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Ensuring Academic Standards in US Higher Education

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Introduction

The most recent research on college-student learning in the US by respected scholars such as Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Ernest Pascarella suggests that our means of ensuring academic standards in US colleges and universities are not working effectively. Like US K-12 education and health care, our higher education system is not only the most expensive per person in the world but appears to be declining in effectiveness.

As in these other policy areas, the US is locked in to a national framework for ensuring academic standards that works less well than some of the policies adopted by competing developed nations. What reforms to US accreditation may be suggested by best practices in some other countries? The critical policy questions are: 1) what criteria should institutional accreditation focus on, 2) how should institutional accreditation be designed, and 3) who should make accreditation decisions?

A Focus on Academic Quality

There are several important differences between the US and other countries: the information available to higher education applicants, the relative emphasis on grading standards, and the educational cohesiveness of baccalaureate education.

Transparency About Academic Quality

A major emphasis in the nation's attempts to ensure the quality of higher education has been on improving the information available to prospective students and their families on

academic quality. Partly this is due to the belief that better informed applicants will create a more competitive academic market that will in turn provide incentives for educational improvement.

However, research on student choice suggests many higher education applicants in the US are naïve consumers whose enrollment decisions are influenced by a wide variety of educational, social, and personal factors, including the immediate consumption benefits of dining facilities, student dormitories, and university athletics (Dill and Soo, 2005). The increasing market competition among higher education institutions for status and prestige is providing incentives for institutions to make costly investments in activities and facilities that may be attractive to prospective students but have little impact upon student learning.

But the link between better-informed student choice and improvement in academic standards is overstated. As Arum and Roksa concluded in their national study of learning in US higher education, "there is no reason to expect that students and parents as consumers will prioritize undergraduate learning as an outcome."

The available evidence suggests that the link between transparency and improved student learning is illusory. What might actually improve that learning is suggested by the contention of the education ministers who initiated the Bologna process that the primary responsibility for quality assurance (QA) lies with each institution itself. A number of these countries have focused their QA policies on "enhancement," efforts to rebuild and strengthen the capacity of faculty Evaluations of these policies indicate they are pro-viding incentives for faculty engagement in ensuring the quality of academic programs (Dill and Beerkens, 2010).

Therefore indicators of the quality and performance of academic programs are more likely to improve academic standards if, as discussed below, a principal criterion for accreditation is the effective measurement and use of information in the collective actions by the faculty of each institution.

Grading Standards

The external QA reviews in other nations often include an audit of the equity of grading standards in the fields of study within each university. Few US accrediting agencies currently examine college and university grading standards, policies, and processes, even though Rojstaczer and Healy's research on US students confirms that an A has now become by far the most common grade given currently and is three times more frequently awarded than in the 1960s.

At the same time, Graduate Record Exam scores and the disappointing performance of college-educated citizens on the literacy surveys of 1992 and 2003 (the National Adult Literacy Survey and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy) reveal that the rise in grades has not been accompanied by growth in student learning. Also, while US college grades rose dramatically, average student study time declined by half. This is of concern because the knowledge and skills students develop are significantly influenced by the amount of effort and time they invest in studying and learning.

Was this observed decline in student study time caused by inflated grades? When current college students enrolled in a course where a grade of A was commonly expected, they invested 50 percent less study time then when they enrolled in a course where C was the commonly expected grade (Babcock, 2010).

Grade inflation may also distort the nature of the knowledge college graduates contribute to society. The US now awards the lowest percentage of first university degrees in science,

mathematics and engineering-related fields among the G-8 countries—15 percent compared to an average of 24 percent in other nations.

Many baccalaureate students in the US, in contrast to students in other countries, select or change their field of study *after* they enter college. Undergraduate changes in major flow essentially in one direction—out of the STEM fields in which students initially enroll and into subjects characterized by greater grade inflation (Bettinger, 2010). As Rosovsky and Hartley noted, grade inflation has been much less in the STEM fields, and Johnson's (2003) study at Duke University estimated that undergraduate students took 50 percent fewer elective courses in the natural sciences and mathematics than they would have if grading practices across disciplines had been more equitable.

