UNC
COLLEGE OF
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THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

PPAQ RESEARCH PROGRAM

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY
CAMPUS BOX 3435
ABERNETHY HALL
CHAPEL HILL, NC 27599-3435

T 919.962.6848
F 919.962.5824
david_dill@unc.edu
www.unc.edu/ppaq

A Matter of Quality:

Markets, Information, and the Assurance of Academic Standards[1]

Professor David D. Dill

Abstract: Global competition has increased the importance of institutions of higher education for individuals as well as for national governments. Policy makers in many countries including Finland are experimenting with new instruments designed to assure value for money in higher education and commercial quality rankings are havening a growing influence on academic behavior. What are the impacts of these various new forces on higher education and what actions can institutions themselves take to assure and improve academic standards?

Introduction

I want to express my deep appreciation for the opportunity to meet with you today as you discuss academic quality in higher education. During the last twenty years academic quality has received increasing attention around the world and is now a particular focus of interest among policymakers in Finland. In my remarks I would like to provide some context for your current discussion by suggesting a definition of academic quality, indicating why it has become a concern among policy makers, and briefly reviewing what we have learned from recent government efforts to ensure academic quality. In my concluding remarks I will suggest some general principles for addressing the issue of academic quality within institutions of higher education.

Over the last decade I have been engaged in evaluations of quality assurance policies in the US, Europe, and Asia and I have also participated in university quality assurance exercises in a number of countries including Finland and the US. In my remarks I will therefore draw upon both my knowledge of the relevant research as well as my practical experience in this field.

[1] Keynote Address Presented at the Kever Conference, Oulu, Finland, 11 October 2006.

As an introductory point I would note that the European Union Ministers responsible for higher education, reflecting on the recent and extensive European experience with external quality assurance, issued a Communiqué in 2003 which stated in part (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2003):

> … consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.

My own experience in this field brings me to a similar conclusion – the public interest in the quality of higher education will best be achieved by strong and effective academic quality assurance processes within institutions of higher education. At the same time, my experience suggests that many institutions of higher education in the world have inadequate processes for assuring academic quality. Furthermore the increasing pressures of higher education expansion, of global competition, and of the changing nature of academic work are weakening the traditional institutional mechanisms by which academic quality has been maintained. Resolving the dilemma between academic autonomy and institutional responsibility for academic quality assurance will require great sensitivity and creativity by both institutional leaders and policy makers.

Defining Academic quality

Let me begin by defining what I mean by academic quality. As you well know, culture and context can cause us to interpret the meaning of words in radically different ways.

Scholarly disputations about the meaning of academic quality have characterized public discussions in every country where the issue has been raised. For example, the initial quality assurance literature in both Europe and the US often cited a classic novel of my generation, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* The leitmotif of Pirsig's book was the search for quality. His famous tagline "what the hell is quality?" subsequently inspired many academics to argue that "academic quality" is amorphous, non-measurable, or so ambiguous a concept as to be inappropriate for government regulation. However it is instructive to read the relevant quote from Pirsig in full:

> Quality … you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things *are* better than others, that is they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes *poof*! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know

> that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. **But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on?** Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw other things in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others … but what's the "betterness?" So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels, and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (Pirsig, 1974: 179) (emphasis added).

I have here highlighted a central phrase of Pirsig's original statement: "But for all practical purposes it really *does* exist. What else are the grades based on?" As Pirsig notes professors routinely identify and differentiate academic quality when they grade student's work, assign academic honors, and evaluate a doctoral dissertation. Academic institutions as we know them are predicated upon the faculty's professional ability to validly and reliably identify and evaluate academic quality in student learning. Herein, I believe, is the heart of the matter.

In my view the public interest in academic quality is defined by academic standards – that is, the level of educational achievement attained by higher education graduates. Public subsidies of higher education in all countries are argued to be in the public interest precisely because of the knowledge, skills, and values we believe educated graduates contribute to the society. This is what economists term human capital, which in its broadest meaning encompasses not only the contributions that educated graduates make to the economy, but also the non-monetary benefits they contribute to society through improved parenting, healthier lifestyles, greater civic participation, and increased social cohesion (Haveman et al. 2003). In short, the public interest is achieved when institutions of higher education genuinely add educational value to their students. My definition of academic quality as equivalent to academic standards is also consistent with the increasing focus of national higher education quality assurance policies on student learning outcomes -- the specific levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students achieve as a consequence of their engagement in a particular academic, professional, or vocational program (Brennan and Shah 2000).

