QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:
WHAT THE PUBLIC EXPECTS

Report from a Wingspread Conference
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EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

707 17th Street, Suite 2700
Denver, Colorado 80202-3427
FOREWORD

Giving Voice to the Public Interest

This report from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) summarizes discussions at a Wingspread Conference on quality assurance in undergraduate education. Co-sponsors of the conference were ECS, the Johnson Foundation, the National Governors’ Association, and the National Conference of State Legislatures. Participants included state and federal policymakers and leaders from the corporate, philanthropic, higher education and accreditation communities. A few words of background information are in order.

The process by which institutions of higher education are accredited is in a period of both crisis and real opportunity; at stake is the concept and tradition of peer self-regulation of colleges and universities. Evidence of the challenge is seen in the recent struggle between accreditors and the U.S. Department of Education over new regulations implementing the 1992 Amendments to the Higher Education Act; in the frustration expressed by some institutional leaders (especially of large research universities) about value received for investment of time and resources in the accreditation process; in the concern of many public policymakers and corporate leaders about quality in undergraduate education -- and the fact that they have not often seen the accreditation process as an answer to their concerns.

At a January meeting in Tucson, the National Policy Board for Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPB) agreed to pursue significant changes in accreditation. The NPB also agreed that steps must be taken to increase accreditation’s credibility with and value to the public. Subsequently, the NPB appointed working groups to draft proposed new accreditation standards and procedures. This work is being accomplished primarily by people from within the academy -- accrediting agency staff, national higher education association leaders, etc. -- people who have essential expertise to contribute and decision prerogatives to exercise. But they are, essentially, "insiders," and their work can be constructively strengthened by activities that give voice to the public interest in this important standard-setting process. The Wingspread Conference was one such endeavor.

Since one of the primary aspirations of the accrediting process is quality assurance, the focus of the Wingspread Conference was not the design of a new accreditation system but the consideration of broader questions about definitions and evidence of quality. Ultimately, the Wingspread discussions produced a set of "standards for the standards" -- criteria which might well be used to judge any proposed quality assurance process for higher education.

This report is offered to the National Policy Board and to the higher education and accreditation communities as advice from concerned but still supportive constituents -- and in the hope of advancing an important and necessary public debate.
QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:
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This discussion paper is premised on the assertion that we need substantial improvements in American undergraduate education and strengthened systems of accountability in support of that goal. There are profound reasons for pursuing a transformation of undergraduate education; at stake are students’ futures, the nation’s future, and the future of the academy itself. For all parties, the assurance of quality—of consistently high levels of collegiate learning as an outcome—is no longer an option to be left to chance. To be sure, undergraduate education is but one of many things that America’s colleges and universities do. But it is the only one that all engage in; it is the one that students, parents, citizens and taxpayers alike believe should be higher education’s main business; and it is the one in which perhaps the greatest improvements remain to be made.

To achieve such improvements, higher education needs collective resolve, intensity of focus, and public support. In return for that support, it must actively engage the public in helping to define what should be expected and must provide those it serves with information appropriate to the decisions and choices that they must make. It is rapidly becoming apparent that effectiveness for any enterprise in today’s world requires open communication, stakeholder involvement, adequate information about performance, and use of that information for continuous improvement. Higher education can no longer remain an exception. Accountability, in short, is a necessary condition for improvement.

Assuring quality is of course only a part of what is needed to discharge accountability. Those who invest and participate in higher education should expect it to deliver high quality; but they have a right to expect that it do so with integrity and efficiency as well. Recent events have revealed our mechanisms for achieving accountability in higher education to be poorly articulated and in disarray. Many of us believe the present moment represents a last chance for the academy to help shape a workable future framework for quality assurance, accountability and improvement. We believe that in crafting such a framework—though integrity and efficiency remain critical to particular stakeholders for particular purposes—the definition and assurance of quality is the best place to start.

In the sections that follow, responses are offered to three questions: What do we mean by quality? What is appropriate and adequate evidence of quality? How should evidence of quality be communicated? Based on the answers to these questions (as developed at Wingspread), a concluding section offers “standards for future standards,” a set of criteria against which to judge any proposed process for quality assurance in undergraduate education.
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY QUALITY?

