

Background paper

Are Public Research Universities Effective Communities of Learning?: The Collective Action Dilemma of Assuring Academic Standards

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ABSTRACT

Are public research universities effective communities of learning? Over time our collegial processes for maintaining and improving academic standards have been corroded by forces both within and outside the university. We now confront a dilemma of collective action in which decisions individual faculty members make with regard to teaching may not optimize the learning that university graduates contribute to society.

The paper reviews the sources of our current dilemma, the effectiveness of related public policies, and potentially relevant design principles drawn from research on successful self-governing organizations.

Developing governance processes that will truly assure and improve student learning will be one of the most significant and meaningful challenges for the American public research university in the coming years.

Introduction

Are public research universities effective communities of learning? This may seem a particularly naïve question in a world where the American research university is universally admired, emulated, and sought out – or perhaps I should say was sought out – by the best students in the world. But to justify its role in society, not to say its rapidly increasing costs, the American public research university must be an effective educational enterprise as well as a prestigious research institution. That is, it must make a legitimate and efficient contribution to the human capital of our society, which is the primary rationale for the public subsidies provided to higher education in every country.

This concern with the public university's contribution to human capital, with student outcomes and the value added by a university education, is increasingly voiced in public policy debates about higher education throughout the world (Dill and Soo, 2004). In the US public criticism about higher education has most often focused on rapidly rising costs, but there is increasing concern about the quality of undergraduate education in our research universities as indicated by the growing number of state policies on academic accountability implemented over the last two decades as well as by recent federal initiatives to reform academic accreditation.¹ Our response to these calls for academic accountability has been to assert the autonomy of the university – to argue that the best means of protecting the public interest in academic quality is to retain faculty responsibility for academic standards. I agree with this assertion, but I will argue that the contemporary American public research university is not well organized to promote effective communities of learning. By communities of learning I mean schools, departments, and academic programs where faculty members are actively and collectively engaged in improving student learning.² Over time our collegial processes for maintaining and improving student learning have been corroded by forces both within and outside the university. We now confront a dilemma of collective action in which decisions individual faculty members make with regard to teaching may not optimize the learning that university graduates contribute to society. I believe successfully addressing this dilemma represents a major challenge to the future success of the American public research university.

¹ It is also manifested in criticisms of the quality of undergraduate student learning in research universities themselves. See for example the report by the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998) and the revelations by a recent graduate of Harvard University (Douthat, 2005).

² Zhao and Kuh (2004) discuss the related concept of “learning communities.” The major difference in our two concepts is that I define a community of learning as cooperative actions taken by faculty members to assure and improve student learning, while Zhao and Kuh define a learning community as intentionally structured experiences among students such as course clusters or residential colleges that enhance student learning.

Student Learning as a Collective Good

We speak easily and often about higher education as a public rather than a private good. But our efforts to improve education within the university often adopt the view of teaching as a private activity. We emphasize the assessment of students and the evaluation of faculty members in individual classrooms, we promote more active teaching methods by individual faculty members, and we award honors and cash prizes to outstanding individual teachers. However, the benefits from teaching are best understood not as a good provided privately and separately by individual teachers, but as a communal or collective good. As Tony Becher (1992) noted in developing an academic quality assurance system at the University of Sussex in the UK:

...the most important consideration in quality assurance must be a holistic rather than an atomistic one, namely the benefits students derive from the totality of their degree programmes, rather than the satisfactoriness or otherwise of their interactions with individual members of staff (Becher, 1992, p. 58).

Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) in their influential review of research on the impacts of college on students note that student outcomes are influenced not only by the actions of individual teachers but also by the collective actions of the faculty to design and assure student learning. That is, students' learning of academic content and their cognitive development are significantly associated with the pattern and sequence of the courses in which students enroll, by program requirements that integrate learning from separate courses, and by the frequency of communication and interaction among faculty members in the subject field (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In sum our public obligation to assure student learning is reflected not only in the commitment and energy we give to our individual teaching and courses, but also in our collective zeal to assure and improve student learning at the program, department and college level (Fisher, Fairweather, and Amey, 2003).³

This is what I mean by communities of learning – an institutional setting in which the expressed norms, collegial processes, and tangible incentives inspire collective action to improve the knowledge, skills, and values learned by university students. Let me now apply this perspective to a review of the existing institutional framework for assuring student learning in contemporary American universities.

