

Federal and State Influence Upon Assessment in Higher Education

Role of Assessment In Higher Education

The purpose for, the type of, and who demands assessment is changing in America's higher education system. This change is most prevalent in public institutions that are most directly influenced by the state governments and the federal government, but it impacts private institutions as well. Higher education was brought into the market and became more like a business in the 1980's. This caused a shift in the way professional work of faculty, staff, and administrators was patterned (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). This shift in higher education has occurred along with a reduction of trust in institutions of higher education by public and government officials (McPherson, Schapiro, & Winston, 1993). This lack of trust and tight financial times has thrust a growing need for accountability on institutions to respond to the scrutiny of various constituents (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The external forces that are driving accountability for higher education are growing and are impossible to ignore (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Ewell, 1998; Hurley, 2003; Richardson & de los Santos, 2001). While institutions become even more resource dependent, external constituents, especially the federal and state governments are gaining more influence, while internal constituents are finding their influence lessened (Cohen & Brawer; Gilley, 1997; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Pusser, 2003; Rhoades, 1997; Richardson & de los Santos). This has caused accountability and productivity measures that are collected and analyzed primarily by assessment administrators at these institutions to be more externally influenced than internally.

These accountability and productivity measures may be appealing to those outside higher education, but are difficult to quantify in higher education's multidimensional and abstract environment (McPherson et al., 1993). Each institution and every state has a different system of

higher education and serves differing student populations. Therefore, many fear national standards may spawn rationale and efficient systems, where flexibility and ambiguity are minimized. This may sound good in a market sense and in a resource dependent environment, but are rationale and efficient systems good for students? Institutions must ensure they are efficient, but that efficiency does not hamper the education and services being utilized by all the diverse constituents and students they are charged to serve. In addition, “Rational systems inevitably spawn a series of irrationalities that limit, eventually compromise, and perhaps even undermine their rationality” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 121). The fear is that institutions may no longer be able to control rational systems and thus rational systems will in turn control the institution. With this fear and a push for accountability, assessment has taken on a new and vital role. Assessment has become a mandate for measuring many state and federal interests in higher education while assessment has also become a tool for faculty, staff, and administrators to show the value of their service, program, department, or division. Assessment in institutions of higher education has become increasingly influenced from many constituents and has taken on a multitude of and many times conflicting purposes. The purpose of this article is to bring understanding to how and reasons why assessment is changing in our institutions of higher education and what those responsible for assessment should be prepared for in the future.

Accountability: Increasing Influence of State and Federal Government

Federal Government

In general, the federal government has no direct responsibility to education, but federal influence has been enduring and pervasive on institutions of higher education. The federal government; just like the state governments, “impact on campuses and on students is substantial, diverse, and constantly changing” (Gladieux, Hauptman, & Knapp, 1997, p. 103). The federal

government has developed accountability systems and reporting structures to ensure outcomes are met (Center for Community College Policy, 2001; Cohen, 2001; Shaw & Rab, 2003; US Department of Education, 2002). These accountability systems and reporting structures have shaped and influenced much of the assessment that is occurring at institutions across the country.

The federal government's role has been to provide the support necessary to ensure education meets national objectives. The federal government first became involved in higher education in the 1800's, but it was not until the 1944 GI Bill that the federal government began to overly influence higher education (Hurley, 2003). From the 1970's to the present, the federal government has become highly involved in creating grants, loans, and work-study programs; numerous legislative Acts began to change the decisions that could be made (e.g., Higher Education Act); policies and regulations were implemented in rapid succession; and funds were made available to institutions who worked towards the outcomes set by the federal government (Center for Community College Policy, 2000; Cohen, 2001; Gladieux, Hauptman, & Knapp, 1997; Hurley; US Department of Education, 2002).

The changing national objectives and concerns about higher education brought federal governments influence into the daily activities of reporting structures and accountability systems. Assessment was becoming integrated into higher education not only because it would help with continuous improvement, but also because external stakeholders demanded it. The federal government began to treat higher education like a business and pressed a system of accountability through assessment mandates and reporting of regular financial and administrative activity (Hurley, 2003). Federal legislation influenced higher education and assessment procedures through two major avenues "the requirements of accountability that accompany the receipt of federal funds and the dictates of social legislation, as well as executive orders and

judicial decisions stemming from such legislation” (Gladieux, Hauptman, & Knapp, 1997, p. 121).

