

Accountability

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Sent: Tuesday, February 24, 2009 12:03 PM
To: tomorrows-professor@mailman.stanford.edu
Subject: TP Msg. #924 The Accountability Movement: Its Role, Opportunities, and Meaning for
Chairs

"The emerging voluntary accountability movement will almost surely influence higher education in expected and, more likely, in unintended ways. ...The calls for greater transparency and the development of strategies for increasing inter-university comparisons are on the horizon. As for department chairs or other administrators, what are the implications of this reformation in our daily work and future strategic planning?"

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Folks:

The posting below looks at the accountability movement in higher education and how it will impact department chairs. It is by David J. Malik, former chair of the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology and currently Chancellor's Professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and N. Douglas Lees, chair of the Department of Biology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and author of Chairing Academic Departments(Anker, 2006). They can be reached at: dmalik@iupui.edu, nlees@iupui.edu.

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Regards,

Rick Reis
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UP NEXT: New Players, Different Game: Understanding the Rise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities

Tomorrow's Academia

----- 1,625 words -----

The Accountability Movement: Its Role, Opportunities, and Meaning for Chairs

by David J.Malik and N.Douglas Lees

The emerging voluntary accountability movement will almost surely influence higher education in expected and, more likely, in unintended ways. Largely resulting from the continuing criticism of American higher education by our own disciplinary societies and academic associations, the public, institutional, and state governing boards, and especially the U.S. Department of Education, universities are or will be taking steps to increase visibility of the enterprise and focus on reframing educational value, both intellectually and economically. The calls for greater transparency and the development of strategies for increasing inter-university comparisons are on the horizon. As for department chairs or other administrators, what are the implications of this reformation in our daily work and future strategic planning?

In addition to the continuing saga of increasing collegiate costs that in most cases exceed inflation rates, the routine question is: Can our students deal effectively with the challenges of an increasingly competitive market-place while adjusting to our changing global society? Although American higher education has enjoyed a commanding lead in degree attainment over the rest of the world, a recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicates that our global degree attainment rank has declined significantly. There are many reasons for these changes, including a shift in the demographic profile of the populations entering higher education and declines in public funding for the academy, but we are nonetheless seen as being caught and surpassed by other nations. This has drawn the attention of many stakeholders, including legislators and leaders.

The U.S. Department of Education through the Spellings Commission has suggested several aggressive proposals, all within the context of changing the legislation governing our institutions. The Federal Higher Education Act will soon be reauthorized (if it hasn't been already). Questions are raised: Will the U.S. Department of Education remain satisfied with quality assurance or will it demand further accountability from colleges and universities? Will cost containment be put in place or will there be tuition controls? The initial efforts from both the White House and the Department of Education suggest pressure on all fronts.

What does all this mean for department chairs? Certainly, we are protected from these external forces and criticisms. It is highly likely that as the inter-university comparisons arise, student success data is publicized, and the quality of student life is examined, pressure will come from administration to address these issues. So, what can a department or school do to anticipate these developments? First, a little background.

Accountability has many faces, most of which have become routine: learning outcomes, assessment of student performance, costs of education, performance metrics at individual colleges, accessibility of information by the public, and so on. There will be direct institutional comparisons of student success, skill development, and value added. Several systems have been proposed to accomplish transparency in these dimensions. For example, the Voluntary System of Accountability has been endorsed by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. This system would involve the posting of institutional performance data on web sites, through a "Collegiate Portrait" system, and through other venues available to the public at large. All of this is to help students and families make comparisons among similar institutions in costs, quality, student success, and learning. While it is too early to predict the exact nature of the new expectations one can safely assume that academic chairs and their faculties and staff will be involved in generating measures of student performance and learning outcomes, student data, and appropriate interpretation of results.

The Collegiate Portrait system is a web-based "exposé" that includes an array of information for potential students and their families. The format of the information would be identical across all institutions within a group, thus allowing for direct comparisons. Groupings would reflect different institutional types. For example, small liberal arts colleges could be a group and regional public campuses might be another. Examples of information displayed would

be measures of student success-perhaps first-year retention rates, four- or six-year graduation rates, average GPA data for graduates or by class, graduate or professional schools' admissions rates, and the like. There would also be cost entries including tuition and mandatory fees and perhaps policies on course retakes, guaranteed tuition caps, refunds, and other items with a fiscal consequence.