This growing public concern with the efficient production of human capital in higher education institutions is clearly a response to the impacts of globalization. The international mobility of products and services has now been joined by the mobility of natural resources, financial capital, and human skill. In this new world the economic future of all developed nations depends upon their ability to efficiently cultivate their stock of human talent through their educational systems. From this human capital perspective the public interest in higher education is best served by a framework of national policies that maximize -- in as efficient and equitable a manner as possible -- the academic standards attained by graduates of higher education.

While there is good evidence to support this human capital argument for subsidizing higher education, economists have long noted an alternative explanation for the observed relationship between higher education and graduates' lifetime incomes. This is the so-called "signaling" or "screening" hypothesis, in which higher education institutions may not actually add to the knowledge and skills of graduates, but simply provide information to the market place as to which individuals posses the native aptitude and behaviors desired by employers (Johnes, 1993). That this debate is not simply one of economic theory is illustrated by known problems in the Japanese university system. Since admission to Japanese universities has traditionally provided a clear and powerful signal to the market place about the ability and motivation of students, there has been little incentive for faculty members or admitted students to invest heavily in effective teaching and learning at the university level. Consequently, while Japan is noted for the quality of its secondary education there has been ongoing concern in the country about lax academic standards particularly in first-level degree programs.

This problem, however, is not unique to Japan. The extent to which highly regarded colleges and universities in the US function primarily as screening mechanisms was a featured argument of a recent *New York Times* article on the economic value of an MBA degree. The article quoted a business researcher's explanation as to why recruiters paid higher salaries to graduates of top-tier business schools such as Harvard compared to graduates from less prominent universities (Ellin, 2006):

> The real value of an Ivy League business degree is arguably not the education itself, but **the screening of intelligence, drive and past accomplishments that the schools do**. **Just like with undergraduate degrees**, if you're smart enough to get into a top-tier school, you're likely to inspire confidence. (emphasis added)

And a recent Harvard MBA interviewed for the same article agreed saying:

> People tend to give you the benefit of the doubt that you're somewhat intelligent. They assume that **if H.B.S. has done the screening**, they don't need to concern themselves with the intelligence screener. (emphasis added)

But does Harvard effectively educate as well as screen? This may seem like a particularly foolish question, but the academic standards of Harvard and other selective Ivy League universities have recently come under public criticism because of visible evidence of grade inflation (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002). At Harvard University in 1950, for example, about 15 percent of students earned grades of B-plus or better; by 2001, half of all grades earned at Harvard were As or A-minuses. A recent Harvard graduate described in a national magazine article

the lack of academic challenge he experienced in the university's undergraduate program and specifically noted the problem of inconsistent grading standards across academic departments. As the student staff of the *Harvard Crimson* argued in an editorial supporting adoption of college-wide grading standards (Harvard Crimson, 2002):

> Students rely on grades to tell them about the quality of their work. Yet Harvard's deteriorating standards have rendered grades misleading and meaningless, giving students little motivation to improve.

You will have heard of the recent resignation of the President of Harvard University. In the immortal words of the late Clark Kerr of the University of California, Professor Lawrence Summers left the presidency of Harvard the same way he entered it -- "fired with enthusiasm!" While the circumstances leading to his departure are not fully known, the national press emphasized President Summers' lack of social tact and political skill. Less emphasis was made of the fact that he had challenged the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences to address some of the known educational problems of US research universities, including the quality of the undergraduate experience and grade inflation.

In sum, there is evidence that the growing global competition in higher education may encourage institutions of higher education in many countries to emphasize signaling over human capital development -- focusing their efforts and resources on enhancing their relative reputation rather than actually improving teaching and student learning. This I believe is the central issue of academic quality and the challenge confronting both policymakers and institutions of higher education.

The Effects of Market Competition

Let me further illustrate the challenges globalization poses to academic quality as I have defined it by outlining the known impacts of market competition on US higher education. The US system historically has been the most market competitive higher education system in the world. Our public and private colleges and universities each must compete for the best students and faculty members as well as for research grants and other financial resources. But the competitive rivalry within other national systems is growing as governments increasingly adopt market-oriented policies for their higher education systems.

