

Improving Accountability and Diversity through Assessment and Accreditation

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Abstract

Assessment and accreditation are important tools for improving accountability and diversity in educational systems, particularly when coupled with measurable goals and robust performance systems.

Keywords: *Assessment, Accreditation, Diversity, Accountability, Goals, Performance, Education*

Introduction

In 2001 Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The legislation aims to improve the academic performance of all students and close the achievement gaps that exist between students from different ethnic groups and economic backgrounds. The law addresses teacher competency, but according to the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force (2004), it pays little attention to cultural competency and diversity. Teacher competency, as well as the models of competencies, is essential. For instance, the likelihood of student success diminishes if the perception of competency is only embodied in ethnic groups that are not representatives of the population being taught.

Ethnicity and cultural competence, as well as curriculum offered and educational competency, are important variables in the educational success of underprivileged groups. Ethnic students in primary and secondary education must be able to visualize successful role models within their communities to be able to bridge the gap between their current state, what is, and what is potentially possible. Moreover, their curriculum should be rigorous and structured for success. Accreditation can ensure a rich curriculum, and assessment can validate diversity and the quality of curriculum and educators.

Undereducated groups and regions should use the political system to bring about changes that will improve the educational opportunities of their children. Often, though, parents of undereducated groups lack the know-how to force community improvements, and many educators are uncaring. Thus, it is difficult to break the loop of an inefficient educational system from within. Some have argued that it is the responsibility of parents to do so, but if parents do not have the know-how, how can they improve educational opportunities for their offspring? Others have argued that it is the responsibility of school administrators and teachers. Still, if they are uncaring to the social ills and costs that a weak educational system inflicts on society, then society cannot expect them to change the educational system.

Federal, State, and City governments allocate taxpayers' funding to the public school; therefore, a large portion of the accountability for an efficient education system rests with them. The government, in conjunction with school administrators, is responsible for developing a standard framework for accrediting K-12, as well as colleges and universities. Moreover, state legislators should use the assessment process to measure progress towards accreditation goals. Furthermore, the performance of school administrators and teachers should be tied to the accreditation framework.

Assessment

Internal and external pressures have led colleges and universities to develop formal assessment programs (Martinson and Cole, 2002). Curriculum assessment includes individual student achievement, general program review, surveys for planning purposes, or institutional-wide self-study (Mitri, 2003). Mitri noted that the assessment processes measure knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavior, and it is done to enhance teaching, learning, and accountability. Martinson and Cole stated that assessment is a systematic collection and use of information on students, the education environment, and learning outcomes to improve student learning.

According to Martinson and Cole (2002), many State legislatures, concerned with how state educational funds are spent, have begun to evaluate their university educational system using the assessment process. Furthermore, they noted that educational assessment provides the means to determine if the goals of the program are being achieved. Thus, State legislatures through funding mechanisms can require state educational institutions to set goals, such as graduation rates, faculty publication, faculty, and student diversity, and so on, and use the assessment process to determine the institution's progress towards agreed-upon goals.

Assessments, however, are difficult, costly, time-consuming, and threatening to teachers (Mitri, 2003). Moreover, the instrument used must be valid and accurate. Furthermore, many educators argue that only what gets assessed is what gets taught (O'Day & Smith, 1993).

Accreditation

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), "the goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality." Thus, their focus is not on accrediting K-12, which is the base for higher education. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) on their website (www.chea.org) notes that "in the United States, accreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, and the press know that an institution or program provides a quality education." The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) does not accredit educational institutions or programs. Accrediting agencies in the United States are private education associations with a regional or national scope.

Accreditation in the U.S., however, should not be confused with the right to operate an educational facility. Each state grants the authority to operate a school. Nonetheless, accredited institutions are the only institutions that can receive federal (and sometimes state) grants and loans. Moreover, many employers' tuition assistance requires that colleges and universities be accredited. CHEA notes that in the United States, there are 19 recognized institutional accrediting organizations. A listing of accrediting organizations can be found on CHEA's website.

Accrediting agencies must meet the Secretary's procedures and criteria for the recognition of accrediting agencies, as published in the *Federal Register*. Thus, the Secretary's procedures and criteria establish the framework for accreditation.

The website of the USDE lists the following accrediting procedures:

1. Standards: The accrediting agency, in collaboration with educational institutions, establishes standards.
2. Self-study: The institution or program seeking accreditation prepares an in-depth self-evaluation study that measures its performance against the standards set by the accrediting agency.
3. On-site Evaluation: A team selected by the accrediting agency visits the institution or program to determine first-hand if the applicant meets the established standards.
4. Publication: Upon being satisfied that the applicant meets its standards, the accrediting agency grants accreditation or pre-accreditation status and lists the institution or program in an official publication with other similarly accredited or pre-accredited institutions or programs.
5. Monitoring: The accrediting agency monitors each accredited institution or program throughout accreditation granted to verify that it continues to meet the agency's standards.
6. Reevaluation: The accrediting agency periodically reevaluates each institution or program that it lists to ascertain whether the continuation of its accredited or pre-accredited status is warranted.

