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Seeking More High-Quality Undergraduate Degrees: Conditions for More Effectively Working with Policy Makers

By: Judith A. Ramaley

Our nation’s colleges and universities have always sought to prepare their graduates for life and work in their own era. The pressures we face today, both from outside the academy and within the higher education community, are complex, interlocking, and hard to manage. Some of these challenges require us to rethink what it means to be educated in today’s world and to explore ways to provide a coherent and meaningful educational experience in the face of the turbulence, uncertainty, and fragmentation that characterizes much of higher education today.

Some of our pressures come from the demands placed on us and on our graduates by the realities of work and life in the twenty-first century. One useful formulation of what it means to be educated was proposed by Paul Lingenfelter (2012), who wrote: “…the most valuable ‘products’ of education are the ability to use knowledge and skill to solve unscripted problems, to explore the frontiers of knowledge and understanding, and to experience life in a deeper way.”

An education of this kind requires us to think about what it means to be educated in new ways. The elements proposed initially in the AAC&U Greater Expectations initiative (2002), expanded in Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) (2007), and supported by an exploration of high-impact practices (Kuh 2008) offer a clear and effective way to design pathways to advanced study and to meaningful degrees. These ideas also formed the elements of the framework called the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) that provides a way to define what we should expect of someone who holds an associate, baccalaureate, or master’s degree (Lumina 2011).

The components that form the logic of an undergraduate education suitable for the early twenty-first century are interlocking and the interactions between them can best be expressed by learning in the context of local, regional, or global challenges that will shape our future (Lumina 2011). The elements of the framework are broad, integrative knowledge and specialized knowledge in one or more fields; intellectual skills practiced through the study of complex challenges within major fields, as well as across disciplines; civic learning acquired both through formal study and through community-based learning; and forms of learning that engage students in integrating and applying their learning to questions of importance to themselves and to others. In order to collaborate with leaders outside the academy (e.g., lawmakers, community and business leaders, etc.), it is essential that both those within and those outside agree on what it means to be educated. Unfortunately, too few individuals outside the academy have even thought about a twenty-first-century vision of quality, never mind the importance of coherence, intentionality, and integration to making such a vision a reality.
Supporting Our Emerging Ideas about Higher Education

The LEAP concept of a sequential, progressive, and integrated approach to learning is based on the belief that we must prepare graduates to manage their own learning and work well with others who see problems in different ways. To accomplish this, however, we need to explore the elements that are reshaping the educational environment, both on our campuses and beyond. This evolution includes the patterns of participation and enrollments that characterize today’s student body, the changing nature of the professoriate, and the demands of policy makers for both productivity and accountability. It is increasingly rare for an institution to have the time and attention of its students and the majority of its faculty from start to finish. Today, few institutions can honestly call themselves intentional communities. Their students may begin their college-level work at another institution or study concurrently at two or more institutions at a time (Adelman 1999). These diverse patterns of enrollment can easily become confusing and the courses taken may or may not build upon each other or lead to the more advanced understanding and informed action that underlie the ideas that shape the DQP and its close relative, the Essential Learning Outcomes of LEAP (AAC&U 2007). Students may remain enrolled each term or may step out and return later or move on to another institution to continue and then complete what they began (Adelman 1999). They may study at one institution or several. The lack of coherence across these different settings can be managed if students have a clear idea of where they are headed and how to navigate the educational sector in ways that add up to a meaningful degree. However, the focus of instruction tends to be at the individual course level. Few faculty at the departmental or institutional level tend to think at this integrative level, despite the use of curricular mapping and a framework for putting together pathways to advanced learning (Lingenfelter 2012).

