

The Problem of Defining and Communicating Quality in the 21st Century

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The front page of the September 3, 2010 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* featured the headline “The Quality Question” and was subtitled “Mediocrity Happens” (Glenn). The title caught my attention because the University of Georgia, my home institution, has spent the last two years preparing for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS), our regional accrediting organization. The guiding document is “The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement” (<http://sacscoc.org/pdf/2010principlesofaccreditation.pdf>). For more than 100 years since the founding of the first regional accrediting body in New England, accreditation has served as the overarching practice for defining and assuring quality in institutions of higher education.

The UGA compliance report for SACS, which documents that we have met the core requirements for reaffirmation, is over 800 pages in length and includes approximately 2,400 supporting documents totaling close to 15,000 pages! Thousands of hours of faculty and staff time were spent investigating the requirements and documenting the University’s compliance with the SACS core requirements. Next, the compliance report will be reviewed by a peer review committee. Out of this “self-study” came several tangible improvements in areas of strategic planning, distance education, and faculty records to name only three areas. In tandem with the compliance work, another 30+ member committee met throughout the preceding 24 months to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which is also a part of the reaffirmation process. After much discussion campus-wide, the QEP steering committee decided to focus on the development of a University-wide first-year seminar, labeled the First Year Odyssey. This seminar has the potential to affect every first-year student in critical thinking and writing—the plans are big!

As anyone who has participated on an accreditation committee knows, the assessment (self-study) process is a fine-grained analysis reporting on multiple dimensions—mission, governance and administration, programs, the faculty, physical resources, student affairs, and so on. The process is an extremely important, high-stakes activity since colleges and universities must be accredited in order to participate in a myriad of federal programs valued in excess of \$75 billion. Accreditation studies are occurring on hundreds of campuses across the nation this year, and will occur in the next year, until 10 years have passed and an individual campus repeats the process again. In addition to institutional level accreditation, comprehensive colleges and universities host numerous specialized accreditation visits each year, ranging from

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business to veterinary medicine to education. Dozens of units across campuses large and small will prepare studies of their programs and processes and host visiting teams of accreditors.

The foregoing is an attempt to document briefly the massive and ongoing task of demonstrating quality in higher education; yet, with all of this effort, certain sections of the public do not have a high level of confidence in how higher education institutions are administered or what students learn or “get for their money.” The lack of confidence in faculty members and administrators, both internal and external, is shown by two recent news stories. The local newspaper for the home of the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, gave huge headline and front page prominence to a story on “Administrative Bloat” in colleges and universities; our University did not fare well in this story. The story stands in bold contrast to what I see daily as administrators arrive early and leave late. The two year long accreditation study of quality, by comparison, has hardly received a mention in the news. So much for town-gown relationships in a small college town. In another *Chronicle* report (September 2, 2010), one reads that the Texas A&M system is considering a plan to rate faculty members by totaling the money generated from research and teaching and then subtracting that amount from the faculty member’s salary. Is that the institution’s best idea for judging quality in faculty? Is there no recognition, even internally, that faculty activities vary by fields and specialty areas? While history may be strong in the production of credit hours from large undergraduate courses serving general education, the revenue stream from research may be very small. The bottom line for faculty members in the arts and humanities will be in stark contrast to those in the professional schools and sciences, where opportunities for grants and contracts are more plentiful. Value is not so simply measured across disciplines and fields.

On the opposite end of the continuum of assessing quality are the numerous magazines that have established ratings of colleges overall. Among the better known U.S. raters are *U.S. News and World Report*, *Forbes*, *Kiplinger*, and *the Washington Monthly*. Unlike accreditation, where colleges are fully engaged in the process, the aforementioned publications use public data sets (i.e., secondary data) and focus on areas such as financial aid, admissions and graduation, faculty characteristics, and instruction. As shown in an interesting graphic in the same issue of the *Chronicle*, there is little agreement among the raters as to which data to include; however, each develops a simple outcome that is easy to understand (even if based on questionable data). These ratings are popular, however, among the public, as they are easy to understand and communicate. Colleges and universities even promote the rankings when they are favorable to the institution and complain about the “wrong measures” when they are not.

So, accreditation and the massive work we put into the effort of showing what we do, how we do it, and the outcomes of our work is not getting the message out to the public—including citizens, trustees, legislators, and other significant constituency groups. In some way, colleges and universities must tackle the problem of quality head-on, and we must bridge the enormous gap between extensive studies and simplistic rankings. Perhaps some of the time we spend on self-appraisal needs to be diverted to direct engagement with the public, to better communication. A part of this may be the difficult task of establishing priorities and ceasing the attempt to offer all things and be all things, to all people all the time. We may need to learn from successful corporate enterprises that to support and communicate quality, hard decisions about areas of excellence will need to be made.

Reference

- Glenn, D. (2010, September 3). The quality question: Mediocrity happens. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *LVII* (2), p. 1.