There is evidence that the rivalry among US colleges and universities has markedly increased and is now encouraging many institutions to invest in efforts to improve their institutional reputation rather than investing in efforts to genuinely improve the efficient production of human capital (Brewer, Gates, and

Goldman, 2002). An important contributor to this behavior is information imperfections in the US market for higher education.

One example of this information imperfection is the influence on higher education of commercial university league tables such as *US News and World Report*, which emphasize measures of admissions selectivity and institutional expenditures in their rankings. In a national study of the US higher education market researchers at the Rand Corporation (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman, 2002) discovered that many institutions are attempting to alter their standings in league tables by "cream skimming" the student market. For example, institutions are *linking* tuition discounts with academic merit and student ability in order to increase the measured selectivity of their admissions process. These institutions are also investing in student consumption benefits such as comfortable dormitories, attractive eating facilities, and fiber optic computer networks that will help attract higher ability students. However the researchers discovered that this attempt to build institutional reputation by attracting more able students was not associated with actual improvements in the quality of education provided.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also evidence that the increased competition for reputation is altering the incentives for effective learning for students *within* universities. In recent Congressional hearings on the renewal of the US Higher Education Act, several speakers argued that grade inflation in institutions of higher education provided evidence of declining academic standards. Grade inflation, or more accurately grade compression in which few low marks are awarded to students, may lower student's motivation for significant academic effort, thus negating or undermining the supposed learning benefits to be gained from increased educational expenditures or contact with more able student peers. Of course, many faculty members argue that higher grades are a product of more able students and/or more effective teaching. But a recent study of marking standards at Princeton University concluded that an observed clear growth in higher grades at that institution could not be attributed to increases in student quality or student learning, but was due to more lenient professors and students who badger them for higher marks.[2] Furthermore, while college grades are rising in the US, average college and university entrance scores are falling and the need for remedial education at the university level is increasing. In addition longitudinal surveys of student activities identified as valid predictors of student learning also raise questions about the assumed link between higher grades and more effective education (Kuh, 1999). The studies indicate that in all types of four-year colleges and universities in the US students 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.

Market competition also affects the traditional balance between teaching and research. By definition universities are multi-product organizations, producing both education and research. But increased rivalry inevitably raises incentives for the more visible process of research and lowers incentives for the less visible

[2] *New York Times*, October 12, 1999. As a result of the study a faculty committee was appointed at Princeton to develop recommendations on means of addressing grade inflation.

process of teaching. Not surprisingly national 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, not just in research universities, but in all types of four-year institutions, including small liberal arts colleges.

This decline in faculty time dedicated to teaching also affects the collegial processes necessary for assuring academic standards. Any collective process 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. Similarly institutional governance processes designed to assure academic standards require substantial amounts of faculty time, usually with minimal rewards. The more competitive higher education market therefore encourages the emergence of what 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).

I have been describing the effects of imperfect market competition on the behavior of colleges and universities in the US, but as the EU countries expand their systems of higher education and institutional behavior becomes more rivalrous we can observe similar problems of "academic drift" among institutions of higher education in these nations as well.

What general lessons can be learned from the experience in the more mature US market? First, and most importantly, academic reputation becomes the dominant goal and signal for <u>all</u> institutions of higher education in a competitive market. The indicators of academic reputation drown out the weaker signals of the quality of teaching and student learning and the aggressive pursuit of reputation crowds out activities associated with the improvement of academic standards (Kuh and Pascarella, 2004).

Second, the existing void in valid information on academic quality is not likely to be filled by the market (Dill and Soo, 2005). With many goods and services, a market failure due to insufficient information may motivate commercial publishers to provide the necessary information to consumers (Gormley and Weimer, 1999). But the cost and complexity of developing valid indicators of academic quality with relevance to student choice are significant and for-profit publications already enjoy substantial sales and influence among opinion leaders, higher achieving students, and even university personnel by focusing on readily available and/or highly subjective indicators of academic prestige. More valid and reliable academic quality information for student consumers is therefore best

understood as a public good that must be provided by Government intervention (Dill and Soo, 2005).