Holding Onto Our View of What Quality Means

Some of the challenges created by the changing economy and the many demands on the use of public funds force us to find ways to do better with less, to find ways to maintain quality and integrity, as well as access and opportunity in the face of declining public financial support. This aspect of change generally plays out in campus administration and operations as institutions try to protect their instructional budgets, but there are important implications for the curriculum and the integrity of the educational experience as well. We have no reason to think that a new way to finance higher education will emerge any time soon (Ramaley and Johnstone 2008), so it is time to acknowledge what many observers are calling the “New Normal.” Our understanding of the pressures and challenges of the New Normal continues to develop but, in general, the core drivers are (1) a changing economy, driven by innovation and new global relationships; and (2) complex social and cultural changes that are emerging as the people around the world interact with each other in new ways.

Many institutions are dealing with the same blend of challenges brought on by similar social and economic changes that my former institution, Winona State University, faced in 2008. Our particular mix included declining state budget support; significant demographic shifts affecting the composition of our student body and our students' backgrounds; readiness for college-level work; greater demands for productivity (meaning largely degree completion); new forms of
accountability focused on surprisingly specific goals, such as the number of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers we graduated each year; and capped tuition. We were faced with the need to work out how to make ends meet in a climate where tuition increases were clearly going to be modest, at best, while protecting the quality of the student experience, our attractiveness to future students, and our ability to offer a coherent and meaningful educational experience.

The priorities that drive thoughtful responses to changing social and economic conditions are relatively simple. We began to test every decision against five criteria:

1. Will this help us remain attractive to potential students?
2. Will this contribute to the success of our current students?
3. Will this protect and enhance the quality and integrity of our academic core?
4. Will this help us generate additional revenue for investing in our own future?
5. If we ought to do this, have we found the best way to do so or should we look for a better way to accomplish it? (Ramaley and Johnstone 2011)

These questions can be applied to any level of decision making from what degree programs to offer to how to stock the supply room in the biology department. These sorts of questions also can form the basis for a more productive conversation with policy makers about what high-quality education means—and what is required to achieve it for more students.

Supporting an Integrated and Intentional Learning Experience for All Students

In the changing environment in which we operate, it will be helpful to think through the implications of the urgencies and expectations that are driving policy initiatives at both federal and state levels. We need to explore ways to inform the making of public policy by unpacking both what is driving the sense of urgency and expectation contained in these policies and the choices of accountability and productivity indicators and incentives that policy makers are imposing as a way to gain the full attention of leadership in higher education. While it is unlikely that many would contest the need for a highly educated citizenry, the current primary focus on degree completion fails to address the important question of what we should expect of a college graduate. Understanding the meaning of quality is central to the challenging task of reinventing how we teach and how we measure what both we and our students have learned. The process of reflection and the pace of change within the academy are too slow and deliberative to put into terms that can engage policy makers and respond crisply to their expectations of the investments they make in higher education. AAC&U has led the way in providing a robust toolkit of high-impact practices (Kuh 2008); approaches to assessment, such as the VALUE Rubrics; and frameworks for building a meaningful progression of educational experiences leading to a degree. As we continue to look for better ways to show the value of an undergraduate education, we may wish to return to ideas first advanced by Peter Ewell decades ago (Education Commission of the States 1995) about the integrated elements that appear to be reliably associated with an effective and meaningful undergraduate education. The approach to measuring quality and productivity proposed by Ewell is a composite of elements including (a)
successful and timely completion by students of their educational program; (b) student performance after graduation; (c) direct measures of the abilities of graduating students; and (d) evidence of the use of instructional and organizational good practices. Some of these measures of academic quality and success have been incorporated into several approaches to accountability, including the College Portrait provided by the Voluntary System of Accountability developed in 2007 by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and self-assessments of student engagement such as the National Survey of Student Engagement. If we can show that accountability measures that are more familiar to policy makers can also be reasonably connected to other measures that can link quality to accountability, we can open up a different kind of conversation with policy makers. The Education Commission of the States showed the way nearly twenty years ago. It is time to pick up that agenda again and pursue it in today’s context.

