This chapter discusses the drivers for assessment and enables readers to understand the tensions arising within colleges and universities in regard to accountability, accreditation, and performance evaluation.

The Assessment Context: Accreditation, Accountability, and Performance

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A diverse society has created a diverse education system, which in turn requires diverse and complex mechanisms of quality control. The diversity and complexity of our industrial, service, and knowledge-based economy, with its vast variety of occupations and dynamic labor markets, heavily influences the curricular structures and academic profiles of American colleges and universities. To be successful, institutions of higher education must meet the educational needs of individuals with different economic statuses, ages, occupational goals, educational aspirations, educational preparation, and family circumstances. These same forces—employers and students—drive curricular diversity as colleges and universities attempt to serve the needs of their local, regional, or national communities, along with the needs of students through an array of academic programs and courses. This open and competitive system has generated institutions of higher education that vary significantly in terms of mission, sources of funding, size, student body characteristics, curricular offerings, administrative complexity, and resources.

While the “ratings game” encourages institutions to become more alike, local control is a strong American value that encourages the opposite. Moreover, the openness and competitiveness of the system encourages new educational providers. Driven by a diverse economy and society, higher education is now a complex industry of public and private educational...
providers, and an array of quality assurance, accreditation, and certification mechanisms has evolved reflecting this complexity.

Assessing for Internal Improvement Versus Evaluating for External Accountability

Many offices of institutional research now divide their time almost equally between the external and the internal organizational roles. The internal role includes providing data and analysis and survey research to assist managerial policymaking, enrollment management, and student outcomes assessment, among others. The externally focused responsibilities include forecasting admissions applications, benchmarking the institution against national and peer databases, transmitting official numbers to government agencies and guidebooks, and occasionally giving research papers and workshops at conferences.

The classic Janusian challenge for most institutional researchers is to resolve the potential conflict between these internal and the external roles. In public and private institutions alike, they face the need to improve themselves and become better teachers, learners, scholar-researchers, and administrators. To accomplish this, they need to expose their weaknesses and identify what needs to be changed. However, the very act of such openness runs the danger of reducing the institution’s enrollment appeal and threatening its revenues, especially in an atmosphere of fierce competition and performance funding. As one writer puts it, “The spirit of assessment requires a diligent search for bad news, but accountability encourages the opposite” (Peters, 1994, p. 23).

The Inspirational and the Pragmatic. To resolve this tension, I like to think about these opposite forces as the inspirational versus the pragmatic: doing something because you want to versus doing something because you have to.

The inspirational foundation for evaluation and assessment is doing it for self-improvement, especially for the enhancement of student learning and growth. We in higher education are at our best when we carry out educational change, assessment, and evaluation not to please external stakeholders but to satisfy ourselves—to achieve an organizational climate of ongoing development and continuing improvement.

The pragmatic foundation for evaluation and assessment recognizes the external need to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders: legislators and trustees, taxpayers and tuition payers. Moreover, assessing institutional effectiveness enables universities to successfully compete for enrollments and resources and gain a strategic advantage over others. In an atmosphere of scarcity, campuses that can measure their effectiveness and reshape themselves will do better in the competition for enrollments, resources, and faculty than campuses that cannot do so. And on each campus, the academic departments and programs that are able to provide presidents and provosts...
with evidence about the impacts they are having on their students will be more successful in the competition for campus resources than academic units not able to provide such evidence.

Thus, the simultaneous and competing needs for both internal improvement and external accountability provide the first foundation for demonstrating institutional and program effectiveness and guiding the institutional research assessment agenda. The regional accrediting associations also are helping to resolve this dichotomy by requiring each campus to present evidence of student learning and growth as a key component in demonstrating the institution’s effectiveness. Over the past decade, this pressure has been especially visible in the publications and written standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. To be accredited, each institution is expected to gather and present evidence that it is accomplishing its educational goals and producing improvements both inside and outside the classroom: improvements in the experience of new students, academic advisement, mentoring, residential life, teaching effectiveness, and the general education curriculum. The other regional accreditation bodies and several of the discipline-based accreditors (especially the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) have strengthened their demands for outcomes evidence as well. Consequently, the accrediting bodies properly call attention to the twin purposes of assessment: internal improvement and external accountability.

