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Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going? The Evolution of American Higher Education

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Abstract

American Higher Education has been engaged in a journey from a knowledge-centered focus towards a performance-based emphasis. What does it mean to prepare students to learn as opposed to disseminating the knowledge base? The federal government, accrediting bodies and educational organizations are demanding that higher education critically examine the purpose of a higher education. What does it mean to prepare students to enter into the work force and the citizenry? Comprehending this journey into this realm of measurable outcomes and accountability is critical for understanding the implications for program development and the advancement of higher education.

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Where have we been?

American Higher Education has its roots in the fundamental Jeffersonian principles of preparing individuals to be informed and active citizens, limiting federal control of higher learning, and fostering the ideas and actions needed to develop an economy that could compete in a global setting (Eckel & King, 2004). Until the late 19th and 20th centuries, higher education was generally limited to an exclusive few who had the means to pay for an education in the United States or who had the pedigree and money to attend elite schools in Europe. With the Morrill Acts in 1862 and 1890, the federal government began
to take a more active role in addressing access to higher education. The 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act provided 30,000 acres of land to each state’s senators and representatives to establish endowments to support higher education institutions ("Morrill Act", 2003). The focus of these institutions was to provide education primarily in the areas of agriculture, mechanical education, and other practical professions. In the Morrill Act of 1890, these grants expanded to include institutions for black citizens; therefore establishing what we now know as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Through these efforts, access to higher education was vastly increased and resulted in individuals achieving social mobility through education. Access to higher education continued to be addressed on a national level through the passage of the first GI bill in 1944 and the expanded access to federal financial aid through legislation in the 1970s (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008).

As access improved, higher education became available to all citizens regardless of income level, gender, race or social class. Community colleges were created as early as 1901 to provide individuals with a two-year associate’s degree in a variety of disciplines as well as numerous certificate programs in various trades. The associate’s degree enabled students to either enter the workforce or transfer into a four-year institution with the foundation for a baccalaureate degree.

Greater access and choice leads to competition among institutions for students, faculty, and funding. Thus, all four-year institutions must actively engage in recruiting students from high schools, community colleges, and the community at large to maintain their enrollment numbers. The goal then becomes to balance your institutional mission with the need to expand your student base and compete for those tuition dollars.

Social, political and economic influences are constantly shaping higher education as well (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). Costs of higher education are rising; at the same time, having a college education is increasingly essential for attaining success in the professional and personal arenas. By 2018, the percentage of jobs that will require postsecondary education will rise to 63% and continue to rise. There will be a shortfall of 3 million credentials to meet this need, if we do not change how we are preparing students (Reindl & Reyna, 2011). Institutions must be guided by their missions and visions, while becoming more forward thinking in addressing these demands.

Many state institutions have seen their funding from state legislatures dwindle over the past decades. Instead of referring to themselves as state funded, numerous public institutions see themselves as state assisted or aided. As a result, many state institutions have to adopt a funding model that is more aligned with private institutions with a heavy emphasis on tuition dollars to fund faculty, programs, and administrative costs. Tuition increases have a powerful impact on access as a college education becomes less available to students who are not eligible for financial aid. Student debt can be a barrier to a productive and active life in a career and as a citizen. As evidenced by recent events, there has been a tremendous push by the federal government, state governments, and the general public to reduce the rising costs of higher education while increasing the number of college graduates (Obama, 2012).

As a result of state funding dollars becoming more scarce, there is greater scrutiny of how those public dollars are being spent at all levels. In the United States, one mechanism in place to ensure accountability is regional accreditation. In order for a college degree to be meaningful, a regionally accredited institution must award the degree. This regional accreditation ensures that the degrees granted meet recognized standards and represent a level of rigor in the program of study. There are five regional accrediting bodies in the United States: the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (HLC), The Southern Association of Schools (SACS), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of
Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (WASC-ACSCU). The federal government through the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) must approve these regional accreditors.