These aggregate profiles and portraits can offer a means to document and evaluate the educational environment, the coherence of the curriculum, and the overall value and intentions of an undergraduate education (i.e., what constitutes quality). Although policy makers tend to prefer single, clearly quantifiable measures such as number of credits that transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution or numbers of degrees conferred annually or by particular field, it may be possible to introduce some measures that indirectly, at least, capture the quality and value of the educational experience in different measures of productivity that serve in rather the same way that indicator species do in a biological ecosystem. What practices seem most closely associated with a coherent and meaningful undergraduate experience and how might we employ those indicators to document our efforts and make a case for more public support for the rapidly changing postsecondary “ecosystem?”

**Working with Policy Makers to Introduce Quality into Policy Development**

The federal agenda, with its focus on degree completion in shorter time and at less cost, is a response to the emergence of a global higher education sector that is rapidly outpacing the productivity of higher education in this country. The changing global economy demands higher levels of learning and greater numbers of college-educated workers. As Lingenfelter (2012) makes clear, higher education is now essential, not simply optional. As education becomes more and more critical to both national competitiveness and the development of a robust economy, we are faced with “churning, almost chaotic” policy responses (4). Each policy effort addresses one component of a complex system of interlocking pressures and influences ranging from the outcomes of K–12 to graduation rates at the college level to performance funding in a new guise. Rarely do any of these efforts to generate more college graduates at less cost and in a shorter period of time focus on what students actually accomplish in college and what we can expect of a college graduate. It would be well worth our while to talk with policy makers about the quality of an education as defined by elements such as how students approach unscripted problems and how well they draw upon the talents and expertise of others (as addressed in the more advanced aspects of the DQP such as civic learning and applied learning). Over the past several years, these conversations have begun in many states but so far, few states have worked out ways to document, assess, and then fund efforts to promote advanced learning of the kind called for in
Greater Expectations, LEAP, and the DQP. The issue of quality is absent from recent policy discussions. In its most recent Policy Matters brief on the Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2013, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities does not even mention quality or anything related to “learning.” Instead the report highlights such topics as boosting institutional performance (meaning increasing graduation rates and overall degree production), tuition prices and tuition policy, state student grant aid programs, college readiness, immigration issues, and competency-based and online education. While these issues matter and they are certainly foremost on the minds of elected officials at the state level, we must find ways to talk about what to expect of a college graduate in ways that address the concerns of policy makers. The focus on the meaning of quality and how to measure it that ECS started in 1995 should be picked up again and adapted to a twenty-first-century context.

Conversations about quality probably won’t help us work out new ways to fund higher education or provide suitable incentives or recognition of successful preparation of our graduates for life and work in today’s world unless we can translate our work into terms that are meaningful to policy makers and address their concerns. Our current model relies largely on keeping time as a constant and allowing learning to vary (Lingenfelter 2012) rather than the other way around. Despite this, we will surely benefit from exploring ways to introduce accountability for learning and some reflection of the outcomes of an education into the formulae that are used to drive state appropriations and institutional distribution of their instructional budgets. What units of value besides the credit hour might be introduced into these financial models formulae? How might we launch a discussion of how to introduce value and quality into a model that currently runs primarily on time and effort only?

So far, most of the funding models have directed resources to address economic and workforce needs by addressing the need to increase degree production in specific fields. State legislatures (AASCU 2012) have provided support for students who pursue targeted fields or productivity incentives for colleges and universities that graduate more students or provide programs that encourage adults to return to complete degrees that they may have begun years earlier. As we work on a blend of qualitative and quantitative measures of both effort and outcome, we can learn from the study being conducted by the OECD on Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (Nusche 2008; OECD 2013) which, according to Lingenfelter (2012), has explored the challenges as well as the inevitability of providing assessments of learning. Experiments with e-portfolios may chart the way forward by providing examples of signature intellectual work, assessments of advancement in skill and knowledge, and an emphasis on supporting learning (formative assessments) rather than only on judgments after the fact (summative assessments).