**Accreditation Diversity and Complexity.** Accreditation and quality assurance activity focuses on three major levels: institutional, programmatic, and individual. True, at most universities, it seems as if there is an unending stream of self-study documents and site visit teams from regional, state, and discipline-based bodies. But at least these accreditation groups focus on educational effectiveness rather than on the latest guidebook ratings.

At the institutional or campus level, the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation recognize six voluntary associations that accredit nationally and six that accredit regionally. Five of the six that accredit nationally limit their scope to distance education providers, rabbinical schools, and Christian and other theological colleges and schools. The sixth agency that accredits nationally is the Accrediting Council of Independent College and Schools, which accredits over six hundred independent, nonprofit career schools, and colleges operating in the United States and abroad.

The oldest and best-known vehicles for providing external accountability and quality assurance are the processes designed collaboratively by the member institutions of the six regions: Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, and Western. Each has developed (and frequently enhances) elaborate processes for the conduct of institutional
self-study, review, and reaccreditation. Regional accreditation is a process based on self-review and peer assessment. It is comprehensive in scope, covering an institution’s financial status, governance, faculty and staff relations, institutional achievements, student services, and student learning outcomes. Reviews typically are conducted on a ten-year cycle (shorter cycles are used in the case of serious problems within an institution).

At the program level, the picture is more complicated. Specialized academic and vocational accrediting bodies and professional societies scrutinize and accredit officially recognized programs in an array of specialties. This quality assurance activity began in some of the oldest disciplines, like medicine, law, business, and theology, and now includes nearly one hundred fields of study, ranging from business to music, chemistry to journalism, librarianship to nursing, forestry to physical therapy, and public administration to teacher education. Institutions are eager to meet the standards set by these professional organizations because accredited programs attract the best students, as well as federal and state funding.

Even in the absence of external accreditors, most campuses have their own faculty-led program review processes. Campus strategic plans almost everywhere now depend on realistic assessments of internal strengths and weaknesses matched against external constraints and opportunity. Thus, nearly every institution has developed its own program review and quality control measures, often coordinating these internal reviews with those of the specialized discipline or profession.

In addition, in many parts of the nation, there are state-mandated periodic reviews of academic programs, especially at the graduate level. Sometimes these are coordinated with and draw on, rather than override, the internal and external academic program review processes.

Finally, at the individual level, there is an array of mechanisms for credentialing, licensing, and certifying professional and vocational practitioners in fields such as accounting, law, medicine, engineering, architecture, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, social work, and teaching. Some of these take the form of national or state examinations, internships or clinical experiences, or a combination of these. Prominent examples include the bar exam for lawyers, the CPA exam for accountants, the Fundamentals of Engineering and Professional Engineering exams for engineers, the PRAXIS for teachers, and the medical boards and other specialty exams for physicians, dentists, nurses, psychologists, pharmacists, and other health care professionals.

**Accreditation Review Process.** As the number and level of requirements for each profession grows, the control of knowledge by specialized accrediting bodies increases, as does the importance of the accreditation review. In general, the procedures for institutional and program-level accreditation, although conducted by different accrediting associations, have many similar features. The institutional reaccreditation process typically has three components:
1. A self-study is prepared by the college or university to be reviewed that responds to the evaluation criteria established by the accreditation body.
2. A team of peer evaluators from other higher education institutions visit the institution and gather additional evidence, which they then submit in a report.
3. Based on the self-study, the site visit report, and the institution’s response, the accreditation body decides to accredit, accredit with conditions, or not to accredit the institution or program under review.

Institutional reaccreditation often begins years before the review, with negotiations over the nature of the review, the focus of the self-study, the collection of evidence, and the composition of the visiting team. Perhaps the most elaborate of the regional review processes is the one in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges region. This is a long, two-stage review cycle that first judges institutional capacity and then institutional effectiveness. After the four-year process is completed, the institution, if all goes well, starts preparing for the next review cycle about six years after the commission action (sooner if all does not go well).

