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THE CONCEPT OF EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

College and university faculty are expected to be excellent teachers. In public, college leaders emphasize to potential students and their parents that at their institution, teaching matters above all else. Colleges seem to unabashedly promote that the teaching done by their faculty is markedly better than at peer institutions — or that the opportunities for close working relationships between students and faculty are unique to their campus.

Many small colleges rest their laurels on the value they place on teaching excellence. From day one faculty members know that they will primarily be evaluated for tenure and promotion based on their role as teachers. Colleges and universities have Centers for Teaching Excellence to further demonstrate that they value teaching and provide support to faculty. Promotion and tenure committees scrutinize faculty dossiers — syllabuses, assignments, exams and ubiquitous teaching evaluations — looking for evidence that faculty members are indeed excellent teachers. Faculty attends workshops and conferences about teaching. Most academic disciplines have professional societies committed to improving the teaching and learning process; some even publish peer-reviewed pedagogical journals where scholars report on the effectiveness of teaching methods and assessment as well as sharing innovative ideas for classroom demonstrations and assignments.

There is no shortage of lip service from various academic ranks on the value of teaching excellence. Faculty and administrators alike — particularly at small liberal arts colleges and

comprehensive universities — make concerted efforts through programming and institutional investments with the aim of improving teaching.

But what exactly is teaching excellence? Institutional commitments, workshops, conferences and journals, all sharing the intent of improving teaching and content delivery, do not necessarily translate to a universal agreement on exactly what it is we are improving.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions contribute immeasurably to the personal and professional lives of students and enrich the intellectual, economic, and cultural fabric of their communities, states, nations, and beyond. Few social institutions have been as highly valued as colleges and universities. For those and other reasons the contributions of the higher education community have been generously acknowledged over the years in popular discourse, and in professional and academic presses. Despite the traditionally high regard for the work of colleges and universities, we are not insulated from the many contemporary economic, demographic, and policy pressures facing other social institutions. The information explosion Increases in available information Decreased review and quality control of available information Shift from needing to remember facts to finding and evaluating information Increasing need for and importance of lifelong learning .

1) The technological revolution: provides new types of jobs for graduates. The Changing nature of the classroom because of technology and online learning. There is a frequent change in job requirements and the need for

continuing education.

2) Changing student demographics:

Increasing proportion of college graduates as a percentage of the general population. Students lacking recommended college preparatory courses. Greater percentage of nontraditional students.

3) New enrollment patterns:

Increased part-time enrollment. Multiple-institution attendance. The Distance coursework.

4) Accountability:

Greater calls for measuring performance. More state regulation of the curriculum. Concerns about mandated testing. Accreditation emphasis on effectiveness and assessment.

5) New education sites and formats:

Growth in the for-profit higher education sector. Distance education. Rise of corporate universities. More flexible teaching and learning formats.

6) The changing nature of the workplace:

Emphasis on creative problem solving, teamwork, and adaptability. It creates the need for high-level intellectual skills & need for employees with greater technological and quantitative literacy.

7) The global nature of major challenges and opportunities:

Porosity of national boundaries increasing international competition for students, faculty, and resources. Worldwide environmental impacts.

DEVELOPING NEW STRATEGIES TO MEET INCREASING DEMANDS, OFTEN WITH FEW ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

On campuses across the country, academic, student life, service, and administrative units are being called upon to increase quality, effectiveness, and efficiency in response to internal and external pressures. More often than not, the heightened expectations are accompanied by few, if any, additional resources. Few good options are available in such situations: ignore the rising expectations, meet the increasing demands by sacrificing quality across the board, look for new approaches to the tasks at hand, or make the hard

choice to narrow the scope of activities. Each option carries risks and potential morale problems, and each threatens to compromise the breadth and/or quality of the contribution. A common theme of the strategies that do not include turning a blind eye to heightened service expectations is the need to prioritize the various activities in which an institution, division, or department is engaged. Without a method for prioritizing programs and services, an analysis of their centrality and criticality, and a plan to appropriately match resources to priorities, meaningful decision making and forward movement is extremely difficult.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURES:

Faculty members, student affairs professionals, and administrative and support personnel typically have quite different training, roles, and responsibilities. As a consequence, these groups often evolve their own distinctive cultures—cultures that sometimes emphasize the value and achievements of their own members, while failing to recognize and appropriately value the full range of contributions of other groups. Whenever that occurs, a lack of understanding and mutual respect across departmental and faculty-staff lines is a consequence, and that, in turn, undermines effective collaboration, wastes scarce resources, diminishes the effectiveness of programs and services, and undermines the institution's reputation among its constituencies. Heightening the shared understanding of the common challenges that confront higher education in general, and each institution in particular, is an important step to transcending such cultural barriers and promoting more effective collaboration in service to one another and our many constituencies.

