Accountability, Transparency and Accreditation:
The Impact of the Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Ralph A. Wolff, President and Executive Director
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities
Western Association of Schools & Colleges

Overview

- Spellings Commission Report – context, findings and recommendations
- Responses from CHEA, NASULGC-AASCU, NAICU, Europe
- Further Actions
- Issues and Implications
- WASC Response
- A Call for Engagement

Commission on the Future of Higher Education – The Players

- 19 members; most from higher education
  - Charles Miller, chair
  - Jim Duderstadt
  - Charles Vest
  - Arthur Rothkopf
  - Arturo Madrid
  - Bob Zemsky
  - David Ward
  - Charlene Nunley
  - Robert Mendenhall

Background to the Spellings Commission – Setting The Scene

- Measuring Up – 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006
- 2004 Business Higher Education Forum Report: "Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education"
- 2005 SHEEO Report: "Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education
- NCLB

The Report: Key Findings & Recommendations

- Access
- Affordability
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Innovation

"Our colleges and universities are treasured national assets, but the shortcomings we have outlined persuade us it is time for American to concentrate on what higher education can become."

The Target: The Need For Accreditation Reform

- **Accreditation, the large and complex public-private system of federal, state and private regulators, has significant shortcomings. …. However, despite increased attention by accreditors to learning assessments, they continue to play largely an internal role. Accreditation reviews are typically kept private, and those that are made public still focus on process reviews more than bottom-line results for learning or costs. The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation. (Pg. 14, 3rd ¶)**

- Accreditation and federal and state regulations, while designed to assure quality in higher education, can sometimes impede innovation and limit the outside capital investment that is vital for expansion and capacity building. (Pg.15, 2nd ¶)

- Federal and state policymakers should: Require accreditation agencies to act in a more timely manner to accredit new institutions and new programs at existing institutions, while focusing on results and quality rather than dictating, for example, process, inputs, and governance, which perpetuates current models and impedes innovation. (Pg.20 top ¶)

- The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how much students' skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly. Higher education institutions should make aggregate summary results of all postsecondary learning measures, e.g., test scores, certification and licensure attainment, time to degree, graduation rates, and other relevant measures, publicly available in a consumer-friendly form as a condition of accreditation. (Pg. 23, 5th ¶)

■ **Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes. A framework that aligns and expands existing accreditation standards should be established to (i) allow comparisons among institutions regarding learning outcomes and other performance measures, (ii) encourage innovation and continuous improvement, and (iii) require institutions and programs to move toward world-class quality relative to specific missions and report measurable progress in relationship to their national and international peers.**

- **In addition, this framework should require that the accreditation process be more open and accessible by making the findings of final reviews easily accessible to the public and increasing public and private sector representation in the governance of accrediting organizations and on review teams. Accreditation, once primarily a private relationship between an agency and an institution, now has such important public policy implications that accreditors must continue and speed up their efforts towards transparency as this affects public ends.** (Page 24, top ¶).

Resetting the Stage: HEA Responses

- AASCU – endorsed the report/findings

- NASULGC-AASCU --VSA system of accountability:
  - Student and Parent Information
  - Student Campus Engagement
  - Core Educational Outcomes

- NAICUI – Unit Data Record system

Outside Players: European Standards for Learning Outcomes

- "Development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes"

- Assessment of students: "students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently"

- Student assessment is to "be designed to measure the achievement of student learning outcomes" and "be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment"

European Standards for Program Reviews

- Be conducted periodically for all programs
- Include external members
- Include a focus on student learning outcomes
- Include regular feedback from employers, labor market representatives
- Include student participation in QA activities

International Standards for Transparency

- Expectations that accrediting/external evaluation reports will be made public:
    - ENQA Standards (45 European countries)
    - Australia
    - New Zealand
    - Hong Kong
- US expectations that institutions will make assessment results public:
    - CHEA recognition requirements
    - 2 regional accrediting associations

Further Actions – Keeping the Heat Up

- Opening of "Neg-Reg"
- Public hearings
- November 29th Meeting on Accreditation
- Letter from members of Congress on Unit Data Record system

What Lies Beneath: Other Issues Raised

- Regional accreditation vs. a national framework?
- Accreditation emphasis on minimum standards – setting the bar to low?
- Accreditation focusing too heavily on inputs?
- Accreditation stifling innovation?
- Lack of comparability?
- Do consumers really want this information?