Ensuring the integrity of grading standards will arouse concern, because it suggests imposition of an institution-wide grading quota such as Princeton University's 35 percent limit on A grades in undergraduate courses. But there are a number of constructive actions that can be taken to improve the relationship between marks received and student academic achievement.

These include institutional dissemination of information on program and department grades, adoption of Valen Johnson's proposed Achievement Index as a means of controlling grading differences among instructors, and more collegial oversight of grading practices. Institutions can also encourage systematic discussions among faculty members about grading practices, thereby developing what Alverno College has termed a "community of judgment."

In short, because of their potential influence on the life chances of graduates, as well as the graduates' contributions to society, institutional grading policies and practices should be one of the principal criteria for the accreditation of colleges and universities.

The Educational Cohesiveness of Baccalaureate Education

A third important difference between the US and other developed countries is the structure of our first-level degree programs. In most other countries baccalaureate programs are focused on a particular field, the "modules" of instruction students take are largely mandated, and the programs often culminate in a subject-oriented, high-stakes exam or project that influences students' academic standing.

Research in northern Europe (Hovdhaugen, 2011) confirms the positive influence of such program cohesion on student progression and degree completion. Because of "massification," in some countries there has been experimentation with "destructuring" the curriculum, which has led to research on the effects of program cohesion on student learning and progression. It turns out that EU students perform better in academic programs with a pre-set structure and a limited number of electives.

Similarly, research on US students (Pascarella, and Terenzeni, 2005) indicates their subject knowledge and cognitive development are significantly associated with the pattern and sequence of the courses in which they enroll, with program requirements that integrate learning across courses, and with the frequency of communication and interaction among faculty members in the subject field.

Given the differences in student learning as well as student "life chances" by academic field, the focus on *institutional* quality in public rankings, such as is currently proposed for the US Department of Education's College Scorecards, is misleading. In contrast, the governments of Australia and the UK require publication of data on student retention, student progression, and graduate outcomes (including the nature of graduates' employment, their average salaries, and

their further education) *by subject field* for all institutions of higher education. Providing such information by academic field may ultimately prove in the public interest and capture the attention of prospective students.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, 648) argued that assessments of student learning at the academic program level—a practice consistent with those of universities in many developed countries—would stimulate the collective action by faculty members required to ensure and improve academic standards:

> *Assessment plans and activities developed and approved by faculty* can provide an empirical foundation of systematic and ongoing rethinking, redesigning, and restructuring programs and curricula. For faculty members, trained to be skeptical about claims, *evidence is the gold standard* in the academy, and they are unlikely to adopt new ways of thinking or behaving without first being convinced that the new pedagogies and organizational structures are better than the old. (Emphasis added)

This argument for the value of evidence regarding the outcomes of student learning in the major or subject field is equally relevant for the general or liberal-arts education component of the degree taken by the majority of US baccalaureate students. With respect to the latter, at one typical US university (Chatman, 2004), a majority of students took only four courses in common, and over one thousand courses and millions of combinations of courses satisfied the university's general educational requirements. Constructing coherence among individual courses has become the student's responsibility and leaves too much learning to chance.

Given the variety of courses, the amount of student choice, and the reported variation in grading standards across subject fields, the academic credits and grades accumulated by students are an inadequate basis for rethinking and redesigning general education. An important criterion for institutional accreditation would be not only whether an institution has in place valid and reliable processes for the assessment of learning outcomes in each academic major and in its general education program but that the results are discussed by the faculty and used to improve programs— including bringing more coherence to general education.

The Design of Institutional Accreditation

US regional accrediting agencies have paid increasing attention to and developed principles for good practice in institutional processes for assessing student-learning outcomes. However, real progress in improving student learning is not likely to occur until accreditors monitor institutional practices with appropriately designed process audits that are comparable across all regions, institutions, and fields.