The old accreditation philosophy, most dominant before the 1980s, encouraged institutions to maximize the quality of the inputs in order to guarantee the quality of the outputs. While the accreditation pressure for maximizing input quality has diminished, growing external attention to performance outputs and outcomes (like academic achievement and graduation rates and faculty publications) has forced us as researchers to start at the end and look backward at the conditions that produce favorable performance. The empirical connections between high inputs and high outputs remain strong. Institutions everywhere are finding that it is in their self-interest to devote continuing attention to the quality of their faculty and student credentials on entry. Studies (Volkwein and Sweitzer, 2006; Sweitzer and Volkwein, 2009) confirm that institutional reputation and prestige are highly predictable from admissions selectivity indicators, enrollment size, and resources.

The new accreditation philosophy, growing in strength since 1990, encourages institutions and their stakeholders to measure the outcomes, that is, to judge the results of educational programs. While most of us are more comfortable with this approach, it runs the danger of providing information too late in the process to render anything but a summative acceptable-versus-unacceptable judgment. Thus, too much of a focus on outcomes may not provide the information needed for internal development and educational enhancement.

Therefore, there is now a renewed interest in process measures on the theory that good outcomes will not result from flawed educational processes. Measurement at critical process points enables institutions to determine which student experiences are having the greatest and least impact and to make corrective interventions as needed. Moreover, the
research evidence indicates that outcomes such as student growth and satisfaction are most heavily influenced by campus experiences that produce student academic and social integration, which in turn produce favorable student outcomes.

Thus, we have for institutional researchers the ideal jobs bill:

- The need to measure and improve inputs because of their strong empirical connection to important outcomes like academic achievement and graduation rates
- The need to measure critical processes because of their role in student integration and growth and because such measurement facilitates corrective intervention
- The need to measure a variety of outputs and outcomes because results matter the most

In short, we need to measure everything.

**Summary of Accreditation Trends.** The accreditation process has undergone dramatic changes in the past twenty years (Ewell, 2005; Wolff, 2005), and these changes have a direct impact on the nature of institutional research, especially at the campus level. One clear trend places student outcomes assessment at the center of the accreditation review. Accreditation bodies, not only at the regional level but also in many disciplines (like engineering and business), have shifted their policies and processes away from meeting rigid quantitative standards for inputs and resources and toward judging educational effectiveness from measurable outcomes. This paradigm shift was led by several of the regional accreditors (most prominently Middle States, North Central, and Western), which revised their manuals and review processes to give greater attention to student learning outcomes and program goal attainment as the institution’s demonstration of its educational effectiveness. These trends began in the 1980s and gathered strength during the 1990s as one accrediting group after another shifted away from bureaucratic checklist approaches that emphasized admissions selectivity, resources, curricular requirements, facilities, faculty credentials, and seat time, now focusing their reviews instead on attaining educational objectives, particularly those related to student learning. This trend has become so widespread that several national organizations like the American Association of Colleges and Universities are bringing accrediting bodies and educational institutions together for the purpose of strengthening their shared responsibilities for student learning. Indeed, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions has developed principles of good practice for accrediting bodies and their member institutions to strengthen the evidence of student learning contained in the accreditation reports across the country (Wergin, 2005a, 2005b). Regional and special-
ized accreditors alike are investing heavily in evaluator training to ensure that each review is less personality driven and more evidence based.

A second related trend in accreditation is the greater emphasis on improvement. Outcomes assessment evidence is now the centerpiece of educational effectiveness, and using that evidence to improve is a hallmark of healthy institutions and programs. Regional and program accreditors alike are prodding all in higher education to build cultures of evidence that feed into continuous improvement systems. This trend is spreading and promises to foster self-renewing organizations. Perhaps the most dramatic initiative along these lines is North Central’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). AQIP integrates continuous improvement into a sequence of events that align with ongoing activities. The process aims to answer two overarching AQIP criteria:

- Are you doing the right things—the things that are most important in order to achieve your institution’s goals?
- Are you doing things right—effectively, efficiently, in ways that truly satisfy the needs of those you serve?