There are two types of educational accreditation "institutional" and "specialized" or "programmatic." The former usually applies to the entire institution; the latter applies typically to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution.

Presently, the coordinating agency for accreditation in the private, non-governmental sector is the CHEA. Accreditation is a means of demonstrating the academic quality of educational institutions and programs (CHEA, 2008).

According to CHEA (2008), the purpose of accreditation is to assure academic quality, provide access to federal funds, ease the transferring process between institutions, and enhance private sector confidence. CHEA recognition standards include, but are not limited to, advancing academic quality, demonstrating accountability, encouraging self-scrutiny and planning for change and needed improvement, employment of appropriate and fair

procedures in decision making, demonstrate ongoing review of accreditation practice, possession of sufficient resources

The United States Department of Education (USDE) recognition standards 602.16 for accreditation and pre-accreditation are listed below:

- a) The agency must demonstrate that it has standards for accreditation, and pre-accreditation, if offered, that are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that the agency is a reliable authority regarding the quality of the education or training provided by the institutions or programs it accredits. The agency meets this requirement if –

(1) The agency's accreditation standards effectively address the quality of the institution or program in the following areas:

- i. Success concerning student achievement about the institution's mission, including as appropriate, consideration of course completion, State licensing examination, and job placement rates.
- ii. Curricula.
- iii. Faculty.
- iv. Facilities, equipment, and supplies.
- v. Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.
- vi. Student support services.
- vii. Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalog, publications grading, and advertising.
- viii. Measures of program length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered.
- ix. Record of student complaints received by or available to the agency.
- x. Record of compliance with the institution's program responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, based on the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency.

Strategic Approach to Accreditation and Assessment

Not all schools (K-12, colleges, and universities) seek accreditations. Nonetheless, the process of accreditation should place a strong emphasis on administration, faculty, and student diversity. Fostering diversity in K-12 and higher education involves increasing the number of persons that represent a diverse population (Brown, 2004; Weisenfeld and Robinson-Backmon, 2007).

However, fostering diversity is often controversial because the benefits are not immediately obvious, and some have argued that diversity, or inclusion, is a zero-sum game. The assessment process could become an effective tool for fostering diversity, particularly as it applies to educational systems sponsored by state governments, including K-12, colleges, and universities. Diversity is important because it adds balance and hope, to society, and it should be viewed as a transformational process.

Diversity or inclusion as it relates to students in an educational sense is the practice of educating all or most children in the same classroom, including children with physical, mental, and developmental disabilities. Inclusion classes could, in some cases, require a special assistant to the classroom teacher. Thus, the argument of cost, as well as classroom disruption, has been raised to discredit inclusion.

A transformational process within the educational community towards inclusion would focus on motivating disadvantaged students to achieve more than they thought possible (Bass and Avolio, 1994). However, for an educational transformation to occur, K-12, colleges, and universities must become involved and committed to educating all students regardless of socio-economic backgrounds or perceived handicaps.

Educating disadvantaged groups is important because education facilitates the ability of working-age people to obtain rewarding work in the formal economy and earn enough not to become a detriment to society (Phelps, 2000). Phelps noted that the decline in inclusion most heavily affects the economically disadvantaged, whose pay and employment rate are generally the lowest. The effects of such exclusion can be seen in the rate of incarceration of underprivileged groups.

Incarceration costs society more than \$25,000 per year per prisoner, the cost of an excellent K-12 education, as well as in-state college education, is often far less than incarceration cost and lost productivity. Therefore, failure to educate disadvantaged groups is costly to society.

Performance Measurements

The delivery of quality education does not exist in all communities; low-income and rural communities are often underserved. Thus, there is a compelling need to set goals and standards, identify and capitalize on opportunities, institute and improve on processes, and document the results of taxpayers' investment in public education.

The public should guide performance goals for the underperforming public education system through the legislative process. The purpose of performance goals is to help organizations understand how decision-making processes or practices led to success or failure and how that understanding can suggest improvements (Cable & Davis, 2004).

Cable and Davis (2004) believe that useful performance measurement should include:

- Clearly defined and measurable goals that cascade from the organizational mission to management and program levels to individuals.

- Cascading key performance indicators that measure how well the mission, management, program, and individual goals are met.
- Established baselines for measuring progress toward established goals.
- Accurate, repeatable, and verifiable data.
- Feedback system to support continuous improvement of an organization's processes, practices, and outcomes.

Conclusion

The primary goal of any educational system is to educate the students. Therefore, it is important to establish measurable educational goals that facilitate the improvement of the primary goal. Thus, the structural integrity of the educational facilities and facility equipment, cleanliness of the facility, discipline, and order within the facility, the commitment, and involvement of administrators and educators, student educational achievement, and graduation rates are measurable goals and reflect the performance of staff. Hence, the educational system needs to establish rigid and measurable performance goals.

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