Finally, the effects of the current imperfect market competition on academic behavior compromise the capacity of institutions of higher education to maintain and improve academic standards. The incentives of unregulated academic markets encourage faculty members to limit their time investment in teaching first-level degree programs and in the collective activities of academic quality assurance, while maximizing their time investment in the faculties' preferred activities of graduate instruction and research.

In sum because the new competitive higher education market is characterized by inadequate and inappropriate information, an ambiguous conception – "institutional reputation" – comes to represent academic quality in the public mind. The distorting influence of reputation in the higher education market means that the educational costs of institutions of high reputation provide a "price umbrella" for all of higher education and present spending targets for less well known institutions that wish to compete by raising their prices (Massy, 2005). I note that when the British Government adopted the controversial policy of permitting its universities to raise tuition up to 3,000 GBP, almost all of the former polytechnics followed the old universities in charging the maximum amount. Competitive markets thereby encourage an academic "arms race" for institutional reputation among all institutions – universities and polytechnics alike -- which rapidly increases the costs of higher education and devalues the improvement of student learning.

Policies

Not surprisingly, public concern with the maintenance of academic standards in the emerging environment of mass higher education and global competition has motivated experiments with new policies designed to assure academic quality in institutions of higher education. A number of different types of policy instruments have been adopted, but let me briefly review what we have learned from the most frequently implemented policies: institutional accreditation, subject assessments, performance funding, and academic audits.

In the United States the institutional accreditation role is performed by six regional accrediting agencies responsible for determining whether institutional missions and objectives are appropriate for the institutional or degree level, whether sufficient resources are available to meet the objectives, and whether the resources are being effectively applied to produce the desired outcomes. Accreditation is criterion-referenced in that it compares observed performance against pre-set threshold standards determined by the accrediting agency. The accreditation process generally utilizes a combination of performance indicators, self study, and peer review. Because in the US eligibility for federal student aid is contingent upon enrolling in an institution accredited by an agency formally

recognized by the Department of Education, academic accreditation is for all intents and purposes mandatory in the American higher education market.

While US accreditation "missionaries" have been traveling the world advocating American-style accreditation as the best means of assuring academic quality, within the US institutional accreditation is increasingly viewed as ineffective in assuring academic standards. Institutional accreditation is criticized as being too comprehensive in its scope, too focused on input criteria rather than policymakers' concerns about academic standards, and insufficiently transparent in that accreditation reviews are not required to be made public (Dill, 2000a). Furthermore, while US college and university accreditation has existed for over 100 years, there is remarkably little empirical evidence supporting the contention that accreditation helps assure academic standards.

The accrediting agencies claim to have responded to these criticisms and to have reformed their processes to focus more on student learning. In fact there are some innovative and promising new approaches to accreditation in the US, particularly in professional fields such as engineering, business, and teacher education. Nonetheless, the recent report of the Secretary of Education's Committee on the Future of Higher Education (2006), noting the continuing decline in US college graduation rates and the significant recent drop in the literacy scores of college graduates, called for a new national accreditation framework with standards primarily focused on measurable quality outcomes rather than inputs.

Outside the US new forms of institutional accreditation are being experimented with and a number of EU countries are adopting comprehensive accreditation of academic programs in association with the Bologna reforms. These new forms of accreditation may offer more promise than the US model, but the early experience with comprehensive program accreditations in countries such as Germany suggests that this process is expensive, exhausting, and may be unsustainable in the long term.[3]

Subject Assessments

In contrast to institutional accreditation subject assessments as implemented in countries such as Denmark, The Netherlands, and the UK focus on the quality of delivered performance in teaching and learning at the subject or program level. That is, assessments attempt to make judgments about the quality of academic programs rather than a judgment about institutional threshold standards. Since a primary rational for subject assessments is accountability, assessment results are made publicly available and are often published in a way that permits comparisons among institutions.

Assessments too have limitations as a mechanism of quality assurance. Small countries may not have the critical mass of subject experts to permit effective

[3] See the policy analysis of the German accreditation system available on the Public Policy for Academic Quality (PPAQ) website: www.unc.edu/ppaq

external peer review of all fields. The rapid expansion of subject fields in the new context of mass higher education, and particularly the rapid development of new interdisciplinary programs for which there may be a limited number of external peers, also raise questions as to whether systematic external review of all subjects is feasible over time. Furthermore, as institutions of higher education develop more sophisticated management systems featuring internal evaluation and assessment procedures, external subject reviews carried out on a timetable set by an external agency and unconnected to institutional administrative processes are increasingly seen as redundant and intrusive.