Academic programs in the US reviewed by specialized accreditors, which set standards for assessment processes across the nation, report higher levels of faculty involvement in academic assessment and greater use of assessment results to ensure and improve academic standards than do programs that are not subject to accreditation (Ewell, Paulson, and Kinzie, 2011). For this reason, the innovative learning-oriented subject accreditation and assessment processes developed in a number of countries (Dill and Beerkens, 2010), such as the Teacher Education and Accrediting Council (TEAC) in the US, the General Medical Council in the UK,

and the Subject Assessments in Denmark, provide potentially valuable models for the design of more effective institutional accreditation.

Each of these external reviews has adopted a rigorous evaluation methodology conforming to scientific standards of evidence. These agencies include an evaluation of the validity and reliability of institutional measures and mechanisms for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning. Peer reviewers are trained, are supported during the review process by professional staff, and employ systematic, standardized procedures and protocols.

These external reviews all strongly emphasize the development of a "culture of evidence" within colleges and universities. TEAC evaluators in the US, for example, were surprised to discover that faculty members failed to apply in their collegial evaluation of academic courses and programs the same scholarly rigor they apply in their research.

The critical question for accreditation is whether institutional processes are in place that result in scrutiny, support, and the observable improvement of programs. Analyses of other national QA regulatory instruments suggest that this requires engaging the faculty collectively, both institution-wide and in departments and programs, in making evidence-based judgments about academic program quality.

A Focus on Collective Faculty Action

The positive impacts of other countries QA processes are most clearly visible in the more frequent faculty discussions they inspire within academic programs about academic quality and in the collective actions taken by these programs to improve student learning (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). This has occurred in part because countries like Denmark and Germany, in contrast to the US, implemented external assessments or accreditations of each subject field in their university sector.

However, because universal external assessments or accreditations at the subject level in other countries have proven costly and exhausting over time, most countries are now adopting institutional reviews focused on ensuring and improving academic quality at the collective faculty level within institutions. A more comprehensive evaluation may be in the public interest for the accreditation of a new college or university seeking access to federal financial aid, but the more common re-accreditation review should have a primary if not exclusive focus on processes known to ensure the development of a robust institutional culture of academic quality in teaching and learning.

Accreditors should create real incentives for actions by the collective faculty to ensure and improve academic standards within all academic programs through close monitoring and active experimentation. To accomplish this, each institution's core academic processes for ensuring academic standards—both by assessing student learning *and* using the knowledge gained to improve programs—should be externally evaluated by competent peer reviewers, and these evaluations should include a review of the impact of these processes on a representative sample of academic programs. The process audits that William Massy helped implement in Hong Kong and adapted for both Missouri and Tennessee (Massy, Graham, and Short, 2007) provide a valuable model for this approach to institutional accreditation.

A recent study of reforms in doctoral training in EU universities (Byrne, Jørgensen, and Loukkola, 2013) provides evidence of the benefits of encouraging collective faculty actions to improve academic standards. Doctoral education in many EU countries has traditionally followed a "master-apprentice'' model, awarding substantial autonomy to supervising

professors. To strengthen their doctoral programs, many EU universities are now developing a university-wide culture of shared values and commitment to doctoral education featuring "defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts" (Byrne, Jørgensen, and Loukkola, 2013).

For example some EU universities now have implemented university-wide doctoral schools, similar to US graduate schools, which has shifted the culture from an emphasis on individual professors' personal authority to a more balanced system featuring stronger collective academic authority. In a number of EU universities, the faculty have collectively endorsed new university-wide rules and guidelines for research-focused doctoral supervision, formed committees to augment the expertise of thesis supervisors, created university-level admissions committees for doctoral education, and implemented informal peer-learning groups and training opportunities for the exchange of experiences and good practices among thesis supervisors.

Independent Accreditation

A final issue for US policy is who determines the criteria and standards accreditors will apply in establishing institutional eligibility for federal financial aid assistance and other relevant resources.

The Bologna education ministers, in adopting a governance design for academic QA agencies in their respective countries, argued that a QA agency must be able to demonstrate that "its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in … instruments of governance or legislative acts'' and that "its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence''(ENQA, 2005).

By this criterion, how satisfactory is the US institutional framework for ensuring academic quality? The financial support for each of our accrediting agencies is currently derived from fees paid by the academic institutions benefitting from their services. But research by Gugerty and Prakash in the nonprofit sector, as well as recent practical experience in the world financial sector, suggest that accountability mechanisms independent from those held accountable are more likely to exhibit stringent standards and rigorous monitoring of participating members.