³ It is also likely that collective actions taken by the faculty to improve student learning will have a greater impact than the sum of improvement actions taken by faculty members individually. This is essentially the argument W. Edwards Deming made about the best means to improve quality (Dill, 1995).

Changes in Our Current Institutional Framework

Collective actions to improve student learning are affected by the institutional framework of universities that includes professional norms, market competition, and the monitoring and sanctioning activities of academic governance. Changes in this institutional framework over time however, have altered the incentives for faculty members to work collectively to maintain and assure academic standards.⁴

The design of academic programs is influenced by disciplinary and academic norms as to what constitutes academic knowledge. The managerial theorist Henry Mintzberg (1979) offers a description of how in the past socialization to a discipline supposedly provided the necessary regulation of academic standards in universities. Long years of training supplied future faculty members with the standardized skills and knowledge characteristic of their particular subject. Their approach to teaching, to their subject content, and to their research was influenced by these ingrained norms. As a consequence, faculty members could teach individually and independently because the professor lecturing on physics to engineering students could successfully predict what the professor lecturing on calculus to the same students was covering. The norms of professional socialization thereby permitted faculty members to coordinate their teaching while working autonomously.

But this concurrence on standards, skills, and academic content, if it ever existed, has disintegrated with the rapid expansion of academic knowledge and the emergence of multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary subjects.⁵ A national survey on the design of

⁴ Throughout I use the term “academic standards” as synonymous with the level of educational outcomes – knowledge, skills, and values – attained by university students. This equivalence of academic standards and student outcomes is common outside the US, where academic standards are often assured by means of subject exams. But even within the US the term academic standards is often used to refer to the level of learning attained by university students. Note for example that the Advanced Placement system assumes that high school AP courses provide a college-level academic standard of student learning and these standards are assured through the design of course curricula and AP exams.

⁵ Commenting on the contribution that disciplinary fragmentation makes to the complexity of higher education systems, Clark (1996) observed:

in mathematics, 200,00 new theorems are published each year, periodicals exceed 1,000, and review journals have developed classification scheme that includes over 4,500 subtopics arranged under 62 major topic areas. In history, the output of literature in the two decades of 1960-1980 was apparently equal in magnitude to all that was published from the time of the Greek historian Thucydides in the fourth century B.C. to the year 1960. In psychology, 45 major specialties appear in the structure of the American Psychological Association, and one of these specialties, social psychology, reports that it is now comprised of 17 subfields....In the mid-1990s, those who track the field of chemistry were reporting that ‘more articles on chemistry have been published in the past 2 years than throughout history before 1900.’ *Chemical Abstracts* took 31 years to publish its first million abstracts, 18 years for its second million, and less than 2 years for its most recent million. An exponential growth of about 4 to 8 percent annually, with a doubling period of 10 to 15 years, is now seen as characteristic of most branches of science (pp. 421-422).

academic curricula (Lattuca and Stark, 1994) revealed that in many fields faculty members did not easily agree on definitions of academic content, nor were they in agreement that specified sequences of learning content were appropriate for students.⁶ In several disciplines, faculty members expressed the belief that the field's diversity precluded achieving a consensus on what students should know. Achieving faculty cooperation to improve academic standards is made even more challenging by the development of new multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary subjects. Designing and teaching academic programs that provide effective student learning in these fields necessarily requires even greater coordination than in traditional disciplines, but disciplinary norms frequently act as a brake on cooperation in these subjects.

Increasing market competition has also affected the incentives for collective action on student learning. Competition for students, faculty members, and resources, has markedly increased within the United States and internationally over the last decade (Dill, 2003). Universities are multi-product organizations, producing both education and research and therefore competing in multiple markets (Dill and Soo, 2004). Because of information imperfections in the market for higher education, the growing rivalry among institutions of higher education has become a contest for academic prestige based upon research not a competition for the most effective production of human capital (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman, 2002). This increased market competition shapes the nature of collective action to improve student learning within universities in a number of significant ways.