For purposes of quality assurance, the paramount issue for every college or university is the performance of its graduates. Among the important characteristics of college and university graduates, for example, are the following:

- technical competence in a given field;
- high-level communications, computational, technological literacy, and informational abilities that enable individuals to gain and apply new knowledge and skills as needed;
- the ability to arrive at informed judgements—that is, to effectively define problems, gather and evaluate information related to those problems, and develop solutions;
- the ability to function in a global community, including knowledge of different cultural and economic contexts as well as foreign language skills;
- a range of attitudes and dispositions including: flexibility and adaptability; ease with diversity; initiative, motivation and persistence (for example, being a "self-starter"); ethical and civil behavior, as well as personal integrity; creativity and resourcefulness; and the ability to work with others, especially in team settings;
- and above all, demonstrated ability to deploy all of the above to address specific problems in complex, real-world settings, and under "enterprise conditions" in which the development of workable solutions is required.

These desired attributes of graduates are listed as examples only. But they are distinguished by several factors. First, while they include goals consistent with those traditionally expressed within colleges and universities, they are couched principally in the language of external stakeholders and reflect the involvement of these stakeholders in the conversation. Second, they demand the concerted attention of the institution as a whole, rather than being the responsibility of any specific department or unit. They are everybody’s job but nobody’s explicit responsibility. Third, they embody a conception of quality that is outside the mainstream of higher education’s current quality assurance practices.

Furthermore, quality encompasses a distinctive set of institutional characteristics and behaviors that increase the likelihood that these outcomes will be developed. While these characteristics do not in our view constitute quality itself, they can serve both to stimulate quality improvement and to signify that quality is present. These attributes include:

- a statement of intended learning outcomes that:
  - provides clear direction for assessment,
- adequately communicates what the institution expects of its students, both to students themselves and to those such as employers and K-12 educators with whom it must act in concert,

- is developed in ongoing consultation with appropriate stakeholders and is updated continuously to meet new needs,

- is bought into by the entire institutional community,

- is regularly checked against actual institutional practices to ensure that these intended outcomes are in fact being addressed.

- explicit mechanisms for gathering evidence of learning consistent with these goals, from a variety of sources and on an ongoing basis.

- the ability to use the resulting evidence to make improvements, including:
  
  - open institutional channels for communicating assessment results to those in a position to make changes and for collectively determining the implications of these results,

  - evidence of actual changes made on an ongoing basis.

- mechanisms that ensure that all parts of the institution are acting in concert in all of the above.

Additional more specific elements of an institution organized to promote the development of the desired learning outcomes include learning that is active and collaborative, a student-centered institutional culture, and mechanisms to provide frequent feedback to students about their status and performance.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE OF QUALITY?

Given a definition of quality based principally on outcomes consistent with stakeholder needs, the evidence for quality should be generated from sources external to higher education to a far greater extent than occurs at present.

The major types of evidence include:

- the successful and timely completion by students of their educational programs;

- the placement and performance of graduates in the workplace and their effective involvement in civic and community life;
performance in further education and on relevant licensure and certification examinations;

results of direct assessments of student abilities on exit consistent with both institutional and societal goals, and the "value-added" to these abilities by the institution given entering student characteristics; and

reported satisfaction of students with the contribution made by higher education toward attainment of their own goals, relative to the costs incurred.

Completely adequate assessments of the full range of these outcomes are not currently available, but the technology exists to create them. In the context of a clear demand for performance information of this kind, existing methods can and should be applied. Furthermore, that demand for information should generate both incentives for and commitment to development of new and better assessments.

 HOW SHOULD QUALITY BE COMMUNICATED?

