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TAKING INITIAL STEPS: A PATH FOR RETHINKING ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

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We hear it all the time in these days of the Covid-19 pandemic— crisis is opportunity and should not go to waste: “Every problem is an opportunity in disguise.” “In a crisis, be aware of the danger - but

recognize the opportunity.” These sentiments now intersect with the past several years of conversation calling for rethinking, restructuring or reinventing accreditation and quality assurance - the major forms of quality review of higher education. This intersection is a promising moment for action, for moving forward based on a shared sense that current quality review needs to be reimaged to more effectively serve students and society.

For those of us with a powerful respect for current accreditation and quality assurance but also a strong conviction that such an overhaul would be desirable for all, how

“Above all, higher education must be accountable for student achievement and success.”

might we set ourselves on the path of rethinking? What follows are five specific steps that can lead to reinventing review of quality in higher education, a post-Covid redesign of accreditation and quality assurance that, if effective, will establish a foundation for the next era of these important efforts.

Beyond the opportunity of crisis, the climate is favorable for major change in quality review because, whether we like it or not, the pandemic has forced at least a temporary and perhaps permanent rethinking and restructuring of higher education itself. And, we need to remember that higher education had begun to change in fundamental ways even before Covid-19. This is what triggered initial and repeated calls for change in quality review.

Online learning, once viewed as suspect until the pandemic made it necessary, has expanded enormously. Short-term, online education certifications have been growing significantly. So has the emerging universe of new or alternative providers. Perhaps even more striking, the valuing of higher education is changing, with more and more students, government officials and the public urging that perhaps non-degree educational offerings may be of greater benefit than a traditional degree, whether associate, baccalaureate, masters or doctorate, at least

FIVE STEPS TO RETHINKING ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

- Sustain the fundamental value commitments of higher education
- Expand the range of activity and scrutiny of quality review
- Modify the primary purposes of accreditation and quality assurance
- Enlarge the universe of accreditation/quality assurance providers themselves
- Redesign the accreditation/quality assurance review process

in some instances. Surveys confirm that societal attitudes toward higher education are shifting – with less confidence and investment in the often-idealized but costly campus-based experience and greater reliance in the cost-efficient and immediately beneficial online certifications or non-degree experiences that lead to immediate gains such as better jobs or higher income.

We need accreditation and quality assurance that capture quality for all of what is going on now in higher education – sustaining traditional institutions and degrees, yet embracing new providers and creatively using technology that brings students greater opportunity, access and progress in furthering their education. The five steps can set us on this path.

STEP 1: SUSTAIN THE FUNDAMENTAL VALUE COMMITMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Whatever changes are made to accreditation and quality assurance; they need to be built on three longstanding core values of the higher education enterprise. These are:

- Sustaining the diverse *missions* and types of various providers of higher education – greater diversity of mission and type means more and greater diversity of students benefiting from a higher education experience.
- Preserving the *autonomy* of higher education providers – higher education cannot be effective without the freedom and responsibility to provide leadership in academic judgment and direction.
- Honoring the centrality of *academic freedom*, especially for higher education faculty, that is essential to quality teaching, research and all intellectual inquiry – and essential to the future of society.

STEP 2: EXPAND THE RANGE OF ACTIVITY AND SCRUTINY OF QUALITY REVIEW

It is time for quality review to move even further beyond the campuses of

traditional colleges and universities and the accompanying traditional credentialing. Quality review needs to significantly expand its purview and to routinely embrace all types of providers, beyond traditional institutions: corporations that have added education to their work, companies created for the specific purpose of providing higher education, small businesses offering especially online education. Traditional credentialing— mainly degrees and one-year certificates— is now accompanied by more and more shorter-term credentials that offer recognition of student accomplishment, both electronic and paper. Quality review is essential for all.

STEP 3: MODIFY THE PRIMARY PURPOSES OF ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

This is perhaps the most powerful change that can be made. Historically, accreditation and quality assurance have placed quality improvement – making current higher education providers better – at the center of their work. Quality improvement is vital and needs to continue. However, in the world of today and tomorrow, it is even more important to move evidence of effective performance of providers and accountability to the public to center stage. Above all, higher education must be accountable for student achievement and success. Effective quality review needs to be centered on reliable evidence of what students know and can do.

STEP 4: ENLARGE THE UNIVERSE OF ACCREDITATION/QUALITY ASSURANCE PROVIDERS THEMSELVES

Accreditation and quality assurance have been carried out, throughout the world, primarily by government-based agencies. The major exception has been the United States, where, to this day, accreditation is undertaken by nongovernmental, nonprofit, membership-based organizations— although government increasingly dominates these bodies, too. In some countries, there are combined government-based/membership bodies that

do this work. These types of providers can be expanded, especially through establishing more and more organizations from civil society or business. This step will bring additional creativity to quality review, provide for the development of additional areas of expertise in quality review and enhance provider choice in the review of quality.

STEP 5: REDESIGN THE ACCREDITATION/QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW PROCESS

Quality review has long been characterized as bureaucratic - carried out through extensive and complex processes that involve standards, policies, reporting, visits, multiple

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committees and multiple levels of judgments about quality. Whatever the extent of the bureaucracy, it has been effective in a number of ways. At the same time, the current process has not, arguably, served us as well when it comes to the proposed primary purposes of quality review: providing

evidence of effective provider performance and accountability to the public.

We can radically simplify the quality review process, starting not with redesigning the process itself, but with what we want to achieve. Quality review, to be successful

going forward, needs to focus on three factors:

- Reliable evidence that students learn and succeed.
- Competent and efficient analysis of the evidence.
- Clear and consistent practices for judging evidence of performance.

We need to address these factors and then design quality review processes driven by (1) a rigorous and transparent set of expectations of evidence, (2) reliance on experts and peers with strong analytic skills to judge the evidence and (3) means to assure open and consistent judgments about quality based on the evidence. This need not involve an extensive array of standards and policies or multiple committees.

The five steps may be implemented in a variety of ways. There is no single model for quality review that these steps require. What is central is that these steps provide a foundation, a way of taking on the opportunity of a crisis and moving forward to rethink quality review. These steps offer a means to achieve quality review that is flexible, creative, reliable and accountable. Taking these key steps will redesign accreditation and quality assurance not only to accommodate changes driven by the pandemic, but provide the foundation for a revitalization of quality review and higher education that will serve students and society well into the future.

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