First the high visibility of “league tables” that rely upon indicators of student selectivity to rank colleges and universities encourages institutions to invest in an increasingly costly “arms race” for prestige. In a national study of the US higher education market Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2002) discovered that many institutions are making extensive investments designed to increase the selectivity of the admissions process by linking tuition discounts with academic merit and student ability. These institutions are also investing in student consumption benefits such as comfortable dormitories, attractive eating facilities, and fiber optic computer networks that will help draw high ability students. The researchers suggest that this attempt to build prestige by “cream skimming” the student market does not lead to an improvement in the quality of educational delivery. A recent study on the relationship between institutional selectivity and the presence of educational practices known to be associated with student learning confirms that they are largely independent (Kuh and Pascarella, 2004). A colleges' selectivity offers no guarantee that it provides a more effective learning environment than a less selective school. The pernicious effect of competition to make a college more selective is that it diverts resources as well as administrative and faculty attention away from the collective actions within universities necessary to actually improve academic standards.

A second effect of increased market competition is that it increases the incentives for research and lowers the incentives for teaching in all of higher education. National

⁶ Research on the cultures of the disciplines (Braxton and Hargens, 1996) also notes that the effectiveness of collective problem solving on academic issues varies substantially across subject fields.

surveys of faculty activity (Fairweather, 1996) in the US have confirmed that the proportion of time faculty members reported spending on teaching has fallen and the proportion of time they reported spending on research has risen in all types of four-year institutions, including small liberal arts colleges. As Charles Clotfelter (1996) an economist at Duke University discovered in a detailed analysis of changes over time at representative departments at Chicago, Duke and Harvard Universities:

If the [three] institutions examined here are any indication, the period between 1977 and 1992 was one of gradual, but quite perceptible, change. Virtually without exception, average classroom teaching loads, measured in courses taught per year, decreased in the sample departments. Although these calculated loads by no means cover all aspects of teaching, they are suggestive of a significant movement away from teaching and toward research (p. 204).

The decline in faculty time commitment to teaching has several implications for universities as communities of learning. A first implication is that the decline may not only affect the quality of individual teaching, but also the collegial processes for assuring academic standards. Any process of collective action is costly in terms of individual time. As Oscar Wilde reportedly observed, the single greatest weakness of socialism was the number of evenings it wasted. University governance processes intended to assure academic standards similarly require substantial amounts of faculty time, usually with minimal rewards. The more competitive higher education market therefore encourages the emergence of what the late Clark Kerr (1994) called a “new academic culture” with less commitment to the local academic community and to citizenship obligations within it:

All over the United States, it is more difficult than it once was to get university teachers to take seriously their departmental and college responsibilities. They are more reluctant to serve on committees, and more reluctant to make time readily available when they do.... They wish to concentrate on their own affairs and not that of the institution. (p. 14).

A national survey of ethical beliefs about teaching in the US (Braxton and Bayer, 1999) confirmed that the strength of professional norms with regard to responsibilities for teaching, advising and grading, obligations for the planning and design of courses, and commitments for the governance of the department and university are weakest among research universities. But a second implication of the decline in university faculty time committed to teaching is that it has required a marked growth in part-time instructors to cover the existing courses. This change in the numbers and nature of the academic staff only increases the costs and complexity of collective actions necessary to assure academic standards.

Finally, there is evidence of a decline in effectiveness of the traditional governance processes used to assure academic standards within universities. A national

report on academic accountability (Graham, Lyman, and Trow, 1995) questioned the adequacy of the “internal accountability” processes for monitoring performance at many universities and called for reform. A study of the collegial processes for assuring academic standards at the department level in US research universities (Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck, 1994) uncovered a pattern of what they termed “hollowed collegiality.” Not “hallowed” in the sense of “venerated” and “unassailable,” but “hollowed” in the sense of “empty” and “without substance.” The researchers noted that the observed departments nominally appear to act collectively, but avoid those specific collaborative activities that might lead to real quality improvements in academic programs. For example, faculty members readily reported informal meetings to share research findings, collective procedures for determining faculty promotion and tenure, and consensus decision making on what particular courses should be offered each term and who should teach them. But:

Despite these trappings of collegiality, respondents told us they seldom led to the more substantial discussions necessary to improve undergraduate education, or to the sense of collective responsibility needed to make departmental efforts more effective. These vestiges of collegiality serve faculty convenience but dodge fundamental questions of task. This is especially the case, and is regrettable, with respect to student learning: collegiality remains thwarted with regard to faculty engagement with issues of curricular structure, pedagogical alternatives, and student assessment (Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck, 1994, p. 19).

Let me summarize this brief review of the changing institutional framework for academic behavior by suggesting that the observed trends toward negative incentives for collective action to assure academic standards within universities are unlikely to be reversed in the near future. Therefore, universities will continue to experience pressure from society for internal reforms designed to improve student learning.