For the purposes of this paper, the standards of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) will be the focus of the discussion, though similar standards are emphasized by all of the regional accreditors. Outside influences such as the federal and state governments, media agencies and the general public are making demands on higher education to ensure that funding is well spent; however, the definition of quality becomes clouded by perceptions of relevance and the pragmatics of a college degree in a competitive job market (Eaton, 2010).

The demands for greater productivity and data driven assessments are evident in the scrutiny of higher education institutions. How can we demonstrate that our graduates know what is needed to be successful in their professional and personal lives? The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) has fostered a dialogue of universities and colleges across the country to develop the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) which champions the benefits of a liberal education that focuses on preparing students for an active professional, personal, and civic life. There are four areas that comprise this initiative: 1) Essential Learning Outcomes, 2) High Impact Educational Practices, 3) Authentic Assessments and 4) Inclusive Excellence. Through LEAP, students are expected to acquire professional, civic, and multicultural knowledge; intellectual and practical skills, and civic and intercultural knowledge. Students must also be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through authentic assessments focusing on real world complex problems and challenges (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005).

A college degree opens doors for individuals in the job market; however, a college education has to be more than simple job preparation. It is undeniable that programs of study must provide graduates with the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions to be effective in a global and competitive economy. However, the more valuable component of higher education is the goal of creating resilient and flexible learners who can easily adapt to intellectual and creative demands of a fluctuating job market and economy. The cognitive and technological demands of the student’s life and career will evolve over the coming decades. In the last three decades alone, the increased and expanded use of the Internet, social media, tablet computers, SMARTPhones, and other digital devices have changed drastically the way we obtain, utilize, and create information. Learners must be equipped to move effortlessly from one medium to another as well as be able to synthesize and evaluate the information that bombards them through these media.

Higher Education along with the P-12 schools must also take an active role in addressing the disparities that currently exist in educational opportunities. Colleges and universities must address closing the achievement gaps between those students who are advantaged (educationally, culturally, economically) and those who are not (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). This becomes increasingly difficult in the face of skyrocketing tuition and other costs associated with obtaining a degree. In addition, more adult learners are entering or returning to higher education. Their needs are significantly different from the traditional college students. Resources have to be put in place to ensure their success as well. (Reindl & Reyna, 2011). Higher Education must be a beacon of opportunity for all individuals who desire to pursue a postsecondary education, while operating under greater scrutiny and diminishing financial support.

Regarding the role of accreditation in the accountability of higher education, student learning is paramount. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has one criterion, Standard 3- Student Learning and
Effective Teaching, dedicated to examining the impact of teaching on student learning. This area is targeted under Core Component 3c: The organization creates an effective learning environment. In the examples of evidence provided by HLC for this component, emphasis is placed on the use of assessment results to inform improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, instructional resources and student services. In order to meet this criterion, institutions must also demonstrate how they provide an effective learning environment that addresses diversity, supports all learners, and provides advising and infrastructure to support and enhance high levels of learning. This process involves targeting key outcome areas that students need assistance in mastering as well as providing services that will directly meet their needs.

Effective oral and written communication skills are often targeted by institutions as critical learner outcomes. In order to effectively provide services to students, the institution has to look at where these skills are being assessed across programs; how students are being assessed; how the student’s performance is being communicated to the student and to the program; and how are students accessing the services on campus to provide the needed support for success. Providing this range of services is a long term process, not one that can be done haphazardly or sporadically.

Assessment provides the critical link between the teaching and learning process (Parkes, 2010). The focus has shifted from inputs (enrollment, degree programs, course offerings, syllabi) to outputs (student performance on designated learning outcomes, time to degree completion, employment). Institutions and programs have to identify appropriate and measurable Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Faculty, alumni, current students, and community members should be involved in identifying the critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students are expected to have mastered by the time they graduate. No longer can an institution assume that all of their graduates are well-prepared; the proof will be in the data collected, analyzed and used based on student performance.

