

Editor's Desk

The Rhetoric of Quality

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A friend of mine is fond of paraphrasing the words of Ted Manning, former Director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Ted is reported to have said that college presidents are convinced that their institutions possess an abundance of academic quality. When pressed for illustrative details (in polite circles one did not ask for actual definitions of quality) these officials had little to say beyond the usual cant tied to faculty credentials and library holdings. Whether this struck him as amusing or disturbing, Dr. Manning should be credited with documenting the Lake Wobegone effect of Colleges – academically speaking, every single one of them is well above average.

Dr. Manning's observations illustrate a serious problem in higher education. Institutions do not define or manage their quality as most of their constituents would have them do. This year, regionally accredited colleges and universities will expend over \$200 billion to educate 15 million students and they will do it with institutional standards and practices which operate on vague and largely self-serving notions of quality. The academics who constitute these institutions are especially remiss (since they are intellectually well prepared for the responsibility, a weaker term will not do) in translating quality concepts into quality management.

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Were U.S. higher education an automotive assembly line, it would be churning out Yugos (far too many of them), Chevrolets, Hondas – and an occasional elite car. Is this a problem? Given the mixed quality in raw materials, isn't it reasonable to assume that the outputs will co-vary with inputs? Yes, they will. The problem is that there is no way to tell which product you are buying from any of the stickers affixed by the institutions.

It would be difficult to overstate how wildly out-of-control are the quality management practices of most U.S. institutions of higher education. Marching across the stage possessing similar transcripts, and receiving identical degrees, are those who

studied hard and learned well, those who studied not at all, and learned little – along with a few who cannot even read, perform elementary arithmetical computations or find Minnesota on an unmarked map.

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Promoted to full professor are those who can teach and do, those who can teach and won't, and those who could not teach if their livelihood depended on it (it doesn't). College deans make decisions to restrict educational services to growing markets and mount new services to dying or non-existent markets – and they are promoted. University administrators spend millions of dollars to add a third floor to the main (and only) library when enrollment at the main campus is declining and the institution has added 1,200 adult students at satellite campuses and through distance learning programs. Faculty committees decide what to teach and what programs to offer, often unaware of or perhaps simply disregarding what students and employers say they need. Administrative overhead soars to ever higher levels with no net demonstrable benefit from the increased expenditures.

Am I looking only at the dark and downside of quality management in higher education? Are there not examples of quality management that would inspire confidence in our institutions of higher education? The answer to both questions is a qualified "yes." There must be many isolated cases in which academic quality is managed well. I have carefully documented a few of them.

Does this weaken the charge that academic quality management is weak-to-non-existent in institutions of higher education? Just the opposite. Academic quality management is about variance. It is about managing the downside and gradually raising minimum standards as part of a continuous process to improve academic processes and outcomes.

Does higher education manage its academic downside well? Have minimum standards for

Common Notions of Quality as Applied to Higher Education

Quality Perspective	General Characteristics	Assessment Measures
<i>Apodictic</i> Quality	Higher Education embodies the very ideal of quality because of its exclusivity, selection attributes, etc.	Assessment is unnecessary as quality is self-evident; faculty will recognize quality when they see it; students will acquire some of it via interaction with faculty.
Quality as <i>Fidelity to Tradition</i>	Values the collective institutional wisdom embodied in the accretion of higher education self-images, standards and practices.	Compliance with institutional norms; generally "assessed" via committee and oversight bodies.
Quality as <i>Fidelity to Mission</i> (otherwise known as "suitability to purpose")	Values setting clear mission and purposes for the institution and evaluating its achievement under various criteria.	Implied measures include full assessment of effects on objects of benefit as defined in mission; this is the definition emphasized by some regional accrediting bodies.
Quality as <i>Fidelity to Standards of Excellence</i>	(Actually a family of definitions that can overlap other perspectives in this table.) Values, standards set by experts; benchmarks for processes or outcomes, consistency.	Will vary with standards; e.g., most institutions have rigorous standards for educational attainment of faculty; few institutions have any standards for demonstrated impact on students.
Quality as <i>Customer Satisfaction/Delight</i>	Identifies customer(s) and organizes success criteria around meeting their needs.	Emphasis on process, outcome and impact measures; de-emphasis of input measures and process measures not related to customer(s).
Quality as <i>Fulfilling Customer Goals</i>	This is a subsidiary of the previous perspective but important enough to break out.	Emphasis on accurately assessing customer(s) goals, the migration of their goals as they participate in the educational system, and the extent to which these goals are fulfilled.
Quality as <i>Value Added</i>	Also identifies customer(s) and organizes success criteria around adding value to the customer.	Emphasis on demonstrating the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values through pre-, post-, and impact assessments of customer(s).
Quality as <i>Continuous Improvement</i>	Sensitizes educational institutions to the largely foreign notion that "good enough" is never good enough.	Assesses everything that might be improved; in practice, process measures dominate.

academic processes and outcomes (when they are enforced) advanced or declined in the past 5, 10 or 20 years? Academic quality management is also about producing the greatest possible outcomes for the fewest possible expenditures of resources – efficiency.