Public Policy and the Improvement of Student Learning

The collective action problem of improving student learning has not gone unnoticed by policymakers. Most of the states have now adopted accountability policies designed to change the incentives for universities to improve academic standards. These efforts have included assessment policies and more recently performance-based funding policies designed to improve academic quality.

The evidence suggests that these policies have been largely ineffective, particularly within research universities. A national survey on the impact of state assessment policies (Peterson, Einarson, Augustine, and Vaughan, 1999) confirmed that among the different types of institutions surveyed doctoral and research universities were the least likely to have an institutional policy or plan on student assessment and were also least likely to use assessment information for educational decision making. Doctoral and

research universities were also the least likely to monitor the impact of student assessment on academic standards (e.g., student grades and external examination performance). Within research universities, student assessment was perceived to be primarily an administrative rather than a faculty responsibility – faculty participation in the governance of student assessment activities was uncommon.

The more recent effort to improve academic standards involves state policies on performance funding. But again research suggests that performance funding policies as currently designed have had minimal influence on the quantity or quality of student learning (Burke, 2002). In many of the states the most positive impact of performance funding policies has been on indicators of academic prestige such as the amount of sponsored research funds or numbers of nationally accredited programs. There is little evidence of improvement in measures of student retention, graduation rates, or standardized tests of student learning. The policies appear to provide insufficient incentives for the active involvement of academic departments and units, which have the greatest influence over academic standards. These policy limitations are illustrated in Tennessee, which has the longest running performance funding program. Between 1978 and 1999 Tennessee allocated over \$340 million to institutions of higher education in recognition of improved performance indicators. However, the scores of students on a test of General Education used as an indicator of educational quality showed little improvement over the same period. Studies of the impact of the policy also noted “cosmetic reactions and game playing as problems” (Bogue, 2002, p. 97). The University of Tennessee, for example in accord with the policy, requires a sample of graduating seniors to take the required test of General Education, but makes no use of the results in academic decision making -- “[i]n this case, assessment is used to satisfy the policy requirements and achieves no serious education benefit” (Bogue, 2002, p. 98). Performance improvement funds were awarded to the central university, rather than to academic departments demonstrating quality enhancements, and these supplemental funds were often expended by central university administrators on activities not directly related to undergraduate instruction (Fairweather and Beach, 2002). Furthermore, the administrators at the University of Tennessee attempted to shield faculty members from the burdens of complying with the program, as a result most of the faculty members supposedly affected by the performance indicators were unaware of the policies very existence.

At the Federal level the proposed amendments to the Higher Education Act reflect an increased federal interest in regulating private institutional accreditation as a means of improving academic standards.⁷ Ironically, these reforms are being proposed by a Congress and Executive branch controlled by the Republican Party, which in 1992 opposed Department of Education reforms designed to increase accountability in higher education (Dill, 1997). Members of Congress are expressing growing concern about declining academic standards amid rapidly rising public and private college tuition costs.

⁷ For a discussion of regulations affecting accreditation in the amendments proposed in the 2003-2005 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, see “Government Relations” on the website of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation at: www.chea.org

Consistent with the Republican Party commitment to free markets, the proposed amendments are designed to empower consumers with better information. Institutional accreditors would for the first time be mandated to provide a public summary of their actions and findings when renewing or granting accreditation. Institutions would be required to provide the Department of Education with a Consumer Profile that the Department would disseminate to the public. Recognized accreditors would in turn be required to assess the validity of each institution's profile, which would include descriptions of every academic program, its learning objectives as well as related student completion and graduation rates. The impact these informational remedies will have on academic standards is unknown, although research on the preferences and choices of university applicants as well as the previously discussed research on the US academic market raises questions about the effectiveness of this regulatory approach (Dill and Soo, in press).

The larger danger of these state and Federal policies is that they may "crowd out" the formation of social norms within universities that could enhance cooperative behavior (Ostrom, 2000). Poorly designed accountability policies often produce assessment "Potemkin villages," add-on procedures designed to meet external demands, but with little relationship to the university governance processes and incentives that influence academic behavior. The development of these ineffective solutions absorbs scarce resources and faculty time, further encouraging academic cynicism toward the feasibility of new approaches to improving student learning, and providing disincentives for cooperation among faculty members of good intention (Ostrom, 2000). In short, despite the desire for university reform, government accountability policies as currently designed still do not provide a regulatory framework that encourages universities to be better organized for learning.

