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Views

Setting Quality Standards in Higher Ed

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By A. Lee Fritschler

The growing chorus of criticism of U.S. higher education is focusing on quality, and rightly so. Quality is or should be the central issue in the higher education enterprise. It is too often overlooked in the quest for reform and change in other important areas such as cost containment, expansion, accessibility and higher graduation rates. We should always be on the lookout for ways to improve quality -- but some caution in our approaches is warranted.

Those interested in improving quality face two major challenges. The first is to define what is meant by quality and the second is to determine who should write the definition and enforce its implementation.

Too often critics toss around "quality" as if it were a word we have the ability to define and measure. It takes its place alongside transparency and accountability as often-used words with little or no meaning. A recent Lumina Foundation for Education report contains the following:

We need a student centered higher education system -- one that is flexible, accessible and accountable...one that supports success and ensures quality by fostering genuine learning...one that truly prepares students for work...

There are eight words (or phrases) in those three lines that defy definition in any meaningful or measurable way: student centered, flexible, accessible, accountable, success, quality, genuine learning and prepares for work.

How can those of us in the classroom take those words and turn them into something with which we can deal? What is genuine learning, for example? How does one know if one has learned or been taught genuinely? Are there some risks in using these words as the basis for reform when we have no definition of their meaning?

There is little chance to adopt effective public policy when the description of the problem to be solved lacks clarity. It is certainly fair and reasonable to require both the reformer and those to be reformed to be clear in stating their goals and their means to achieve them. High-quality academic programs insist that students define the words they are using with precision before they undertake analysis. We should expect the same high quality standards by the critics of higher education. Without definitions there is chaos. (Clifford Adelman has written a [thoughtful article](#) for *Inside Higher Ed* on the lack of definition of the word "accountability.")

The measures of quality frequently put forth are to increase graduation rates and to report on the number of students who find jobs in their fields immediately after graduation. The first is easy and wrong; the second is just wrong. The assumption that higher graduation rates increase quality is highly suspect; one could easily argue the point exactly the other way around. Quality may be sacrificed in the quest for higher completion rates.

Data collection problems for the second suggestion, knowing where students are employed after graduation, are enormous. Collecting this data would require a new, expensive process that would yield little, and the problems in writing survey standards are daunting. Does an accounting major who finds a job in sales diminish the quality of her alma mater? What of the English major who moves into HR? (A Greek and Latin major who graduated from a college of which I was president became, soon after graduation, one of the three founders of a major, international software company. I gave our school high quality marks for that one!) The problems of developing standards that could be used to measure these quality indicators across any one institution or a group of them are expensive and probably insurmountable.

Equally daunting are the challenges involved in deciding who defines terms such as quality and genuine learning as well as settling on processes through which the terms will be tested, either in a single institution or across many. Possible choices for who defines the variables include state legislatures or Congress, state or federal departments of education, boards of trustees, parents, corporate executives, students or faculty and the departments and universities in which they are employed.

For elementary and secondary education it was decided years ago that government, mostly states, should decide what quality is in the schools over which they have responsibility. They developed standardized statewide tests to oversee and implement their quality standards. There are many today who would like to extend those ideas and processes to higher education. The mood in Washington seems to be about the same in this administration as in the last. The U.S. Department of Education is staffed by many individuals who were trained to or have worked in elementary and secondary ed. This might explain why the quality measures invented for those systems over the years are attractive to those pushing for higher ed reform in the Department today.

But adopting the K-12 processes in higher education makes little sense on several fronts. Why should one think that government officials would be better at judging quality in higher ed than are faculty? The K-12 model is increasingly held up as a solution to higher ed quality problems, although the latter has quite different goals and aspirations. Standardized testing does not fit well with the idea that higher ed should foster creativity, innovation and critical thinking. Whatever those terms might mean, it would seem they are not supported well by state or national standardized tests administered on a required or voluntary basis.

For years, even centuries, the quality judgments made in higher education, from admissions through curriculum to quality evaluation, have been made by faculty within individual universities. Knowing that the word quality is a tough one to define, faculty generally keep the definition somewhat more vague than critics would like to have it. To tighten definitions of quality might endanger innovation -- another hard-to-define term.