An adequate quality assurance system must encompass more than just assessing quality. Equal emphasis must be placed upon communication of the results of these assessments to affected parties, both to discharge accountability and to enable them to make appropriate decisions. Among the stakeholders who require such information are students (actual and potential) and their parents; elected officials and other public policymakers; employers, K-12 educators and others with whom higher education must act as a partner; as well as the media and the public at large. Consistent with these purposes and audiences, attributes of an effective communications system to support quality assurance in higher education should include:

- an open process for examining the evidence for quality and public communication of its results;
- frequent, regular, and up-to-date reporting of results;
- a manner of reporting that enables appropriate comparisons to be drawn across institutions (and discriminations to be made among them) in order to inform consumer and investor choices.
- concise and understandable reporting, tailored to meet the needs of different audiences.
- multiple measures that allow presentation of a balanced profile of institutional performance and the context in which it occurs.
- wide dissemination of results to affected parties through multiple channels, including
the media.

CRITERIA AGAINST WHICH TO ASSESS ANY PROPOSED QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

Answers to the three foregong questions suggest a number of criteria that any proposed quality assurance process in higher education ought to meet. These "standards for the standards" can be usefully listed under three broad headings.

Questions about the primary emphasis and focus of quality assurance:

- Is its conception of "quality" centered principally on undergraduate education?
- Does it draw its conclusions about quality primarily on the basis of student outcomes?
- Are these outcomes based significantly on the views of key constituents and stakeholders?
- Do these outcomes reflect complex abilities that are important to performance after graduation and that are likely to endure?
- Do these outcomes reflect the full range of the undergraduate educational mission, including intellectual development, employability, citizenship, and the student’s own objectives?
- Does the assessment of these outcomes allow judgments to be made about both the levels of attainment reached and the institution’s particular contribution to these levels of attainment?

Questions about the quality assurance process itself, and how it operates:

- Does the process visibly involve the participation of key stakeholders in making quality judgements, rather than simply "disclosing" to them its results?
- Does the process rely significantly on evidence about student performance after completion or graduation?
- Does the process act to focus the institution on making improvements rather than reinforcing the status quo?
- Is the process continuous, rather than episodic and infrequent?
- Does the process as a whole encourage institutions to reach beyond minimums toward
far higher levels of performance?

- Does the process work to promote integration of higher education with K-12 education as part of a larger system of standards, quality assurance, and improvement?
- Does the process work effectively as part of a comprehensive system of accountability and quality assurance that may include components run by government, the private sector, and the academy itself?

Questions about the information produced by the process, and how it is presented:

- Is the information generated by the process worth the cost of producing it?
- Does the process provide adequate information for stakeholders to make choices or decisions important to them?
- Consequently, does it allow appropriate comparisons to be made among institutions—either generally, or within sector?
- Is the information that it yields broadly understandable and effectively presented?
- Are both the information produced and the judgements based on that information openly available and publicly reported?

It is important to stress that these criteria are intended to be applied as a whole to any future system of quality assurance for undergraduate education. We offer them to the accreditation community especially, as voices from the public that should be heard as new accreditation standards and processes now under discussion are crafted.

TOWARD A "NEW COMPACT"

A comprehensive system of quality assurance and accountability, we recognize, may consist of a number of different entities and processes acting together—including voluntary accreditation, state and federal policy, and additional private bodies. Each of the interested parties has a legitimate and compelling interest in the effective functioning of all components of such a system. But it is equally in the interest of all that the system's parts function with synergy and with minimum redundancy. Quality assurance, we believe, is an area in which the academy itself—in full consultation with its constituents and publics—may be best equipped to take the lead. Forging new accreditation standards and procedures thus represents a significant opportunity. If warrantable under the criteria noted above, the requirements of
accreditation need not be overlaid or amplified by the unilateral actions of state and federal bodies in the realm of quality assurance. But the academy must fully, faithfully, and consistently commit to discharging the obligations so delineated in order to avoid legitimate intervention by others with large stakes in the enterprise. At the same time, state and federal authorities could confine their attention with respect to accountability to matters of efficiency, institutional integrity, and administrative capacity, thus relieving accreditation of the need to assess such domains.

The deliberations at Wingspread suggest that forging a "new compact" for accountability and quality assurance in undergraduate education on this basis is a worthy and achievable goal. They suggest as well that frank and open dialogue across communities is a key condition for its attainment. We hope that the criteria offered here, and the conceptions of quality upon which they are based, can serve to further this important and necessary dialogue.