Collective Action in Self-Governing Organizations

We are not however limited to the rules of an intrusive state or the incentives of imperfectly competitive markets to address the dilemma of collective action confronting the contemporary university. Self-governing organizations themselves can shape the conditions that affect collective choices. A recent and intriguing line of research on successful self-governing organizations (Ostrom, 1990, 1998, 2000; Ostrom and Walker, 1997) offers a number of design principles that could help guide us in strengthening universities as active communities of learning.

A first design principle is the provision of information. For you or me to decide that participating in a departmental committee on improving the undergraduate program is more important than an equivalent hour spent on our own research or teaching, we need to make a prediction as to the learning benefits generated by this cooperative activity. However, in most departments and programs information on student learning is murky or not readily available and therefore our commitment to collective actions to improve academic standards is likely to be weak. This situation is called a "second order" collective action dilemma. Voluntary cooperation is first needed to generate the

information necessary to judge whether further cooperation to solve the collective action dilemma is rational. Not surprisingly, this two-step process of cooperation makes achieving collective action on student learning especially challenging.

The first design principle therefore addresses this “second order” dilemma by providing information that would help individuals make more rational calculations about collective actions. In the case of higher education, this would require the overall university subsidizing the production of information that would aid individual faculty members’ assessment of the relative cost and benefits of collective actions designed to improve teaching and student learning. Most universities do subsidize the regular production of student evaluations of teaching, but while this information may assist the individual teacher in improving her or his instruction it is of little assistance in promoting collective action by faculty members to improve academic standards. Investment in the regular provision of information on student grades by program, on completion rates by program as currently proposed by the Congress, as well as regular surveys of program graduates, could be helpful for collective decision making, but each has obvious limitations (Dill and Soo, in press).

More useful still would be university participation in the recently developed National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provides information on student engagement in learning activities known to be associated with effective learning (Zemsky, 2005). Although originally designed to provide guidance to consumers of higher education, the information from the NSSE is likely even more valuable for faculty members to use collectively in evaluating the effectiveness of various curricular, teaching, and assessment strategies employed in their academic programs. Along these lines it is worth noting that while a large number of US colleges and universities are voluntarily participating in this survey, the leading public and private research universities are conspicuous by their lack of involvement (Zemsky, 2005).

While the provision of relevant information is a necessary condition for collective action, it is not sufficient. For a social norm of cooperation in improving teaching and learning to evolve, it is necessary that individuals believe both that the rules governing academic standards will be effective in producing joint benefits and that monitoring mechanisms are fairly and systematically applied. The research on self-governing organizations further suggests that when users design their own rules, enforced by local users or accountable to them, using graduated sanctions that define responsibility for collective provision, and effectively assign costs proportionate to benefits, collective action problems are solved in a self-reinforcing manner (Ostrom, 2000). Simply stated in this way, these appear to be elementary principles of university governance, but let me put flesh on these abstract ideas with several concrete examples of university governance processes designed to encourage collective actions for improving academic standards.

Over the last several years I have been privileged to participate in number of external reviews of academic quality assurance processes in the US, Europe, and Asia. Through these reviews I have observed a number of collegial processes that appear effective in assuring and improving academic standards. My examples are not meant to be prescriptive, but illustrative of the general principles discovered to be effective in

governing self-organized communities. Each university will need to design processes most appropriate to its particular context, which is in fact one of the basic principles.

My first example is the formal process universities employ for approving new academic programs and courses. In an experimental accreditation review of a US university in which I participated, we adopted a new approach of systematically reviewing the effectiveness of collegial processes for improving student learning that were nominated by the visited institution. These included the university's processes for program review and evaluating teaching. At the end of the review the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who was coordinating our visit, asked what other processes we might have examined. I noted that we had not reviewed the process by which new courses and new curricula were approved by the university. He gave me a quizzical look and said: "Why review that process? Everyone knows that curriculum committees have nothing to do with the quality of education." I appreciated his candor as his observation accorded with my own experience in US universities. The process by which the academic content of newly proposed programs or individual courses are reviewed is often largely procedural, more a matter of protecting academic turf than of assuring academic standards.