Have our institutions of higher education become more or less efficient? The answer to this question will depend on the mission of the institution but, on balance, the answer is that they have become significantly less efficient with respect to the production of their primary product: degrees ensuring that their

holder possesses a specified knowledge base and set of competencies. Managing academic quality means many things. It means you might not add a third floor to the library (the primary benefit of which would be the glorification of the campus) if 1,200 remote students need state-of-the-art electronic access to library services; it means you will take the money earmarked for Smith to teach his favorite course in esoterica (which will enroll three students) to add multiple sections of the paedestria that will ensure that thousands of students have the opportunity to achieve a four year

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Objects of Benefit	Strengths	Weaknesses
The professorate; administrators	Resistant to change.	Resistant to change; not scrutable; indifferent to needs of other stakeholders.
Systems and individuals in control of the institution	Resistant to change; high involvement of constituencies in control.	Resistant to change; not scrutable; often devolves to self-serving system over time; little or no involvement of constituencies not in control.
Beneficiaries identified in mission	Flexibility to serve a well-defined mission.	Few in principle. In practice, missions almost always lag changing needs; the mission is defined and evaluated by systems and individuals in control of the institution.
Will vary (see left)	Depends on standards.	Depends on standards.
The customer(s)	Offers some of the advantages enjoyed by the private sector, e.g., sharp focus on basis for decisions, unrelenting impetus for continuous revision and improvement.	Higher education's customer is polymorphous; the needs of different customers can conflict; long- and short-term customer needs often conflict.
The customer(s)	(See above.) Also, serves to align institution with longer term customer outcomes (goals versus immediate satisfaction).	Few, unless one believes that customer goals are not paramount.
The customer(s)	Business analogues as described above; lays foundation for the calculation of cost per unit of outcome/benefit.	Same as above.
The institution per se; all of its customers and other constituents	The possibility of creating an organic educational institution; one that could keep pace with societal change.	May find some babies in the discarded bathwater.

degree in five years instead of the 6.5 years now imposed upon them because of inflexible schedules and too few sections of required courses. Academic quality management is about ensuring that standards for impact on students are as least as high as standards for credentialing instructors.

There is much more to be said about extant concepts of academic quality management but it may be more helpful to outline the foundations for such concepts (*see the above chart*). This conceptual road map for quality will not ensure that more quality-minded decisions are made. But it will help.

Fundamentals

"Quality" is a polymorphic term. The images, values, broad purposes and specific goals of each stakeholder or constituency group form the basis for that group's definition of quality. A college instructor's definition of quality teaching may center on students' demonstration of critical thinking behaviors that experts associate to the subject matter being taught. A public member of the college's board may accept the instructor's definition as a down payment, but will, one hopes, also want to have benchmarks for the expected level of achievement combined with measures of efficiency included in the definition – teaching critical thinking is good,

teaching it to expected levels (the implication is that assessment took place) is better, and teaching it for a cost that is half of the national average is better still.

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There can be no unified approach toward the improvement of academic quality without some kind of agreement among constituents as to a working definition for quality. These definitions need to be worked out in each of the educational contexts deemed to be of importance.

Agreement can take place at two levels. In the first instance, there may be common definitional ground among constituents. (They may have to work through the definitional issues before they know if they share common ground.) This common ground can be exploited to create and advance a common agenda. Compromise is the second possibility. If each constituent group has a clear sense of the relative importance of its definitions of quality, it may be possible to negotiate a set of common definitions that reflect a balance of wins and losses for each constituent group. Unfortunately, there is no analytic reason why a definition of quality advanced by one constituent group will be commensurable with a definition advanced by a second group. This rules out common sizing and leaves consensus and compromise. Some observers consider that the current state of assessment is stuck at this level – a cacophony of incommensurable perspectives with little effort toward consensus building or compromise.

With the above in mind, it may seem that high level constituency groups (e.g., public boards) are best qualified to define quality. I think this would be a mistake. We need rugged and durable definitions of quality if assessment is to become a thoroughly integrated part of the system of higher education. To be rugged and durable, definitions of educational quality must reflect the wisdom of stakeholders at all levels of the educational enterprise. These definitions must reflect the sometimes harsh and always complex realities of the external market. They must also reflect the complexity and subtlety of the internal learning environment. The various definitions of quality (explicit and strong tacit) must be unified into a coherent family of definitions.

While the road to effective assessment is a long one, three among the next steps are clear and essential to progress. First, constituent groups must

better understand what there is to mean by “quality” and how their particular definitions fall under this broader typology. Second, the tacit issues and definitions must be made explicit and subjected to critical appraisal. Third, a timetable for results must be set. (See *South Carolina initiative, this issue.*)

Many of those at the forefront of the assessment movement have offered a variety of definitions of quality for the higher education production function. These definitions vary in their objects of attention, complexity, and level of sophistication. Most notable is the fact that they are out there for people to examine. For the most part, the advocates of these definitions are eager to debate their merit with all takers.