Where do we go from here?

Accountability is driving the evolution of American Higher Education. It can be daunting, but it is essential in making informed decisions. Whoever controls the direction of this evolution will determine the directions in which higher education will go. Higher Education must be proactive and engaged in this process or outside forces will define who we are and how we shall educate our students (Eaton, 2010). A college education cannot be defined only as job preparation, but also as a means for preparing individuals to be critical and informed thinkers.

In addressing the demands of greater accountability, it is essential for institutions to define the critical components and learning outcomes of a higher education. The work of AAC&U provides a solid guide for having these conversations regarding the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions we expect of our graduates regardless of their discipline. Not only must the student learning outcomes be identified, but meaningful assessments must be developed and implemented. These assessments must be authentic and tied to performance measures. Passive assessments, such as many paper and pencil tests, do not provide the rich and multilayered picture of a student’s knowledge and skills. These performance assessments cannot be designed by a chosen few individuals. Dialogue within programs and across the disciplines is essential to have consensus on the designated student learning outcomes and the key elements of the assessment. Faculty members, students, alumni and community members should participate in this process. Having these different perspectives during this process will provide for a broader understanding of what it means to be a college graduate. It also promotes the support needed for successful implementation. If the university community feels connected to the overall assessment plan, then there is a strong likelihood that there will be follow-through with the process.
After data are collected on these key assessments, the data have to be analyzed and shared across all constituencies. Designated collection times have to be established and maintained. It is through this process that meaningful data-driven program and institutional changes can take place. Decisions cannot be made solely on a hunch or anecdotal information. The process has to be systematic, data driven and transparent to everyone. Collecting the data is not enough; it is how the data are being used in transformative ways that is critical. Documentation of these data-driven decisions are shared through multiple venues, such as governing boards, accrediting bodies, alumni, potential donors, and current and potential students. For example, a program may want to take a look at the effectiveness of its culminating project. The description of the culminating assessment, a copy of the rubric used to score the assessment and a summary of student performance on that culminating project are shared with the program’s advisory board. This advisory board may include alumni, current students, program faculty and community members. The discussion would focus on the expectations of the assignment and the level at which the students performed. Are the expectations of the assignment aligned with the expectations in that discipline? Are students excelling in one area, but having difficulty in another? How can this be addressed in the program? What changes need to be made to strengthen the program? Input from multiple constituents provides for a more in-depth and richer examination of the data and the next steps needed for the program.

Another key component of this accountability process is the strategic review of how programs are designed and delivered. This may involve critically reviewing which programs of study should be added, revised, redesigned, or possibly eliminated. This critical review involves examining the best practices occurring in the field as well as the performance of the students on key assessments that are aligned with the professional standards. Are the assessments designed in such a way that students have to be actively engaged with the material? Are the graduates able to transform and create knowledge as opposed to just restating what is already known? How do the instructors know that the students truly understand and are able to effectively use the knowledge and skills gained through their program of study.

A careful examination of how courses and programs are being delivered must also be addressed. The manner in which courses are being delivered is changing at a rapid pace. The institution and the classroom are no longer confined to one geographic location. Interactions with students may take place face to face within the classroom, but may also occur face to face with technology eliminating the geographic separation. As stated earlier, these types of transformations cannot take place in a vacuum. Discussion and debate among all of the constituencies must take place in order to generate viable solutions. Change can be daunting, but through open discussions and the brainstorming of solutions, change can lead to rewarding and positive results.

Higher education cannot afford to be stagnant and resistant to the forces of change and accountability. The economic, social and political pressures are not going away; they are increasing as we face more financial challenges. How we engage in the process will ultimately determine our success or demise. It is up to us to be the leaders in this transformation. There is much at stake; however, the opportunities abound to be innovative and creative. By being responsive and focused, Higher Education will continue to be the venue for all individuals to achieve professional and personal success.

References