An interesting exception to this tradition is the course approval process designed by the University of Ulster when it was formed by merger of two institutions. The course approval process of the former New University of Ulster was typical of most universities in the UK (Gibson, 1993). New academic courses were often planned within academic departments, sometimes with often without external advice, and were approved by the Senate on the basis of an outline course description. When the New University merged with the Ulster Polytechnic in 1984 to form the University of Ulster the Faculty Senate decided to build upon the more formal course planning procedures of the Polytechnic sector, which had been required by the Committee for National Academic Awards (CNAAs) in order to safeguard academic standards. Under this procedure proposals for new courses are still initiated at the department level, but are reviewed at the Senate level by a Development Committee, which establishes a Course Planning Committee for each new proposal. The membership of this committee includes those who are to teach the new course, but is augmented by members with relevant expertise drawn from industry, the professions, and other academic institutions. The Course Planning Committee is required to produce a comprehensive document

which should explain the reason for the proposal, describe the objectives, outcomes and structure of the course, demonstrate academic progression, and internal coherence, specify the syllabuses and reading, name the staff who are responsible for each syllabus, state teaching, learning, assessment and examination methods, and set out course regulations (Gibson, 1993, p. 80).

The Senates' Academic Advisory Committee then establishes an Evaluation Panel composed of staff from departments not invited in the proposal but with relevant knowledge or experience and two external members with expertise in the field meet with

the Course Planning Committee to conduct an independent, thorough assessment of the proposal. At the conclusion of this review, which follows established guidelines, a report is forwarded to the Senate Academic Policy Committee with recommendations as to whether the course should be approved, with what conditions, and for how long. The overall process requires a detailed, collective response from the proposing faculty, systematically introduces relevant information to the course planners, emphasizes the academic coherence of the overall program, requires a plan for student assessment prior to the implementation of the course, and engages those responsible for the program in an active dialogue.

A second example is a process for addressing university grading standards. Grade inflation, or more accurately grade compression in which few low marks are awarded to students, is receiving increasing attention in US research universities. In recent Congressional hearings on the renewal of the Higher Education Act, several speakers argued that grade inflation in US universities provided evidence of declining academic standards. The relationship between grades and student learning in higher education is complex, although some faculty members wish to assert that rising university grades indicate increasing student achievement. Surveys of student activities identified as valid predictors of student learning do, however, provide some support for the hypothesized link between grade inflation and declining academic standards (Kuh, 1999). The studies indicate that in all types of four-year colleges and universities in the US students of the 1990s reported spending *less* time on learning-related activities such as attending class, writing papers, and studying than did their predecessors, but reported *higher* academic grades.

The more crucial issue, however, may not be the effect of grade inflation on student learning per se, but the distorting influence on faculty and student behavior of variations in grading criteria across the university. Because student evaluations of teaching influence faculty promotion and tenure decisions and undergraduate program enrollments influence departmental budgets, the lack of common standards on grading provides incentives for opportunistic behavior among faculty members. Similarly, the well documented disparity in average grades between the sciences, social sciences, and humanities (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002) may shape undergraduate choices in ways that are harmful to the public good. Studies at Williams College and Duke University (Sabot and Wakeman-Linn, 1991; Johnson, 2003) suggest that these grading differentials influence undergraduate science enrollments, thereby contributing to a growing shortage of scientific talent in our society. As the author of the Duke study concluded:

As a consequence only of differences in grading practices between academic fields, American undergraduates take, on average, about 50% fewer elective courses in the natural sciences and mathematics than they

would if grading practices across disciplines were more equitable (Johnson, 2003,p. 238).⁸

A number of research universities including Harvard and Princeton have taken collective action to address the grade inflation issue. Princeton, for example, recently adopted a policy restricting the number of A's awarded to 35% in undergraduate courses. For junior and senior independent work, the percentage receiving A's will be capped at 55%. The enforcement of a fixed standard, however, may not be the optimal approach for building effective communities of learning. At another university I have visited the Faculty Senate created a standing committee to develop and implement university-wide marking standards. The committee defined and published general grade distribution guidelines for the university as a whole and monitored departmental grade distributions for each term. Members of the committee met with departments which varied significantly from the grading guidelines and asked them to provide supporting arguments and evidence for the observed exceptions. While the committee actively pursued fairness in grading across units, it was equally concerned with promoting educationally defensible grading policies within each academic program.

