

Our Students' Best Work **An Educational Accountability Framework Worthy of Our Mission**

Testimony for the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education
Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Calls for higher education to become more accountable have been increasing in frequency and fervor and we welcome the opportunity provided by the State Higher Education Executive Officers to contribute to this important national debate. While much has been written and said about the need for greater accountability, too much of the current national dialogue on this issue has lacked clarity, focus, and specificity. Further confusing this debate, contributors often have divergent aims in calling for greater accountability.

Whatever one's focus or aims, however, **it is high time for the higher education community to embrace accountability, develop a framework for it that rests on a small set of widely endorsed key learning outcomes, and construct effective ways to measure how well students achieve these outcomes.**

In so doing, however, it is essential that higher education develop assessment approaches that are consistent with the highest levels of college learning and that reflect the differences in the manifestation of these outcomes across different fields of study. Far too many proposed solutions to the accountability challenge rest on simplistic mechanisms designed to measure low-level skills rather than our students' best work at culminating levels of college learning. The good news is that there are emerging trends in higher education that hold promise for a new framework for educational accountability worthy of higher education's highest aspirations.

While the debate on the national level may reflect a lack of consensus about aims and designs for accountability, in dialogues on campus and with such key stakeholders as business leaders and trustees, one finds two emerging and promising trends. As a forthcoming report from AAC&U's Project on Accreditation and Assessment documents, across these different sets of stakeholders, one finds a surprising level of agreement about the key outcomes of an undergraduate education. Moreover, as one surveys curricular developments on campuses across the country, one detects another trend that holds great promise for developing this more effective framework for accountability in higher education. More and more campuses are requiring all their graduates to complete a culminating, integrative project, experience, and/or sequence of courses within their major field of study.

Emerging Consensus on Key Outcomes

An effective framework for educational accountability must focus on cultivating and documenting students' progress and level of achievement of a small set of key learning outcomes. AAC&U has summarized a more comprehensive list of outcomes and their significance in its 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. A few key outcomes described in this report that are widely accepted as essential include:

- **Strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information literacies**-- achieved and demonstrated through learning in a range of fields, settings, and media, and through advanced studies in one or more areas of concentration;

- **Deep understanding and hands-on experience with the inquiry practices of disciplines that explore the natural, social, and cultural realms**-- achieved and demonstrated through studies that build conceptual knowledge by engaging learners in study of the modes of inquiry basic to the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts;
- **Intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills**-- achieved and demonstrated in a variety of collaborative contexts (classroom, community-based, international and online) that prepare students both for democratic citizenship and for work;
- **An examined framework of individual, civic and social responsibilities**-- achieved and demonstrated through forms of learning that connect knowledge, skills, values, and public action, and through reflection on their own roles and responsibilities in social and civic contexts;
- **Habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another**-- achieved and demonstrated through advanced research and/or creative projects in which students take the primary responsibility for framing questions, carrying out an analysis and producing work of substantial complexity and quality.

These goals for student attainment are not arbitrarily chosen. Rather, there is an emerging consensus across many professions, the business community, civic leadership, and the academy that these liberal education capabilities are valuable for work, for citizenship, and for a satisfying life.

When one compares standards for accreditation (in the professions and regional accreditors) with views from industry and numerous educational associations, one discovers that all view these outcomes as integral aspects of a good education and, in the case of the professions, of preparation for business, education, engineering, and nursing. (AAC&U, forthcoming 2004)

These outcomes are valuable, it is now widely agreed, because they prepare students to bring knowledge, experience, and reflective judgment to the daunting complexity of the contemporary world. They give graduates a strong foundation to deal with issues that are challenging, unscripted, and often vigorously contested. They teach students to find and evaluate evidence and to take into account both context and competing perspectives as they form judgments about significant questions. They help develop both a respect for the value of human diversity and a set of internal values that serve as a compass in an era of accelerating change

While it is clear that these outcomes can be described generally, as we do above and as accreditors and individual campuses frequently do in campus statements and reviews, **these outcomes must be cultivated and assessed in context**. Analytical skill, for example, will have one kind of applied meaning for an English major, and a quite different kind of applied meaning for an engineer. Similarly, the civic, ethical or intercultural questions faced by a student preparing for teaching are likely to take very different forms from those encountered by a student studying economics or biology.

Assessing Milestones and Culminating Work

As AAC&U's recently released *Greater Expectations* report attests, key learning outcomes should be addressed throughout the entire educational experience. Whatever the field of study, therefore, a student's progress in achieving these aims ought to be assessed periodically from the initial to the final year, and in both general education and the chosen major field(s).