Research on the impacts of Subject Assessments (Henkel, 2000) indicates that these new instruments have helped to inject greater concern for teaching and learning among faculty members in the university sector. Measurable affects include significant increases in the amount of communication and collaboration among faculty members on teaching-related activities within academic units that have been subject to assessments. There is also evidence of the development of new corporate mechanisms within institutions of higher education for assuring faculty accountability for academic quality and the maintenance of standards. On the negative side, these processes have absorbed a great deal of faculty time and if poorly designed can become primarily exercises in paper work. There is also a danger that subject assessments, particularly as they were initially implemented in the UK, focused too much on teaching "performance" and as such may have promoted teaching orthodoxies that undermined the improvement of student learning.

Performance Funding

The most recent effort to improve academic standards involves policies on performance funding. In over half of the US states the traditional funding model based upon broad measures of inputs such as enrolments, expected ratios of faculty to students, and price indices for staff salaries and library books is being supplemented with performance-based funding linked to narrower indicators of university efficiency and effectiveness. (Burke and Serban, 1997). Predictably the major limitation of performance funding policies for teaching and learning quality is the inadequacy of available data and measurements of quality. In the US performance funding still tends to focus on input and process-oriented indicators of academic quality.

As a consequence performance funding policies as currently designed have had minimal influence on the quantity or quality of student learning (Burke, 2002). In a number of the US states that first adopted performance funding of public universities, the most positive impact of the new policy has been ironically on indicators of academic reputation 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.

A major weakness of the policies is that they 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). For example, the University of Tennessee in accord with the policy requires a sample of graduating students to take the required test of General Education, but makes no use of the results in academic decision making. As an evaluator noted: "[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 the academic departments that demonstrated enhanced quality, 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 surveys indicate that most of the faculty members supposedly affected by the performance indicators were unaware of the policy's very existence.

Academic Audit

One new type of quality assurance instrument developed in Europe and now being applied here in Finland is Academic Audit. Academic audits are external reviews directed at the institution level. Unlike accreditation, however, academic audits make no attempt to comprehensively review an institution's resources and activities, but rather are focused on those processes by which universities assure their academic standards. Academic audits evaluate the procedures that universities use for designing curricula, evaluating teaching and assessing learning outcomes, as well as seek evidence that the existing quality assurance processes actually lead to program improvement. Academic audits therefore begin with the assumption that universities have the primary responsibility for assuring academic standards and the audits evaluate how an institution satisfies itself that its chosen standards are being achieved. As observed in Sweden, the focus is not on "quality," but on "quality work." Audit reports, similar to financial audits, are usually made public. Academic audits offer some measure of public accountability in that they provide assurance that institutions of higher education subject to market competition are seriously attending to issues of academic quality as well as cost.

Evaluations of academic audits in a number of countries have noted the weaknesses and strengths of the audit process. The first academic audits, which

were developed in the UK, were criticized for too great a focus on university-level processes and paperwork. More effective audits now focus on the critical relationship between university-level quality assurance processes and the behavior of academic units, seeking evidence that academic programs are taking concrete steps to improve teaching and student learning (Dill, 2000b). Overall, well-designed academic audits, while substantially less costly and less intrusive than subject assessments, provide some similar benefits. These include making the improvement of academic standards an institutional priority, facilitating active discussion and cooperation within academic units on means for improving teaching and student learning, and clarifying responsibility for improving academic quality at the academic unit, faculty, and institutional level.

Let me take a moment now to briefly summarize, based upon the available research and my own practical experience with a number of these instruments, what I believe we are learning about public policies for the improvement of academic standards.

First, as I noted in the introduction to my remarks, the experience with each of these policy instruments in the new market environment of higher education appears to reinforce the view that the most successful means of maintaining and improving academic standards will be the development of effective institutional processes for assuring academic quality.

Second, while evaluations of these policy instruments provide some proof that faculty members and institutions have improved their internal processes for assuring academic standards, there is limited evidence of these improvements occurring without external pressure on higher education institutions. Furthermore, these evaluations provide evidence of substantial variation in efforts to assure academic standards both within and between institutions. Therefore some type of external assessment of academic quality will likely be needed as part of any effective policy framework for higher education. I believe therefore that most countries will, similar to Finland, eventually adopt some form of academic audit as a means of assuring academic standards.