A third example of a university governance process relevant to academic standards is the process of program review. Many universities including my own have a procedure of systematic reviews for all academic programs. Research on program reviews (Wergin, 1998) notes that they rarely seem to stimulate faculty discussion and collaboration about means of improving teaching and student learning, perhaps because the reviews conducted by research universities often focus on indicators of academic prestige such as graduate placements, faculty publications, and research grants.

In sharp contrast to the focus of program reviews in US research universities is the academic audit approach to quality assurance, which was first initiated in the UK and has spread rapidly throughout the world with experiments now underway in the US (Dill, 2000a, 2000b; Massy, 2003). Academic audits are external reviews of the processes that universities employ to assure academic standards. Academic audits evaluate the procedures that universities use for designing curricula, evaluating teaching and assessing learning outcomes, as well the evidence that the quality assurance processes lead to program improvement. In a number of universities in other countries these external reviews have led to the development of internal academic audit committees that review the quality assurance processes of every department and program on a regular basis. The

⁸ The differing grading standards between the humanities and sciences was emphasized by a recent Harvard graduate who criticized the lack of academic challenge he experienced as an undergraduate student:

Those [classes that were so easy] tended to be in history and English, classics and foreign languages, art and philosophy – in other words, in those departments that provided what used to be considered the meat of a liberal arts education. Humanities students generally did the least work, got the highest grades, and cruised academically, letting their studies slide in favor of time-sucking extracurriculars, while their science- and math-minded classmates sometimes had to struggle to reach the B-plus plateau (Douthat, 2005, p. 97).

most effective such process I have seen was implemented ironically in one of the most research-intensive institutions I have ever visited. Within this university the academic quality assurance process was not in the hands of administrators, but the responsibility of a committee of faculty members elected from across the university and consisting of respected researchers and scholars who were committed to assuring academic standards. It was this committee, not the administration, that was actively pressing each department to demonstrate the effectiveness of its processes for improving teaching and student learning. The committee required initial reports from each department on its quality assurance processes, but followed up these reports with meetings with the members of each department to provide criticism and suggest needed improvements. This committee was a formal standing committee of the university, an integral part of the university governance process, with close linkages to the academic deans.

Let me now draw upon these three cases as a means of further illustrating design principles for addressing collective action dilemmas in self-governing organizations. First and obviously these processes were designed and carried out by academics themselves (Ostrom, 2000). They are core processes of each university's academic governance system, not temporary task forces, or procedures delegated to administrative offices or staff members. In comparison, student assessment systems developed in response to state and accreditation demands in the US are rarely part of the formal academic governance process of the university (Peterson, Einarson, Augustine, and Vaughan, 1999). Second, in each case monitoring is applied to all academic units and addresses factors known to affect student learning -- program design, grading standards, and collective processes for assuring academic quality. Research suggests that a social norm of cooperation is most likely to evolve in an organization when its members believe that rules will produce collective benefits and when monitoring is fairly and systematically applied to all, i.e., "free riders" will not be rewarded (Ostrom, 1998). Third, the processes include written reports, but they avoid the danger of empty "proceduralism" by emphasizing collegial discussions. This requires face to face communication between central committees and academic units as a means of reinforcing collective norms, changing expectations, and fostering group identity. Through this communication there is also the greater possibility of disseminating information on means for improving core academic processes including the transfer of best practices developed in other academic units of the university.⁹ Both laboratory and field research suggests that face to face communication in social dilemmas is the most effective means of producing substantial increases in cooperation over time (Ostrom and Walker, 1997).¹⁰

⁹ Research on "learning organizations" -- i.e., organizations skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, as well as adapting their behavior to reflect new knowledge -- has identified a number of activities that are necessary conditions (Dill, 1999). The identified activity *least* in evidence in a study of contemporary universities was a process or structure encouraging the transfer between programs of implemented innovations for improving teaching and student learning.

¹⁰ In their study of academic ethics, Braxton and Bayer (1999) also argued that effective deterrence and detection of proscribed academic behavior is more likely to occur in departments with frequent social contact. Departmental meetings, face-to-face informal interactions, and performance reviews related to

In a related earlier study, *Communication and Organizational Control* -- a book, which I consider a neglected classic of the organization theory literature -- the sociologist Jerald Hage (1974) provided an insightful explanation for the role communication plays in professional self-regulation. Hage conducted extensive field studies of medical organizations and concluded that traditional hierarchical methods of coordination and control are ineffective in professional settings because of the complexity of professional tasks and the need for individual autonomy. Consequently, he argued that necessary coordination must be achieved through a process of socialization that features high levels of communication and feedback about professional tasks. This communication is not vertical – as with administrators, not primarily written as in reports and procedural documents, not episodic, and does not focus on the detection or transmittal of sanctions. Rather, the communication is horizontal – with respected peers, largely verbal and face-to-face, continuous, and focuses on the exchange of information about means of improving core professional tasks.