A third national trend is using accreditation reviews as catalysts for institutional transformation. Embedding the accreditation review and its products in ongoing institutional processes is now quite widespread as a regional practice. In order to make the review more cost-effective, as well as to increase the benefits associated with these costly reviews, campuses and accrediting bodies alike have begun to base their accreditation self-studies and reviews on existing processes (like strategic planning or program evaluation or student services or enrollment management) rather than to generate a one-time, stand-alone self-study document that evaporates as soon as the site visit team leaves the campus. Most of the six regional accrediting bodies encourage institutions to elect this review option. Progressive campus leaders increasingly are seizing the regional reaccreditation process as a “chariot for change” (Martin, Manning, and Ramaley, 2001). Rather than viewing the accrediting process as a burden or hurdle to be overcome, presidents, provosts, and deans are viewing the self-study and team visit as an opportunity to stimulate constructive change.

A fourth trend, also aimed at reducing the cost of these multiple accreditation processes, is the combined or multiple-visit model. This occurs when several accrediting bodies agree to hold their campus site visits at the same time and the respective self-studies are coordinated, if not combined. Several universities like Binghamton University and Drexel have experimented with this arrangement. The evaluations suggest that campuses prefer combined visits because the combined self-studies and visits are less costly, but that the specialized accreditation groups (like engineering and business) view them as less effective than separated reviews.
Measuring Educational Effectiveness

In higher education, we think we know how to measure efficiency and cost, but we do not agree about what it is that constitutes educational effectiveness. There are at least three competing models or philosophies about what constitutes excellence in higher education (Burke and Serban, 1998; Burke and Minassians, 2002; Volkwein, 2007).

First, the academic community traditionally embraces the resource/reputation model, disapprovingly articulated by Astin (1985). This model assumes that an institution’s quality is indicated by its reputation ratings, financial resources, faculty credentials, student test scores, external funding, and rankings by experts. Under this model, faculty, sometimes joined by accreditation bodies, argue for more resources to support educational effectiveness and to boost the institution’s academic standing. This drives up costs and attends to inputs rather than outcomes.

Second, many parents, students, and student affairs professionals cling to a client-centered model. Derived from the literature on quality management, this market-oriented, customer-centered model emphasizes all possible student services, faculty availability and attentiveness, student and alumni satisfaction and feedback, and low tuition and high aid. Seymour (1992) articulates this model in his book *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education*. Under this model, the first priority of a college or university is to fulfill the needs of students, parents, employers, and other “customers” of higher education. Institutions that best meet the needs of their constituents are considered to be the most effective. Therefore, an organization’s customers, rather than the views of experts, define quality. Good customer service is very labor intensive and emphasizes student experiences over student outcomes.

Third, the civic and government community generally believes in the strategic investment model (Burke and Minassians, 2002; Volkwein, 2007). This model emphasizes the importance of return on investment, cost-benefit, and results-oriented and productivity measures such as admissions yield, graduation rates, time to degree, and expenditures per student. Under this model, government officials and even trustees evaluate each new initiative in light of its perceived payoff. This is the only one of the three dominant models that has the potential to dampen costs.

In any case, these competing views of educational excellence are interpreted differently by different higher education stakeholders. Hence, there is a potential for misunderstanding, if not outright conflict, and presidents frequently feel caught in the middle between faculty and accreditors, students and parents, government officials and trustees. Frequently institutional researchers are asked by their presidents to help develop multiple responses to multiple audiences.

Hence, efficiency joins accountability and effectiveness as a third major public concern. The costs of higher education constitute an enormous national investment. No longer is it sufficient to demonstrate student suc-
cess alone. Colleges and universities must also demonstrate that teaching, research, and service programs are being conducted economically. Such concerns stimulate current legislative and trustee interest in class size, faculty workload, administrative salaries, time to degree, loan default, economic impact, and research productivity, among others.

The Connection Between Student Outcomes Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness

Chapter Two places the topic of outcomes assessment within the larger topic of institutional effectiveness. Student learning outcomes are central to the purpose of educational organizations. The greater the evidence of congruence between organizational outcomes and the statements of mission, goals, and objectives, the more institutional effectiveness is demonstrated, and the more likely is reaccreditation. The accreditation process, then, may be thought of as an attempt to examine the connection between desired and actual outcomes, with the assessment process providing much of the evidence. Although institutional effectiveness may be demonstrated in a variety of ways, student outcomes assessment supplies some of the most important documentation for institutions with educational missions. Student outcomes assessment is the act of assembling and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative teaching and learning outcomes evidence in order to examine their congruence with an institution’s stated purposes and educational objectives.

References


**Recommended Reading**


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