Third, while performance funding may have some uses in higher education, it is unlikely to solve the challenges of assuring academic standards. Valid general performance indicators of learning outcomes have become the “holy grail” of higher education and are likely similarly unobtainable. Furthermore the most commonly used performance funding measures, such as student retention and graduation rates, are clearly subject to the manipulation of academic standards.

Fourth, the market in higher education is imperfectly competitive primarily because of inadequate information. Therefore appropriate public policies are warranted to help provide needed information on academic quality. However, contrary to popular economic ideology, the distinctive nature of the higher education market suggests that improved information is most likely to assure academic quality if we focus on its use by the producers -- the faculty -- rather than its influence on consumers.

Finally, both the research on academic quality policy instruments and the extensive research on student learning in higher education suggest that the

primary focus of efforts to assure academic standards must be at the level of the academic unit and program. It is here where faculty members' identities and careers are centered and it is here where additional efforts to improve teaching and student learning are likely to have the greatest payoff for society. Therefore the ultimate test of any institution's quality assurance processes is whether is whether it has a measurable impact on the behavior of academic units and programs.

In sum, public policy can provide the framework conditions for the improvement of academic standards, primarily through accountability for institutional quality assurance processes and the provision of more valid and reliable information on academic performance. However the assurance of academic standards ultimately will depend upon changes within institutions of higher education.

Let me therefore turn to a brief discussion of principles for guiding the improvement of academic standards by institutions themselves.

Collective Action in Self-Governing Organizations

To provide a context for my remarks about assuring academic standards at the institutional level I first need to say a few words about a very complex subject, the improvement of student learning. We have learned a great deal over the years about university teaching and student learning and there is ample evidence that the classroom behaviors of individual faculty members influence students' acquisition of course subject matter. However, academic standards are most likely to be assured and improved not by the independent actions of individual teachers but by the collective actions of faculties. 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 (2005) in their magisterial review of research on the impacts of college on students note that learning 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 program content and their educational development are significantly associated with the pattern and sequence of the modules in which students enroll, by program requirements that integrate learning from separate modules, and by the frequency of communication and interaction among faculty members in the subject field (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). In sum our public obligation to assure student learning in institutions of higher education is reflected not only in the commitment and energy we give to our individual teaching and course modules, but also in our

collective zeal to assure and improve student learning at the program, department, college, and university level (Fisher, Fairweather, and Amey, 2003).[4]

Institutions of higher education best serve the public interest when they can function as autonomous, self-governing organizations that design and organize their own curricula and degree programs as do the universities and polytechnics in Finland. However, a common type of problem in any self-governing organization is what is termed "a dilemma of collective action" in which the rational choices made by individuals within the organization do not maximize the collective good of the institution. The problem of assuring academic standards as I have outlined it can be framed in these terms. In the emerging context of higher education the rational decisions individual faculty members make with regard to the activity of teaching may not optimize the learning that university graduates contribute to society. Recent 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 addressing this dilemma of collective action.

A first design principle as I have already noted is the provision of information. For a faculty member to decide that participating in a departmental committee on quality assurance or spending an additional hour improving a first degree-level program is more important than an equivalent hour spent upon her or his research, s/he needs to make a prediction as to the collective benefits generated by this cooperative activity. However, in most departments and programs information on student outcomes is murky or not readily available and therefore the commitment to collective action 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 as I have suggested that the state and the overall institution subsidize 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. For example, many institutions of higher education subsidize the regular production of student evaluations of teaching. This information supposedly assists the individual teacher in improving her or his instruction, but it is of little assistance in promoting collective action by faculty members to improve academic standards.

What type of information is needed? I would suggest information on grade distributions, student retention and graduation rates, graduate employment and

[4] 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).

further education, as well as average salaries of graduates. In Australia the government requires and subsidizes the production of information by program on graduates' employment, average salaries, and further study prospects through a Graduate Destination Survey. The government also subsidizes the College Experience Questionnaire that provides graduates' perceptions of teaching quality, skills learned, and their satisfaction with their education in their academic program.[5] More useful still would be data such as that produced by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the US, which provides information on student engagement in learning activities known to be associated with effective learning (Zemsky, 2005).

