. The current result is confusion about the role of private higher education and apprehension about exporting it, especially when it comes from the United States. Unfortunately, the success of some questionable for-profit providers (“degree mills”) is exacerbating this situation. And, at least to date, there have been serious limitations on what the U.S. and other major exporting countries have been able to do to address this issue.

Internationalization has also injected market issues into deliberations about higher education in an international setting. Trade negotiations, whether the World Trade Organization’s negotiation through the General Agreement on Trade in Services or other trade agreements, sometimes consider the availability of higher education as one of the services of a negotiating country. This can quickly lead to discussions of vital academic matters such as transfer of credit and recognition of degrees. Some government officials and some in the higher education community are raising serious questions about the appropriateness of addressing these academic matters in the context of regulation of trade, and about whether the market should emerge as the ultimate arbiter of these issues in an international setting.

Impact on academic quality and accountability

For both higher education and government, internationalization is also about

norms of academic quality. As students, faculty and institutions are increasingly mobile, the issue of how to determine quality in an international setting becomes more and more important. Who decides academic quality? Is it the institution? The country in which an institution is located? Or, as some multinational organizations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD) have suggested, should we establish a single set of international quality standards that provide a framework for student, faculty and institutional mobility?

Internationalization has raised fundamental questions about the current role of national governments in relation to higher education institutions and programs. This is accompanied by a questioning of the national governments' role in establishing conditions of academic quality and accountability. The issue centers on the feasibility or desirability of setting international norms for higher education and its quality that would supersede the work of national governments and institutions of higher education. Advocates of such international norms sometimes point to the success of the business world's International Organization for Standardization (ISO), located in 153 countries, as one type of international currency of quality.

Internationalization is affecting both government and higher education by raising questions yet-to-be-answered about responsibility for cross-border academic quality and accountability. Who is responsible for norms of academic quality—is this the primary responsibility of individual institutions and faculty, national governments or international bodies? With regard to accountability, to whom does the higher education community answer—itsself, national governments or international bodies?

Electronically delivered distance learning

The history of U.S. higher education is in part a story of embracing diversity—accommodating and welcoming progressive variation in students, faculty, curricula and institutional types. We have also witnessed increasing diversity of modes of instruction—how higher education is “delivered.” The most dramatic diversification of modes of instruction currently underway is electronically delivered distance learning: synchronous or asynchronous instruction relying on Web-based or Internet-based instructional tools and content.

Distance learning courses, programs and degrees have grown enormously in

the last five years, along with the number of colleges and universities that have chosen to engage this delivery system. Distance learning often involves a recasting of curricula to engage students in a online setting. It has significantly altered the faculty-student and student-student relationship. It has contributed to the mobility of both faculty and students. During 2000-01, 2,320 of accredited, degree-granting institutions offered distance learning courses, serving more than three million students.⁶

Impact on academic quality and accountability

Distance learning has raised fundamental questions about academic quality. The initial tendency within higher education and government was to use the quality expectations of site-based education as the basis for judging the quality of distance-based delivery. The quality of distance learning was often justified in terms of being “as good as” site-based learning.

More recently, however, judgment about the quality of distance learning is based on whether traditional indicators of quality (e.g., challenging curricula, appropriate academic standards) are fully addressed through this alternative delivery. For example, faculty who teach in a distance learning mode are committed to an effective working relationship with students. However, the way this relationship plays out in a distance learning setting is different from how it plays out in a classroom setting. The former involves considerable skill in written communication (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms) while the latter relies more heavily on skill at verbal exchange.

With regard to accountability, both higher education and governments have worried about how to assure quality in an distance learning setting. Accredited colleges and universities that offer distance learning have been able to readily address this through faculty leadership in developing distance learning curricula and standards of achievement. Both federal and state governments have relied on the work of these institutions and their accreditors to assure that government funds supporting students are going to reliable providers of distance learning.

At the same time, there is a universe of other distance learning providers for which we do not have evidence of quality. The federal government seeks to protect the public against fraud and abuse, wanting some restrictions on distance

learning in this regard. The 2004 Senate hearings on federal employees who have obtained degrees from distance learning “degree mills” are a case in point. These hearings focused on those who are misled into believing that credentials from degree mills have the same value as degrees from legitimate institutions, and on those who knowingly obtain fraudulent credentials and may not have appropriate skills for the work they are employed to do, thereby endangering the public.

State governments have a difficult time overseeing distance learning. This is because distance learning crosses boundaries, allowing providers to easily operate independent of a state. Although site-based higher education providers must be authorized at the state level in order to operate, distance-learning providers can easily by-pass this obligation. The Internet is not state-controlled. On the one hand, most of the distance learning currently available is offered by site-based institutions that are subject to state scrutiny. On the other hand, there is a burgeoning world of totally virtual distance-learning providers that escape such scrutiny, some of which may be classified as “degree mills” harming students and society by issuing bogus degrees and conducting other activities that are considered fraud and abuse.

Distance learning, then, challenges higher education and government to consider alternative norms of quality as well as to think about appropriate accountability measures, especially when working with providers that fall outside the scope of federal and state authority.

Electronic technology and the impact on information and communication

Electronic technology is having an impact on academic quality and accountability in more systemic ways, going well beyond distance-learning delivery. First, there is a dramatic increase in the availability of information about very nearly everything. Second, the ease with which this information can be communicated has increased significantly.