Accreditation Agencies

“The federal government has relied on accreditation for the past 50 years to be accountable for the academic quality of higher education institutions and programs” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Eaton, 2003, p. 1). “Accreditation is a form of self-regulation in which colleges, universities, and programs have come together to develop standards, policies, and procedures for self-examination and judgment by peers” (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 1). There are approximately 80 private and nonprofit accrediting organizations. Some review entire organizations and some review programs such as law, medicine, and business. These accrediting organizations are recognized and scrutinized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the federal government through the Department of Education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation).

There is a growing divide between accreditation and the federal government on how to measure accountability. Congress and the Department of Education are looking to have more influence on the accreditation process, especially parts of the process that deal with accountability, evidence of institution and program performance, and student learning outcomes (Eaton, 2003). The current decentralized structure of accreditation could come to an end if the federal government controls this process. The federal government is thinking of implementing national standards on performance and outcomes (Eaton, 2003; Eaton, 2004). Eaton (2004) is worried the federal government will shift the responsibility to evaluate academic quality to themselves and away from self-regulation through accrediting agencies. Eaton believes this shift

could compromise the core academic values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the centrality of mission.

Accreditation is a major responsibility for everyone at an institution, but is often the primary responsibility of those in assessment positions. Accreditation already influences the everyday work of assessment professionals and a shift in control will have substantial impact on their daily assessment activities. Accreditation agencies and the federal government agree that accreditation must be accountable to higher education, students, and society. This is done through developing and using data on effectiveness of institutions and their programs.

Accreditation agencies believe data on effectiveness should cover resources, processes, institution and program performance, and student learning outcomes (Eaton, 2003). Eaton, with the accreditation agency, fears that the federal government is beginning to disagree on what types of data are more important and who is responsible for ensuring institutions and programs are meeting the standards set.

State Governments

States have the most influence in higher education; therefore institutions operate under many state regulations. It is important to realize that “state policies allocate decision-making authority to state agencies and college officials” (Cohen, 2001, p. 20). It was not until the late 1970’s that states began implementing legislative intervention and budget cuts. Then in the 1980’s states began implementing various accountability measures (Cohen; Richardson & de los Santos, 2001). State interests began to influence reporting, compliance with regulations, and are accountable for various operations, but Cohen and Brawer (2003) posit that they have had less direct effect on teaching and services. Overall, state governments external influence on higher education is increasing (Cohen; Cohen & Brawer; Newman, 1997).

The relationship between the state and the institution is sometimes strained when the state pushes its own agenda on institutions by developing too many regulations. The institution can also strain this relationship by trying to push initiatives that run counter to the institutional mission, failing to address state issues in a timely manner, and setting limitations on what they can accomplish and on open discussions that can occur (Newman, 1997). A relationship must be developed between the institution and the state to ensure communication exists on the governance structure and how to make an efficient process for all involved (Hines, 1997; Newman).

This lack of communication institutions have with their state government is an even greater concern considering that the state and federal governments have very limited communication on how to combine their accountability efforts (Gladieux, Hauptman, & Knapp, 1997). This lack of communication many times leaves those responsible for the meeting reporting requirements and accountability measures following the direction of various agencies. Not only do institutions have assessment objectives, but the state governments and federal government also have assessment measures they are seeking. This can leave those doing assessment with a demanding schedule and faced with some difficult decisions on what tasks will take precedence.

Assessment: Increased Demands and Changing Purpose?

How this is impacting Assessment in HE

Those who conduct assessment

Those (faculty, staff, and administrators) who must complete reports and other mandates
Growing load of “must complete and add to your daily tasks”

Marilee’s real life knowledge of changes she sees at work and when she is consulting
Accreditation
Mandates and Reports
Acts

Implications and Significance

What does the future hold?

What impact may this have on the future of assessment?

Will assessment be self-directed or will the shift continue?

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