THINKING MORE BROADLY ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND DEPARTMENTS AS ORGANIZATIONS:

How different are colleges of education,

law, communication, liberal arts, and business? How unique are departments of human resources, institutional research, computing services, or admissions? The first list, of course, is composed of academic departments, and the second, of administrative and service units. There are major differences in the content of the programs and services that each type of unit offers. Yet, at a higher level of analysis, all of these units are organizations and all operate within a higher education context and, as such, have much in common. To recognize and benefit from those commonalities, we need integrating frameworks and terminology for thinking about, talking about, and analyzing the work of departments and institutions (Massy 2003; Ruben 1995a). Without general frameworks, concepts, and terminology, the sharing of insights, strategies, operational practices, and expertise across departmental boundaries is a formidable challenge.

**ADOPTING THE PHILOSOPHY OF—
AND DAY-TO-DAY COMMITMENT
TO—CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:**

Higher education has long been committed to excellence. However, critics often point out that the pace of change and improvement in colleges and universities is slow—and more episodic than continuous (Spellings 2006a, 2006b). Within higher education, proposed innovations and improvements become the topic of protracted discussion about potential shortcomings, as one alternative model or approach after another is introduced, debated, and discarded. Committees often are formed to investigate the problem in depth and make recommendations, and their recommendations may become input for other committees, which also investigate and make recommendations to still other committees. Sometimes, in the quest for completeness, rigor, and ideal solutions, we overlook the less-than-perfect solutions. As a consequence, we may talk ourselves out of making any improvements. Or the "window of opportunity" for change may pass before any decisions have been made. Or those involved

simply lose the will to invest any more time or energy in the effort. No one would argue that extensive analysis is unimportant to innovation and advancement. Likewise, the alternative of unilateral, top-down decision making is fraught with perils. However, too much unfocused analysis and discussion—with no clear plan to move to action—leads to organizational paralysis, and ultimately that is as likely to lead to poor outcomes as is too little analysis. Thus, the challenge is to adopt approaches that encourage interaction and consultation but that also ensure that the commitment to timely decision making and change is not simply rhetorical. For our own sake, and to effectively address what is a frequent concern among our critics, greater attention to analysis that results in plans and improvements is important.

**EXPANDING THE BASE OF CAPABLE
AND COMMITTED LEADERS:**

To address the many obstacles confronting higher education, strong leadership is needed at all levels in academic, student life, service, and administrative areas. For reasons that are difficult to understand, leadership development has historically not been the priority in higher education that it has been in other sectors (Hecht 2006; Ruben 2004, 2006a; Wolverton and Gmelch 2002). The assumption seems to be that leadership and managerial capabilities will emerge and develop naturally among those who have excelled in academic or technical areas. While that approach does produce some excellent leaders, most would agree that its limitations are readily apparent. The learning curve for new leaders is steep, and the consequences for colleagues and the organization while the necessary learning takes place can be painful. The challenge is to clarify the knowledge and skill bases necessary for effective higher education leadership, and then to create opportunities to attract, develop, and reward people with such capabilities. A vision of what constitutes an effective organization, a commitment to institutional self-reflection, and the competencies necessary

to ensure collaborative and continuous improvement are among the key elements needed for the excellence in educational leadership that is so much in demand.

ADOPTING A BROADER VISION OF EXCELLENCE:

Colleges and universities have a long-standing tradition of quality in academics and scholarship. In this respect, higher education is the gold standard—the model to which other sectors look for excellence. But increasingly today there are competing views as to what constitutes excellence in higher education. At least three quite different points of view are evident (Volkwein 2006). First, there is what might be termed the resource/reputational perspective, which emphasizes the importance of institutional and disciplinary ratings and rankings, faculty accomplishments and credentials, available financial and material resources, student ranks and test scores, levels of research, and donor funding. The client-centered model, which provides a second point of view, focuses on the student experience, the quality of educational practice, program and faculty availability, tuition levels, access, alumni and employer views, and most especially student satisfaction with programs, services, and facilities. The third model, the strategic investment model, focuses on return on investment, cost-benefit analysis, control of expenditures, regulation and compliance, and productivity measures including admission yield, retention, time to degree, and expenditure per student (Volkwein 2006). The first of these models tends to be the preferred model of many faculties and has been traditionally important for external reviews, including accreditations, although this pattern is changing. Students, parents, alumni, and employers often emphasize the second, client-centered model. Government officials, boards, and trustees are generally drawn to the perspective of the strategic investment model.

INTEGRATING APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT, PLANNING, AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:

Most colleges and universities have procedures for conducting academic review, planning, and improvement. Within many institutions, however, such activities may be administered in different offices and the functions may not be well integrated. For example, the evaluation and planning activities that occur at the institutional level may not be clearly linked to those undertaken at the program or department level. Or the standards and approaches used in administrative and service areas may differ from those used in academic or student life areas.

CONCLUSION :

Most colleges and universities would benefit from having a unifying framework and common language to guide review, planning, and improvement at all levels and across various departments and programs. Among other benefits, a unified model of this kind would promote the exchange of good ideas and increase the adoption of effective practices throughout an institution.

LEAD YOUR COLLEGE or UNIVERSITY TO HIGHER PERFORMANCE....!!!

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