Issues and Implications

- Redefining the role of accreditation to a public accountability model
- Shifting from mission-centrism to common expectations
- Shifting from individual institutional approaches of student learning to benchmarked, comparative learning results
- Agreeing on common measures, instruments
- Determining what should be made public, and by whom

The Accreditation Response: Stay the Course or Get Proactive?

■ Stay the Course?

- – CRAC Statement on centrality of student learning
- – All regionals require specified learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional levels
- – All have revised Standards in the past 5 years
- – Significant innovation and reform – WASC, Sr., AQIP, QEP
- – Common public statements of accredited status

Get Proactive?

- Focus more on retention – graduation rates?
- Agree on common outcomes?
- Agree on tests/measures/instruments?
- Publish outcomes and learning results?
- Publish full accrediting actions?

The Challenge

- To find ways to assess student learning – and report the findings – in ways that support education and do no harm.

- Standardized tests are a legitimate part of the picture, but they can't be the whole picture.

WASC, Sr. Response

- Participation in national dialogue on accountability and transparency
- Focus on retention and graduation rates as a common element of reviews
- Continued elaboration of "Educational Effectiveness"
- Completion of External Review Process
- Initiation of Handbook Revision Process

Elaborating What We Mean By Educational Effectiveness:

A system of quality assurance (intentional, holistic, aligned) for student and organizational learning that demonstrates . . .

- Educational infrastructure (leadership, expertise, processes, resources)
- Educational outcomes at all levels (student, program, institution, organization)
- A culture of inquiry and evidence
- Determining what is "good enough?"

Applying the Standards (ACSCU) for Educational Effectiveness

- FROM Standards I & III as capacity issues, II & IV as educational effectiveness . . .

- TO seeing ALL four Standards as having both a capacity and an educational effectiveness dimension (see "Two Lenses on Two Reviews")

An evolution ….

- FROM requesting a lot of different kinds of data about EE . . .

- TO privileging direct evidence (i.e., student work and performances), although descriptive data and indirect evidence are still important

An evolution…

- FROM an expectation of program review . . .

- TO *insistence* on robust program review, including an assessment plan and a focus on student learning as a central component of a broader review

An evolution…

- FROM expecting programs to *define* standards for student learning . . .

- TO asking for evidence that students *achieve* those standards

What About National Tests and Surveys?

■ Discover what's out there? What's working? Under what conditions?

- – Critical Thinking (CLA, COMP, ETS Profile, Insight Assessment)
- – Writing
- – Quantitative Reasoning
- – Information Literacy
- – Workforce keys
- – NSSE/CCSSE

Choice of Assessment Methods Matter

- Students value and learn what we teach and test.

- *How* we teach and test matters as much as *what*

- What and how we assess also matters.

- **We get more of what we test or assess, less of what we don't.**

A Call for Engagement

WASC, Sr. will be creating:

- A study/users group on the CLA and other critical thinking tests

- A study/users group on the NSSE and other engagement/campus culture instruments

- A group to explore cross-institutional rubrics for
  - Capstones
  - Portfolios

Continuing the External Review Process

- WASC CPR report on the web – www.wascsenior.org

- ERC CPR report to be published soon

- Educational Effectiveness Report underway:

  -- survey of 31 institutions

  -- external readers (Pat Hutchings, Christian Thune, Frank Murray)

  -- Content analysis of team reports and action leeters

Launching a Review of the Handbook

- Identification of a limited number of key areas for attention (e.g., retention, enrollment management, nontenure track faculty

- Review of data exhibits

- Further development of e-portfolios

- Refinement of review process

How You Can Participate

- Focus groups
- Study/user groups
- Data exhibit review
- Comment on needed areas for improvement
- Comment on CPR and EE reports

Follow Up:

Come to the Annual Meeting
April 17 – 20, 2007,
Fairmont Hotel
San Jose

Comments
Requests to Participate:

rwolff@wascsenior.org

www.wascsenior.org