At the federal level, Congressional actions through the Higher Education Act (HEA) have awarded the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) within the Department of Education the power to define accrediting criteria and to recommend that certain organizations be granted the authority to accredit institutions eligible for Title IV funds. The renewal of the HEA in 2008 restructured the NACIQI, which is now composed of 18 "knowledgeable" members, six appointed by the Secretary of Education and 12 whose appointments are evenly divided among the majority and minority leaders of the House and Senate. In short the existing institutional framework for ensuring academic quality in the US fails the test of being demonstrably autonomous and independent "from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence.''

In addition, changes in teaching and learning brought about by innovations in information technology diminish the effectiveness of the existing structures. In this rapidly changing environment, an objective, informed, and independent means for the evaluation of institutions appears warranted.

I propose that government look to the National Academies for the creation of an agency that would replace NACIQI. It would be tasked with specifying what academic information would be required from each accredited college and university, defining criteria and standards to be applied by accrediting agencies in determining eligibility for federal financial support and approving each accreditation agency that would carry out this function.

The National Academies are private, nonprofit, self-perpetuating societies of distinguished scholars dedicated to the furtherance of science and technology and to their use for the general welfare. While many of their members are faculty in accredited colleges and universities, their membership is based not on their institutional affiliation but on their distinguished achievements in research.

The Academies have already published reports designed to improve academic standards in US colleges and universities, including a recent study of the kinds of information needed to assess quality and productivity in US higher education. Based upon a Congressional charter granted in 1863, they have a mandate to advise the federal government on such matters. They also have access to individuals who are expert in the design of public policy, in education, in evaluation, in performance measurement, and in the academic fields essential to the tasks assigned the agency.

The governance, financing, and mission of the proposed national academic QA agency would be defined in legislation approved by the Congress and President, but the governing board of the new national agency would be appointed from members of the National Academies by the Congress and President. The independence of the agency could be further ensured by mechanisms such as staggered terms longer than a Presidential term, a prohibition against board-member dismissal for policy reasons, and a proviso that no body other than a court of law could overturn the agency's professional judgments.

The governing board of the national agency should have authority to appoint its director and to control its policies and practices. And by financing the QA agency with an appropriate balance between an operating grant from the federal government and fees from those seeking approval as accrediting bodies, the independence of the agency could be further ensured. For example, the Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education in Portugal (A3ES) was established by a one-time government grant that included sufficient monies for the creation of an endowment, which (along with user fees) provides support for ongoing operating expenses.

In addition to its other tasks, the proposed agency would conduct studies supportive of its function of ensuring and improving the academic standards of US colleges and universities. The now-defunct Higher Education Quality Council in the UK published reports on what was learned about the means of ensuring academic quality from the initial academic audits conducted of UK universities. The new national agency could publish similar public reports on what it is learning about the most effective processes for accreditation from its approval and evaluation of relevant agencies.

The National Academies also have relevant prior experience in judging academic quality. With funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, the National Research Council (NRC)—the principal operating agency of the National Academies—has long provided quality rankings of US research doctoral programs. The major goal of the most recent NRC rankings (Colglazier, and Ostriker, 2010) was to further university discussion of how to manage and improve doctoral programs, an emphasis quite consistent with the previously outlined academic QA policies of a number of other countries.

As a further protection of the public interest, the Bologna ministers require that all national QA regulatory agencies in participating countries undergo an international evaluation of their conformance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). The preferred process for evaluating national QA agencies to date has often been designed by the agencies themselves, in cooperation with fellow agency professionals and/or selected representatives of those regulated.

US colleges and universities, as well as the public interest, would be better served if the proposed new agency were required to be publicly evaluated by an established, respected, and truly independent national agency such as the US Government Accountability Office. The public, policymakers, and the regulated colleges and universities would thereby be provided with more objective assessments of the extent to which the new national agency ensures academic standards, and the national agency would gain greater insight into means of improving its own core practices.

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