Technology has expanded both the amount and the type of information available. Higher education institutional Web sites continue to grow as sources of information about the college or university resources and operations. As more information about an institution becomes available electronically, the institution is operates increasingly in a national or international domain, and becomes

less local or regional. For example, college and university presidents who, until recently, garnered only local attention now are scrutinized by a national audience. Intriguing faculty behavior is similarly affected.

Federal and state governments are accumulating more and more information about their public colleges and universities, in part because of the expanded ease of reporting using electronic means. In some states, this is taking the form of a focus on student learning outcomes and institutional performance. There are a number of state-level projects such as the National Forum on College-Level Learning that is establishing a common set of measures for goals, plans and outcomes to allow cross-state comparisons.⁷ *Measuring Up 2004* evaluates and grades the 50 states based on their higher education performance.⁸ Governments are becoming less dependent on individual institutions of higher education to provide and analyze information about quality.

Technology also has expedited the communication of this information. For example, instant information about graduation rates has enabled the Education Trust (www.collegeresults.org) to provide a service allowing anyone who is interested to obtain the graduation rates of any higher education institution in a federal database. Even more significant, one can massage the data for comparative purposes, such as to compare graduation rates among institutions in a state, a region or by type of institution. It is easy to envision a future in which expansion of information accompanied by common definitions applied to academic and other higher education functions can yield a treasure trove of comparable data.

Impact on academic quality and accountability

The potential impact of the expansion of information and communication on academic quality can be profound. Until recently, an individual higher education institution was the best source of information about its performance and work with students. The institution was the main arbiter of its quality. However, as access to information expands, institutions may be giving up their positions of expertise. Collection of data, whether by government or another outside source (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*) can have the effect of shifting the expertise outside the academy. This loss of control of information about academic quality can mean that other sources (e.g., the government or *U.S. News and World Report*) can and are developing their own norms about quality.

With this new opportunity to define academic quality, government and other sources can significantly expand their call on institutions to be accountable based on expectations of quality different from those decided by an institution. For example, the current emphasis on institutional performance defined in terms of “rates”—graduation rates, transfer rates, retention rates—is more and more attractive to federal and state governments. And, this is not limited to quality issues. The current effort by the federal government to track rates of tuition increases (as proposed by the House of Representatives) would be very difficult to do without the expanded access to information and distribution of that information.

Some Recommendations: The Emerging Trends and Addressing Academic Quality and Accountability in the Future

These emerging trends and their effect on the climate of academic quality and accountability can provide opportunities for higher education and government to reconsider their respective approaches to these issues. The following recommendations are based on the assumption that higher education can and should continue to maintain a leadership role in defining academic quality and accountability—a contention that may be challenged by federal and state officials. While many other initiatives can be undertaken, the following would sustain the robustness of both academic quality and accountability:

1. *A Dialogue about Academic Quality.* Higher education, federal and state officials need a dialogue on their differences about academic quality. We need a series of national and state level discussions about differences in views and how we want to address these issues in the future. The goals of these discussions would be to enhance understanding and perhaps find some common ground. Absent this dialogue, the traditional faculty role in defining academic quality is at risk of being overtaken. Given the commitment of the higher education community to responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and a mission-based system of higher education, how do we assure the vibrancy of faculty leadership in the determination of academic quality? Are federal and state officials persuaded that higher education leadership can adequately address academic quality in the future? Or will these officials, lacking such conviction, continue to pursue a path of prescribing what counts as academic quality?

2. *Strategic Use of Technology to Enhance Higher Education's Academic Leadership Role.* Higher education faculty and administrators need to undertake a strategic analysis of the impact of technology on information and communication, especially focusing on the implications for who determines academic quality. This analysis should address whether there is an emerging competition about who is the primary authority on academic quality and how to address this. For higher education, the goal here would be to capture the technology to retain a leadership role in defining academic quality.
3. *Addressing International Norms for Quality and Accountability and Creating a U.S. Voice.* Higher education and government need to address the challenging issue of international norms for academic quality and accountability. This needs to be done both nationally and internationally. The goal would be to position U.S. institutions and government with regard to these issues and to assure that the U.S. is a significant participant in ongoing international discussions. At present, the U.S. role (whether government or higher education) in international deliberations is episodic and without a policy framework.
4. *Attention to Degree Mills and the Role of Distance Learning.* Higher education and government need to explore and develop means to protect students and the public from degree mills and fraudulent credentials, both nationally and internationally. The goal may ultimately be additional legislation particularly focused on distance learning, but colleges, universities and accrediting organizations are central to deciding what the legislation would be. Absent some effort, we are on a path toward devaluing legitimate higher education through our lack of attention to questionable providers.

ENDNOTES

¹Hartle, Terry, Christopher Simmons, and Becky Timmons. *Paying for College: How the Federal Higher Education Act Helps Students and Families Pay for a Postsecondary Education*. Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 2003.

²The federal government routinely scrutinizes the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations that provide access to federal funds based on standards contained in the Higher Education Act, a process called "recognition."

³State Higher Education Executive Officers, National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. *Accountability for Better Results*. 2005.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Eaton, Judith S. *Is Accreditation Accountable? The Continuing Conversation Between Accreditation and the Federal Government*. Washington D.C.: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003.

⁶National Center for Education Statistics. "Postsecondary Education Quick Information System." *Distance Education of Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2000-2001*. United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, NCES 2003-017, July 2003.

⁷SHEEO, 2005.

⁸National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up 2004: The National Report Card on Higher Education*. San Jose, California, 2004.