There are few takers. In response to these good faith efforts, the producers in the higher education system (primarily the faculty) have adopted a reactive, at times guerilla warfare, posture. These educators have foregone countless opportunities to enliven and enrich the public debate with their own definitions of academic quality and to anchor them with proposals of how to implement an assessment system. Instead, they have bobbed and weaved as if under attack, striking out with shamefully self-serving criticisms of the proposals of the evaluation scientists. I would not be surprised if the public is having a great deal of difficulty distinguishing the position of the professorate from that of the nation’s K-12 teacher unions who also resist accountability at every possible turn.

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“Getting ready to get ready” is the most charitable appraisal one might make regarding higher education’s coming to grips with the issues of defining and assessing academic quality. It is commonplace for rhetoric of quality within a constituent group to be terminally vague (“We will lead society into the 21st Century”), self-contradictory (“One cannot measure the true contributions of professorial education”) or slippery *cum* self-serving (“Our faculty will conduct thorough, independent assessments of their quality”).

It would at least advance the discussion if each constituent group had a clear sense of the range of things there are to mean by “quality.” By this, I do not mean definitions, per se, but rather

Common Criteria for Evaluating Definitions of Quality

Conceptual Criteria	Explanation of Criterion	Risks and Other Issues
Clarity	Does the definition employ clear, unambiguous language and terms (especially processes, outcomes and objects of benefit)?	Look out for lofty but unmeasurable ideals, harmless half-truths, vagueness that permits redefinition out of public view.
Consistency	Is the definition consistent with established language systems, models, institutional practices, etc.? If inconsistent, are reasons provided for the departure; are they good reasons?	Consistency is not an absolute value but it is surprising how many definitions of quality are determined to be internally inconsistent several years into the assessment program.
Comprehensiveness	Does the definition subsume or address a broad range of educational quality considerations of relevance to many constituents? E.g., quality defined as "workplace impact" is likely to be more comprehensive than quality defined as "writing test scores."	It takes longer to identify and incorporate all of the important issues and perspectives.
Scrutability	How open and inspectable are the elements of the definition? "Socially aware adults" is a less scrutable definition of quality than is voting behavior.	Does the definition lead to, imply or subsume specific measures? Is there unnecessary emphasis on professional or technical language?
Importance	Does the definition address issues of importance to one or more constituents? "Library utilization" is an important proxy measure of a broader and more important skill set. With a little more effort, more important definitions and measures can probably be agreed upon.	Maximizing importance to constituents is a key to successful implementation of the quality standard.
Proxy Value	Does the definition lead to measures that stand in or substitute for things that are more important but are not feasible to measure?	Professional licensure is often a proxy measure for a family of more specific elements of quality.
Empirical Criteria	Explanation of Criterion	Risks and Other Issues
Usefulness	(The empirical counterpart of importance.) Does the definition of academic quality lead to the production of information that can be used to improve programs and services?	The assessment of a definition's usefulness may vary by constituent. Usefulness therefore has a utility function which can be negotiated.
Congruence	Is there congruence among the factual premises and elements of the definition? Do empirical outcomes associated with the definition build upon or vitiate one another?	Poorly thought out and single constituent definitions of quality are less likely to square with the facts, including those that form their own empirical foundations.
Generalizability	Does the definition lead to evidence that generalizes well? Is the definition based on idiosyncratic assumptions or situations?	On balance, there is greater utility in definitions that lead to generalizable findings.
Precision	(The empirical counterpart of clarity.) Does the definition describe or imply measures and outcomes that meet acceptable tests of precision?	Definitions centering on satisfaction will generally be less precise than those centering on employment, although either may be more important in a specific context.
Durability/Ruggedness	Are the methods and outcomes durable across contexts, situations, and changes in theoretical, social or political climates? Does the definition attach strongly to core empirical questions that cannot be "defined away" or otherwise weakened?	Definitions centering on political correctness, for example, are likely to be tied to political tides. It would be difficult to construct a rational definition of academic quality that does not address learners' goals.

types of definitions, the logical or empirical platforms on which they rest, and the categorizations of those types of definitions. Horizon widening of this kind is an effective antidote to the dominance of provincial, reactive views. Reviewing and debating the merits of the table above is one way to begin the process.

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The Quality of Quality

Eventually, debates about academic quality evolve to the adequacy of the specific conceptualization of quality. Most of the individuals likely to be involved in these debates will be operating on a tacit set of criteria more or less like those listed in the table here. It is of some benefit to make these criteria more specific so that their contribution to the discussion and to the judgments evoked can be appraised.

A Place to Begin

A complete list of criteria for evaluating the adequacy of definitions of academic quality would be much longer than that offered above but these common criteria offer a place to begin – a place that is essentially neutral with respect to the various constituent groups. Some observers note that the higher education community is behaving as if it were under siege – perhaps it is. If so, it will help to bring stakeholders to the table for constructive discussion about what there is to mean by “academic quality.” The charts presented here will have served their purpose if they focus the discussion and provide some initial questions about the nature of academic quality and criteria for evaluating various definitions of it.

As always, I invite commentary on the issues set out in this editorial. I am especially interested in hearing from those who hold contrasting views. Send e-mail to rtucker@InterEd.com.

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