Quality judgment processes exist and are well-developed in academe. Tenured faculty members are at the center of those processes.

Faculty decisions shape curriculums and student evaluation as well as who is hired and who is promoted in universities. The assumption is that faculty members are active professionals who have the most knowledge about the fields in which they are teaching. They are expected to be active in professional societies and contribute to the literature in their fields. They are judged by their peers on the basis of what those peers believe to be quality work. It a system based on peer review, professionalism and self-regulation.

Outside reviews of departments and accreditation reviews are important components of the quality evaluation process; however, in all these cases the primary basis of the review is that it is done by peers from within academe. This tradition is being eroded; quality evaluation processes are increasingly being taken over by governments. Judith Eaton, the President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), has noted the gradual decline of the role of faculty in assessment of quality. She wrote:

The worth of higher education is determined less and less through the professional judgments made by the academic community. The deference at one time accorded accrediting organizations to decide the worth of colleges and universities is diminished and perhaps disappearing.

The existing faculty and university system of quality evaluation relies on the Socratic method of questioning and discussion. Where the definitions of terms like quality are elusive, faculty in a department, with the participation of peers from other departments and universities, talk, discuss and argue about meaning without ever defining it precisely. The discussions lead to experimentation,

innovation and the realization that quality has no single definition. If there were agreement on a single definition one fears it would stifle innovation, change and quality itself within the academy. This is one of the central paradoxes of higher education: the more one attempts to define quality with measurable precision the more one realizes one cannot.

This rather stubborn confounding point makes for high levels of discomfort outside the academy. These ideas or principles have been called into question in recent years, and faculty members have been mostly quiet in defending the nearly ancient practices. This is a mistake because the system seems to have served the nation rather well. But the system is far from democratic and it is difficult for those outside academe to understand how it is done. Also, it is difficult at times for those of us in the system to feel comfortable in judging the quality of our peers, especially those outside our academic discipline. For example, as a social scientist I feel I have few if any qualifications to judge the work of biologists. I must rely within the university, as those outside of it do, on the professionalism and self-regulation of academic groupings within the university, in this case biologists. A high level of professional trust is what sustains us.

It is tough to defend the current evaluation system in today's populist environment. However, relying on experts to evaluate experts, or peer review, is the most effective way to assure academic quality.

There are ways to improve faculty-based quality assessment processes. Much good work has been done by some of our colleagues on improving teaching techniques. But faculty have been laggards in adoption of these techniques and passing them on to graduating Ph.D.s, future teachers. Here some government encouragement would be helpful. Further, the Socratic discussions on quality improvement within universities should be regularized and broadened to include trustees, community groups, students, parents and others. Involving the public more deeply in quality discussions would strengthen everyone's understanding of what quality means and how it is defined both over time inside and outside of the university.

The Irish national universities' decade-old quality evaluation system relies heavily on quality discussions and reporting, within universities and with national and international peer groups. Yet in the Irish and U.S. cases alike, when it comes to decision time, universities rely on peer professional judgment and self-regulation for quality assessment.

Could they do otherwise? How would nonprofessionals decide what should be taught in medical schools, and come up with curriculum and evaluation techniques for those preparing to become medical professionals? Would non-engineers be better designers of engineering curriculum? Are there nonprofessionals who could define academic quality and evaluate students in French lit or history? Broadening the discussion base would help, but placing the decision-making powers in nonprofessional hands would lessen, not improve, quality. Should we rely on public opinion, legislatures and other nonprofessionals to make these judgments? The alternatives to faculty quality determinations are bound to worsen quality.

To move quality assessment out of the university would be a major undertaking. The implications for quality itself are enormous and not at all positive. It would be wiser to foster discussions and attempt to come up with better understanding of what we are in fact doing, how it is working and what changes might improve things.

But let's do all we can to avoid the unintended consequences lurking from inadequate definitions of our problems and purported ways to solve them.

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