As our capacity to describe our efforts and to document and evaluate the results of our approaches to learning and teaching improves, we should be able to develop meaningful accountability measures that can be used as an integral part of our model for public funding of higher education. A more complete model of learning can also provide a means to build a true cycle of innovation to provide energy and momentum for our efforts to design courses of study and accompanying educational experiences that will culminate in the awarding of a truly meaningful degree. In the meantime, as we work on ways to make our work visible and compelling, we can engage policy makers—both public officials and members of our own
governing boards—in discussions about what it means to be educated and what we are learning about how to create a supportive educational environment and ways to guide and assess learning.

**Changing Institutional Culture to Provide a Meaningful Twenty-first-century Education**

In order to change institutional culture to provide a meaningful education for today’s students, we must move away from a focus on individual achievement and rewards and foster a culture of mutual responsibility, intentionality, and a collaboration. In fact, the elements that define community engagement as a concept also apply to the behavior of a campus community. Although the formal definition of community engagement developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is meant to describe the character of effective university-community collaboration, the same elements can apply equally well to the ways that the different units within a campus community interact with each other, both across the academic sector and between academics and the support and operational units on campus.

Engagement describes the collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2013))

A course of study that is guided by clear learning outcomes and that draws upon and encourages reflection on all the ways that students learn and then use what they have learned—in the classroom or laboratory, on campus in cocurricular activities, in the community or at work—can lead to a meaningful degree. To design a sequence of this kind, faculty members need to develop a culture of collaboration based on a sense of shared responsibility for the outcomes of the educational experience. As Holland (2012) makes clear, the things that a twenty-first-century college or university will be rewarded for are materially different from the aspirations and assumptions of the twentieth century. Institutions that were successful in gaining support and resources in the twentieth century offered a comprehensive array of disciplines, sought support for their scholarship from a few federal agencies, focused on grants, publications, and technology transfer as indicators of success, sought to educate only the most well-prepared students and defined excellence largely in terms of the work of individual faculty. In those institutions, the core work of the institution was defined largely in terms of the teaching, research, and service activities of individual faculty members, and these three functions were seen as separate activities, with most institutions valuing individual scholarship over other forms of faculty contributions.

A very different picture is emerging today across the diversity of higher education institutions in this country (Holland 2012). Many institutions are now emphasizing a smaller number of signature themes or programs supported by a focused mix of disciplines, having concluded that the current financial model cannot support a desire to be “all things to all people.” A growing number of institutions are working collaboratively with other universities and colleges, public K–12 systems, the nonprofit and business sectors, communities, and networks of organizations that span regional, national, or international scales. These new forms of cooperation and
networking are meant to create a working environment for scholarship and learning that spans the boundaries of individual institutions and opens up access to the large world-shaping “big questions.” In this larger educational context, institutions seek to enrich the undergraduate experience and provide access to contexts in which students can practice advanced intellectual skills while applying what they know to pressing and unscripted problems.

These trends are shaping who is learning, as well as where, when, and how they will learn. Concern about access and success in higher education as a “nation goes to college” (AAC&U 2002) has also led to a growing interest in rethinking developmental or remedial education (Complete College America 2012) to ensure that bringing students up to speed also accelerates their movement into a program of study. Innovative approaches to instruction and learning (technology-based and experiential) are being used to enhance student learning and completion. These changing patterns of scholarship and learning are resulting in the inclusion of students as active participants and contributors to scholarship and community engagement. The convergence of faculty scholarly interests and student interests with the growing use of high-impact practices along with a growing involvement of members of the broader community in the generation and application of knowledge is leading to new definitions of excellence.

Excellence is now being created by the measurable impact of collaboration on the quality of life, culture, health, economic stability, and the environment, both locally and further afield. It should soon be possible to identify measures of Social Returns on Investment (SROI) that can be used to track the value of this kind of education and to measure the overall impact of collaboration on indicators that matter to the community at large (SROI Network 2013). All of these new trends are demanding new forms of collaboration both within the academy and in and across other sectors. As the twenty-first century continues to unfold, we shall see more examples of effective community formation on our campuses as well as between our institutions and the larger society that we all serve. As that trend unfolds, so will a growing appreciation for and support of high-quality education and an appreciation of its value both for graduates and for the communities in which they live.
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