

It is Time to Make Our Academic Standards Clear

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Paul E. Lingenfelter

The seal of the United States of America bears the phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one.” In education, however, *e pluribus pluribus* is a better description of our national character. We insist on “local control” in elementary and secondary education, which David Cohen and Susan Moffitt in *The Ordeal of Equality* suggest has impeded nearly a half-century of efforts to improve the education of poor children. In higher education “institutional autonomy” is the functional equivalent of “local control.” We resist “standardization” with every fiber of our being, while asserting our commitment to ever higher standards of scholarly achievement.

We *have* standards, of course, but we avoid making them explicit. They should be more explicit, even while we acknowledge uncertainty, ambiguity, and the vital importance of freedom of thought, unfettered inquiry, and debate in a civilized, democratic society. Standards, properly framed and articulated, *are* reconcilable with an appreciation of human limitations, complexity, and diversity. The key is making proper distinctions between those things that are fundamentally necessary to educational quality and those that may, or perhaps even should vary.

In higher education we pay an unacceptable price for the fuzziness of our learning objectives and incoherent, multiple mechanisms for quality assurance. As argued by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, we harm students when we cloak learning objectives in mystery. And the current imbroglio over a federal regulation requiring institutions to comply with state laws in providing distance education, has stripped the veneer off our inefficient and ineffective mechanisms for quality assurance.

Driven by economic necessity, enrollment demand in postsecondary education has never been higher. Public FTE enrollments have grown 35 percent in the past ten years, and other sectors are growing as fast or faster. Enrollment demand is creating innovation and healthy competition within higher education. It also is stretching our capacity to finance quality instructional programs. (For example, in five years Pell grant recipients have doubled and the budget has tripled.) When, more than ever before, the United States needs to invest in authentic higher education, we must make sure our investments add value to students and our country. We can no longer tolerate an incoherent, ineffective system of quality assurance.

We need a system that is consistent with the broad range of student needs, that is flexible enough to accommodate different delivery systems, that efficiently uses scarce institutional and public resources, and that prevents and corrects substandard practices and inspires and promotes excellence. An effective quality assurance system will not inhibit market-based competition and innovation, but it cannot be overwhelmed by market forces.

Viewpoint

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Two of the many shortcomings of our quality assurance and improvement system are related: its lack of consistency and efficiency. Clearly, a state regulatory framework with 50 varieties (and perhaps more when institutions offer multiple programs), cannot be efficient. When it was not connected to Title IV this situation was an annoyance and source of potential threat to distance educators, but a lot of people in higher education didn't feel their pain. Especially in distance education, state laws and regulations have been sporadically enforced and frequently ignored. Now the proposed federal rules make ignoring state laws impossible, and the current situation is difficult both for regulators and for those regulated.

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Of course, the lack of consistency makes effectiveness just as impossible as efficiency. If there are no consistent standards, the legitimate and necessary purposes of a regulatory framework cannot be achieved. While there is room for debate about means and ends, and an enormous need for creativity and judgment in this arena, the growing demand for higher education and rapidly changing delivery systems are creating problems related to quality assurance that we can no longer sidestep.

Our system of quality assurance is weak at both ends of postsecondary education. Our tradition has been to give the student the benefit of the doubt on "ability to benefit" as a criterion for receiving federal aid. We have created open-enrollment institutions, and we have encouraged institutions to provide access to opportunity. Our standards for "ability to benefit," are generous, as they should be, given the importance of postsecondary education. But we have an obligation, when we admit students on the "margin," to assure that most of them really do benefit.

Generous standards for entry need to be coupled with legitimate, and to some degree *externally validated* standards for achievement as one exits postsecondary education. But our standards for the quality of a degree or certificate are a patchwork crazy quilt. In some cases we have patches of solid gold; students must demonstrate the acquisition of significant knowledge and skill to complete a degree or certificate. In other cases we have patches of frayed cheesecloth, full of holes.

I am not a fan of "one size fits all," nor am I a fan of simple, test-based, degree standards. But with enormous incentives to enroll in higher education and substantial public subsidies it is unsurprising we have problems with a fragmented quality assurance system. We motivate institutions to stretch the limits of "ability to benefit" but we don't hold them accountable for real achievement. Institutions have incentives to enroll students who are unlikely to benefit without very skillful teaching and support, and we have historically tolerated large rates of attrition. Students who have invested precious time and money without fully realizing their aspirations and potential are the first casualties of attrition, but their loss is a loss for all of us. But attacking attrition without meaningful standards for degrees invites cheapening the meaning of all postsecondary credentials.

The Degree Qualifications Profile developed with the support of the Lumina Foundation is an effort to begin a conversation about meaningful standards for degrees to be supported by multi-faceted, sophisticated, professional assessments. The academic leaders of every sector of postsecondary education should get seriously involved in the conversation about what we expect a degree to mean in the United States and how we will validate academic achievement with evidence.

To be efficient as well as effective, we need a quality assurance system that is simultaneously

coherent and better tailored to student needs and institutional characteristics. To achieve coherence, states and accreditors need to work together to adopt either common standards for institutional approval or reciprocity agreements that amount to the same thing. To the extent we can achieve them, common standards and approaches for minimum thresholds of quality assurance would be best. The crazy quilt of standards and practices we now employ serves nobody well.

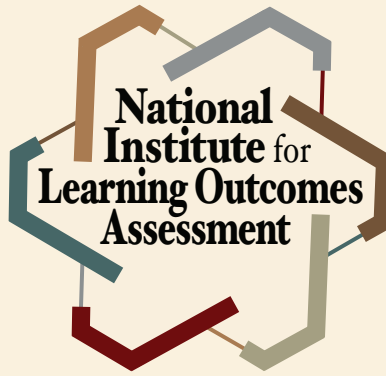
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But an *efficient* quality assurance system cannot have identical procedures and approaches for widely different institutions. Ironically our crazy quilt of ineffective quality assurance frequently treats very different institutions the same. The need to guard against inappropriate practices on the “ability to benefit” dimension obviously doesn’t apply to institutions who admit only students with very strong records of academic achievement. We need a quality assurance system that can prevent and remedy the abuse of such students and the abuse of public financial aid programs on which all of higher education depends.

I see important differences among minimum threshold standards for operating, qualifications for a degree, and good practices for continuous quality improvement. All need attention, but only minimum threshold standards for operating require governmental involvement.

The ideal state laws and regulations for institutional authorization should constitute a light regulatory footprint focused on minimum threshold standards, which as far as possible, should be consistent across the country. Then state governments should step back, becoming involved only when unambiguous institutional failure (such as financial collapse) or egregious violations of fair practice threaten to injure students.

The most important work in this domain, establishing standards, assuring that degrees meet standards, and achieving continuous improvement, is the job of the academic community. Professional self-regulation is far superior to any alternative in higher education, but it is impossible without substance, standards, and verification. The educational challenges of the twenty-first century require new approaches for assuring and advancing educational quality.



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