A necessary condition of any such quality-related information is that it must be provided by academic program or department. Data and information provided only for the institution as a whole is essentially useless for assuring academic quality as it will not inform or motivate faculty members at the program level on the improvement of academic standards. For this reason, relevant academic quality information must be produced and published in a manner that permits comparisons across programs as well as within programs over time.

With regard to measures of academic learning outcomes, as I previously noted general indictors will likely have little influence and will in any event provide little insight as to how faculty members can improve academic programs. Here I strongly agree with the views of Ernie Pascarella and Pat Terenzini (2005) who noted in the conclusion to their review of research on college impacts:

> Assessment of department-specific learning outcomes can be a useful vehicle for change. Assessment plans and activities developed and approved by faculty can provide an empirical foundation of systematic and ongoing rethinking, redesigning, and restructuring programs and curricula. For faculty members, trained to be skeptical about claims, evidence is the gold standard in the academy, and they are unlikely to adopt new ways of thinking or behaving without first being convinced that the new pedagogies and organizational structures are better than the old. In addition, the findings of assessment studies specific to faculty members' academic units will generate more interest and action than general or institution-wide evidence. (Pascarella and Terenzeni, 2005, p. 648) (emphasis added).

While the provision of relevant information is a necessary first condition for improving academic standards, it is not sufficient. For self-governing communities to take responsibility for their own standards, it is also necessary that the members of the community collectively design their own rules, that the rules

[5] See the policy analysis of the Australian CEQ and GDS surveys available on the Public Policy for Academic Quality (PPAQ) website: www.unc.edu/ppaq

be enforced by members of the local community, and that monitoring mechanisms are fairly and systematically applied (Ostrom, 2000). Simply stated in this way, these appear to be elementary principles of academic governance, but let me put flesh on these abstract ideas with several concrete examples of institutional governance processes designed to encourage the improvement of academic standards.

My first example is the formal process institutions of higher education employ for approving new academic programs and courses. In US institutions of higher education the process by which the educational content of newly proposed programs or individual modules 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 (CNAA) 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 to conduct an independent, thorough assessment of the proposal. The panel is composed of staff from departments not involved in the proposal, but with relevant knowledge or experience, as well as two external members with expertise in the field. 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. At a polytechnic I have visited the Faculty Senate created a standing committee to develop and implement institution-wide marking standards. The committee defined and published general grade distribution guidelines for the institution 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 governance process for improving academic standards are institutional reviews of the quality assurance processes of every department and program on a regular basis. These internal academic audit processes have developed in those countries where external academic audits of institutions of higher education were required by policymakers. The most effective such process I have seen was developed 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 was 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, which 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 Faculty Senate, 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 the improvement of academic standards within institutions of higher education. First and obviously these quality assurance processes, similar to the measures of academic learning outcomes advocated by Pascarella and Terenzini, were designed and implemented by academics themselves (Ostrom, 2000). They are ongoing core processes of each institution's academic governance system, not temporary task forces or procedures delegated to administrative offices or staff members. In comparison, many institutions have wasted money and effort by creating quality assurance administrators and offices that are rarely part of the formal academic governance process of the university, but more like "Potemkin Villages" erected to divert the attention of external visitors. Second, in each case monitoring is applied to <u>all</u> academic units and addresses factors known to affect student learning -- program design, student

assessment, marking guidelines, and programmatic processes for assuring academic standards. 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 direct 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 institution. 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).

Conclusion

Let me conclude these remarks with a brief personal story about academic quality assurance in the US. In preparation for our recent decennial institutional accreditation by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges the Provost of the University of North Carolina mandated that every department develop for the first time and implement within a matter of months an assessment plan designed to improve student learning. At a university sponsored assessment workshop that I and other representatives from every department in the College of Arts and Sciences were required to attend we were introduced to this new assessment regime by a well-meaning staff member. Anxious to calm the growing 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. Rather, she said, 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!'"

In short, effectively assuring academic standards in self-governing academic communities will require us to confront a dilemma of collective action:

> 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 efficiently and effectively academic programs in which students genuinely learn the knowledge, skills, and values essential to

society. Developing governance processes that will truly assure and improve academic standards will be one of the most significant and meaningful challenges for institutions of higher education in the coming years.

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