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Frank Bonner

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College Presidents: Losing Sleep for the Wrong Reasons — Dr. Frank Bonner, GWU President

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Office of University Communications

July 19, 2012

By: Dr. Frank Bonner, President Gardner-Webb University

College and university presidents may be losing sleep for the wrong reasons. Economic challenges are all too familiar. If you are a public institution president, you are probably dealing with significant cutbacks of state funding, along with almost all of the worries of private college presidents — endowment return, maintaining enrollment in the face of spiraling costs for our students, pressure to hold down tuition increases, our own increasing expenses, and economic stresses on our donors. Indeed, many of us are facing increased attention to college affordability (and rightly so) while also striving continuously to enhance overall quality and minimize our own rising costs — a perfect storm.

Then there is the growing question, “Is college worth it?”— also a legitimate issue. There are widely discussed charges that colleges are not effectively fulfilling their missions. One of the best accounts is Derek Bok’s *Our Underachieving Colleges*.

In the face of this skepticism, accreditation seeks to assure the public as well as students and parents that accredited institutions do in fact comply with established standards and do effectively fulfill their respective missions. But within the large context of mission and academic quality, accreditation can be either a blessing or a curse. Having served on and chaired accreditation committees for over 30 years, I am a staunch supporter of the concept and principles behind accreditation, and I believe that overwhelmingly it is done well. But if not done well it can detract from and even harm the teaching and learning process.

Central to the accreditation process is the concept of effectiveness, and at the heart of this concept is the famous “closing the loop” — establishing desired outcomes throughout the educational endeavor, assessing results, then learning from the assessment and making improvements. The principle is absolutely right, and any endeavor in any field should operate this way. However, there is a two-fold problem that often arises in its application.

First, as many faculty members have long complained, the most important “outcomes” of the academic endeavor cannot be succinctly and objectively measured. Second, the importance placed on the methods of assessment and the need for processes that can be clearly understood by external accreditation reviewers often cause more focus to be applied to the mechanical processes and less to the real results and, most important, to the real substance and value of the “outcomes” that are delineated.

In the short space of this blog, my response will come across as greatly oversimplified, and in concept it is. Simply stated — indeed, overly simply — we should focus far more intently on the end rather than the means. Whether in response to economic stresses, questioning of the very worth of the college experience, or the challenge of measuring and attesting to the true quality of the academic endeavor, we cannot seem to avoid obsessing over the processes involved and the management of those processes. Our planning and reasoning are working in the wrong direction. Let's begin with the question of what the end result should be — what the truly educated person should know, do and, most important, be. Over the decades if not centuries, enormous attention has been given to this end result; volumes upon volumes, essays upon essays have been written. My point is not that we have ignored the question but that in our educational planning and evaluation this is where we should begin. Planning and development should begin with the desired “end” and then move toward the “means.”

If we can first identify and make a compelling case for what our graduates should know, do, and be and then build and evaluate our operations and programs accordingly, the rest will more likely fall into place. Funding priorities and decisions still will not be easy but should be much clearer. With a valuable and credible end result clearly presented and successful results demonstrated, the “worth” of college should be more compelling. The case for support from legislators and donors will be stronger. Devising and correctly assessing the right kind of learning outcomes will be easier and more effective. The spirit and intent of accreditation will be apparent and far more defensible to the naysayers.

This approach will be perplexing, and the inherent challenges may keep us up at night. Perhaps, though, we will be losing sleep for better reasons.

Dr. Frank Bonner, President Gardner-Webb University

*This was originally posted in the Huffington Post on July 19, 2012 –
<http://tinyurl.com/7jydc3a>