Within an individual college or university context, a comprehensive accountability framework could include:

- 1) **Feedback** to the student during the first year about the institution's expectations for important learning outcomes, and a diagnostic assessment of each student's demonstrated accomplishment and expected further progress in relation to these outcomes;
- 2) **A plan of study**, constructed with the student's advisor, that transparently connects the expected outcomes to the student's choice of courses and major field(s);
- 3) **Milestone assessments** in both general education and the major field that are tied to key outcomes, with timely feedback to the student and his or her advisor;
- 4) **Capstone or culminating experiences** in the major field(s) in which the student actively demonstrates and is assessed for his or her cumulative accomplishments in liberal education.

These frameworks can readily apply to courses of study in both two-year and four-year institutions. In the former, milestone assessments might occur at the end of the first year and capstone assessments at the end of the second year of study. For students who complete four years, these culminating experiences will hold them to higher standards of accomplishment

For every institution, the first accountability questions that should be asked are these:

- Are all students expected to produce culminating work?
- Is this culminating work assessed for broad liberal education outcomes as well as knowledge relevant to the specific field?
- Have standards been established and made public for what is expected at this advanced level in each program?
- Are examples of this advanced work and the related standards regularly peer reviewed in the context of accreditation?

Both milestone and capstone assessments can be embedded in the regular curriculum, through institution and field-appropriate combinations of designated courses, qualifying assignments in the major(s), internships and field-based learning, and culminating courses, projects, research papers and/or portfolios.

An important foundation for this approach to accountability has already been laid in the majority of college and university campuses. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reports that 58 percent of college seniors currently are expected to complete a capstone or culminating experience of some kind.

Capstone projects provide promising anchors for a meaningful approach to educational accountability. They provide contexts in which student work can be assessed for the cross-cutting outcomes described above as well as for conceptual knowledge and skills appropriate to the students' selected major(s).

Summarizing Results and Reporting to the Public

It is not enough in the current climate for an institution to assess its students in ways that are grounded in the curriculum; it also must provide useful knowledge to the public about its goals, standards, accountability practices, and the quality of student learning. A common rubric may be needed to summarize what will inevitably be a rich reservoir of knowledge about the learning of students and to prepare reports that are transparent.

But here again, much progress has been made. The National Assessment of Educational Progress grades student achievement at four levels: advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic. On each of the five outcomes described above, these four levels can be described in concrete terms and in enough detail that they can be reliably scored. Faculty members can be trained in short order to judge the level of each student's achievement on each of the five outcomes.

A summary report to an accreditation body, a state official, or the general public can be prepared by someone who aggregates the data across the institution. Because the summary across many students majoring in different disciplines is based on a great deal of evidence, reports can include examples that illustrate the meaning of the reported results.

Like many forms of standardized testing, this method summarizes outcomes with a few scores. But unlike typical standardized tests based on multiple choice questions, these measures summarize achievement of high level skills such as communication, analytic ability, and integration of knowledge, and can reflect work on meaningful educational projects judged by professionals.

Also, when data are available, each campus can take steps to engage faculty and students in interpreting the meaning and implications of assessment outcomes. They should use the findings as a basis for discussion and a catalyst for needed changes in academic programs.

Conclusion

This framework is clearly an ambitious one. But AAC&U believes that higher education should be held accountable for achieving the most important and empowering outcomes a college education can provide today's students. This framework stands in contrast to other models currently being debated in policy circles around the country.

Because of this focus on the cultivation of higher order capabilities, knowledge, judgment, and responsibility, AAC&U strongly cautions against accountability proposals to measure the quality of individual colleges and universities by assessing **basic** literacies—such as reading, writing or mathematics—that should be the responsibility and province of pre-collegiate education. (We do, however, endorse the assessment of such literacies at entrance, in order to determine whether students need additional preparation to succeed in college-level courses.)

It is also clearly insufficient to rely solely on tracking of persistence and graduation rates, and/or student opinion surveys to measure higher education quality. While these indicators of student

progress are informative, they cannot by themselves serve as indicators of students' educational accomplishments or of institutional effectiveness. In fact, there is a danger that the use of graduation rates as an index of effectiveness may lead campuses to lower their standards.

AAC&U affirms that accountability is essential, but the form that it takes must be worthy of our mission. This means we must hold ourselves accountable for assessing our students' best work, not generic skills and not introductory levels of learning.

Sources:

Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (Washington DC: AAC&U 2002).

Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Our Students' Best Work: An Educational Accountability Framework Worth of Our Mission* (Board Approved Statement, forthcoming 2004).

Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree* (Washington DC: AAC&U, forthcoming 2004).