The role and influence of “face to face communication” among professional peers in addressing dilemmas of collective action highlights what I believe to be the greatest challenge to developing effective communities of learning within research universities – claims for professional autonomy (Fisher, Fairweather, and Amey, 2002). Both individual faculty members and program faculties may object to the types of collegial monitoring mechanisms I have described because they appear to intrude on a professor’s right to teach as s/he believes appropriate. But the assertion of professional autonomy has sometimes been used to reallocate property rights within the university, defining individual courses as exclusive private property (Shulman, 1993) and thereby increasing the costs of collective actions designed to improve student learning to the point that they are avoided.

The major contributors to this observed pattern of professorial isolation are contemporary commitments to academic specialization and prevailing beliefs about academic freedom. Faculty members not only do much of their teaching alone, but because academic sub-fields are defined quite narrowly, many faculty members find it almost impossible to discuss their teaching with one another. In a comprehensive analysis of the professional ideal in America, Bruce Kimball (1992) documents the shift over the 20th century from the belief in service to the public to the active pursuit of individual income and prestige. Reflecting on the academic profession Kimball (1992) asks whether increasing academic specialization has been used “to deflect criticisms of professionals’ power and prestige by disguising their self interest?”(p. 314).

In addition collective efforts at improving student learning are frequently frustrated by assertions of academic freedom. But does this assertion of autonomy in individual teaching serve the public interest or private needs? Marvin Lazerson, (1997) suggests that academic freedom in the US has over time been misinterpreted to mean that individual faculty members have an unchallenged right to determine the content of their courses:

teaching and student learning provide the social ties necessary for the communication, observation, and enforcement of ethical standards.

What professors did inside the classroom had to be defended against external threats...The defense of academic freedom had the effect of making the classroom a “private” domain – as faculty responses to student evaluations often made clear. Any questions about what happened in the classroom, even whether students were learning anything, were viewed as threats to the faculty member’s liberty. The transactions of the classroom, teaching and learning, needed to be excluded from serious observation and contention (Lazerson, 1997, p. 21).

There are important issues of academic freedom involved in the design of curricula as well as the selection of instructional strategies and methods of student assessment. But as Henry Rosovsky, former Dean of the College at Harvard has noted, “[a]cademic freedom does not absolve colleagues or administrators from assuming responsibility for what are essentially matters of procedure, management, good order – and above all else – legitimate student needs” (Rosovsky and Ameer, 1998, p. 150). The critical questions inherent in this debate about academic freedom and the improvement of student learning are the reasons I firmly believe that the public interest in academic standards is best served not by government regulation, academic accreditation, or more perfectly competitive academic markets, but by the active ongoing application of professional judgment through face to face communication among university colleagues.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this discussion of the collective action dilemma confronting the American public research university with a brief story. As part of our decennial institutional accreditation by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges the University of North Carolina has mandated that every department in the university develop and implement this spring an assessment plan designed to improve student learning. At a recent university sponsored assessment workshop, representatives from every department in the College of Arts and Sciences were introduced to the assessment requirement by a well-meaning staff member. In response to the increasing anger and frustration among those attending, the staff member emphasized the “good news” that we would not have to produce the required assessment plan alone, because the plans were intended to be a product of our entire department. All of the departmental representatives at my table responded in a chorus, “that’s not the ‘good news,’ that’s the ‘bad news!’”

The dilemma of collective action I have outlined can be summarized in the following way:

Without some form of coordination or organization to enable individuals to agree upon, monitor, and sanction contributions to the

provision of a [collective] good, the good is underprovided.... (Ostrom and Walker, 1997, p. 69)

The public has entrusted the academic profession with its future human capital. We have been awarded substantial professional autonomy with the expectation that we will in turn provide efficient and equitable communities of learning in which students are taught the knowledge, skills, and values essential to society (Massy, 2003). Developing governance processes that will truly assure and improve student learning will be one of the most significant and meaningful challenges for the American public research university in the coming years.

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