

WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY

ACCREDITATION AND ASSESSMENT UPDATES

July 2008 Newsletter

The “Road Not Taken” in Higher Education

An article this morning in the Chronicle of Higher Education forecasts that the federal Higher Education Reauthorization bill, which has already taken five years longer than expected, could finally move through Congress this next week. The discussions of this bill have reflected the wide-reaching public accountability movement that spawned both the ‘Sarbanes-Oxley Act and the No Child Left Behind legislation. The act, as proposed, would increase the pressure on regional accreditation agencies for measurable public accountability in higher education.

An illustration of the federal sentiment for accountability is the Spellings Report’s call for the “collection of data from public institutions allowing meaningful interstate comparison of student learning.” Such comparisons at first blush appear benign, but the underlying assumption of any meaningful comparison is similarity.

While public accountability may promote some positive changes in academia, using assessment data for comparative accountability has the potential to limit the current conversations on general education in higher education to a set of easily measurable, relatively uniform student learning outcomes that can be used to equate learning between institutions. An unfortunate example of the consequences of this kind of focus on assessment primarily for accountability can be seen in public education,

where a “culture of accountability” promoted by the No Child Left Behind legislation has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum in K-12 systems across the country.

As Robert Frost suggests, in his poem “The Road not Taken,” crossroads can provide the opportunity for choices that can “make all the difference,” but the choice has as much to do with the roads we choose not to take as the roads we select.

Some guidance about the roads that we can productively take in general education assessment can be found in a recent address by Princeton University Professor Stanley Katz.

Generalizations about longitudinal collegiate assessment are difficult, not least because of the remarkable range of four-year institutions and the students who attend them. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that we need to try to assess the effectiveness of liberal education. While I refuse to assume that students are consumers, and that the product they purchase can be evaluated by mandatory standardized tests, I also reject the notion that important values goals are not broadly shared across higher education. And if I am not yet convinced that there is any adequate way to assess longitudinally across all of higher education — although my mind is open on the subject — I am fairly sure that we can begin

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begin to evaluate the learning outcomes of general education.

Professor Katz's assumption that we, as educators, can identify "broadly shared" and "important values" that underpin our education endeavors represents an important first step. The second step, also implicit in Katz's remarks, is that "mandatory standardized tests" are not a productive way to delimit our discussion. We must choose an assessment road that allows us to maintain the "remarkable range of four-year institutions and the students who attend them." Professor Katz continues:

Many educators rightfully assert that the very attempt to measure learning outcomes is likely to stifle student creativity, creating incentives to mimic what a student assumes the assessors seek. That is not trivial, and it emphasizes the need for culminating demonstrations of knowledge in the senior year. In Princeton's scheme of things, that means the senior thesis, but many alternative demonstrations are possible.

Professor Katz's next step would have us acknowledge the importance of assessment that includes summative and integrative measures. Such assessments may be an incomplete reflection of what Katz calls the "qualities of mind and the capacity to recognize and analyze significance than with the mastery of any quantum of information." However, he urges that just because we cannot adequately measure all of "liberal education" we must nevertheless assess something broader than simply "students' performance in courses." He concludes with a challenge that we identify what we can meaningfully assess and that we find the strength to move forward.



The courage and capacity to assess is dependent upon institutions' doing something other than putting the pea under a different shell. Defining what we want to assess as a general, or liberal, education is the real issue, and resolving it will take massive re-imagination.

Hebel, Sara, "With Compromises, Higher-Ed Bill Could Move Through Congress This Week," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 28, 2008.

Robert Frost, "The Road Not taken" (1915) AACU address given by STANLEY N. KATZ, Spring, 2008.

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