The Collegiate Portrait would also include data on student learning and accomplishment. Tools such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), ETS Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, or the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency will be used to evaluate the intellectual and critical thinking skills enhanced through matriculation at your institution. The CLA asks students to generate a written response in support of an argument and to provide a written critique of an argument in support of a position. A second component of CLA tests students' ability to think, reason, and solve problems in written form. A multifaceted problem or issue is posed and students must arrive at a solution that is supported by the information provided. This assignment is accompanied by several supporting documents or other potentially relevant information. Students are rated in critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication. Student progress is measured from an entry test taken upon matriculation, and then through a senior-year exam. That would be the value added by attending your campus.

So, what does this all mean to us? Well, we may be forced to review how we educate, how we elevate students' critical thinking skills, and how analytical and quantitative tools complete the arsenal of techniques for students to enter the knowledge-based workforce in their futures. Moreover, students will be polled long after graduation to assess their education. Clearly, we will need to be a part of this growing conversation. We will need to be aware and informed of the implications (intended or not) of these potential actions. In addition, we will need to help shape a cogent institutionalization of these measures to ensure that the major beneficiaries are indeed our students.

Toward this end, we have several suggestions for department chairs to consider and to begin conversations in your departments. You should keep in mind: change brings opportunities for proactivism; opportunities to develop leaders to address and revise our work are essential; and cooperation with elements of change improves communication with our faculty and students.

Proactivism for chairs.

If we scan the big picture for new opportunities in this accountability world, we have the option to begin reviews or create faculty productivity assessments, develop general metrics of productivity with faculty input, modify departmental promotion standards to include new work in accountability, seek professional society input and develop self-studies to determine departmental strengths and weaknesses, or consider developing new assessments that measure educational objectives other than content. The list of possibilities is limited only by your imagination and that of your faculty. Faculty need to be engaged in this process and ensure that all have ownership of the ideas and directions. If your department has academic staff, their engagement can be helpful and productive.

Curricular considerations.

An important consideration in the use of standardized exams is the measurement of critical thinking, analytical skills, and other dimensions that are outside of disciplinary content. Although we might have elegant proofs in mathematics, interpretive skills in early English literature, or solutions for understanding dynamical equations in physics, these new exams are measuring other skills acquired in education. The challenge for chairs is to get faculty to view the development of higher order thinking skills as a routine part of the traditional content to improve the educational prowess of students and expand their arsenal of problem-

solving skills. What do we do to prepare students in addition to disciplinary expectations? That is the challenge. Considerations might include:

- * Faculty determination of local metrics that assuage or address institutional expectations
- * Traditional examinations and impact of newer closure examinations
- * Content vis-à-vis Bloom's Taxonomy (How do you retool curricula to address exit exams?)
- * Identify new benchmarks (beyond grades) suitable for measuring student learning

Developing departmental leadership.

Whenever outside forces affect the department, chairs should consider assessing faculty potential for leadership development. This is exactly that circumstance: How might a current chair engage faculty with a high probability of leadership potential? We suggest identifying those faculty members who:

- * Grasp intradepartmental implications for change and produce a favorable global outcome
- * Effectively work with others across disciplines and value developing connections to other disciplines
- * Possess a history for advocating change or are progressive in encouraging others to consider improving past practices
- * Are able and willing to explore innovations and experiments in assessment and learning measurements in courses and programs

Recommendations for Chairs

What additional opportunities and challenges await department chairs? With leadership and imagination organized and ready to rise to the challenge of reinventing business in the department, what might a chair do? We offer some answers to these questions here:

- * Familiarize yourself with traditional and emerging models and structures for the College Portrait system and how departmental data match metrics.
- * Prepare to assemble a team to address the departmental role in the accountability and local impact.
- * Begin conversations that engage faculty with the new work as a valuable component in the department.
- * Foster a culture of scholarly expectation around the new accountability that fits your culture and disciplinary mission.
- * Anticipate changes in the curriculum, structure them to fit your priorities, and incorporate them gradually.
- * Start departmental data collection on student success early to be ready with improvements and further innovation.
- * Establish good leadership to foster reflection in achieving your teaching and learning missions and to balance with the scholarship objectives of faculty.

Could we all end up teaching to the test? "If this exit exam measures the ability to critically think and analyze new situations well," a CLA representative said at a recent conference, "so what? Your students have learned." You be the judge of that ...

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