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STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES—
IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL ACCREDITATION
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In 1885, Harvard University President Charles Eliot established the New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, with the intention of creating a watchdog organization that would focus on ensuring the quality of higher education programs. The goal was to develop a robust program of self-examination and peer review that would have sufficient credibility to avoid excessive government oversight.

Today, accreditation of higher education in America is under attack, because we have not done a good job of demonstrating that we are attending to the goal of ensuring quality that President Eliot envisioned 230 years ago. If we are to maintain our system of regional accreditation, college administrators and higher education advocates must develop a substantive response to valid criticisms and articulate that response publicly.

NEASC is the oldest of the nation's five regional accrediting agencies. As former chair of NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education and as a member of the national Council for Higher Education Accreditation, I have had much experience with regional accreditation.

My years as a faculty member and administrator on college campuses—rural and urban, big and small — also inform my perspective on our system of evaluating the institutional effectiveness of colleges and universities. I have led many site visits and have hosted my fair share as well. What we have works, but we need to improve it. And we need to articulate its strengths and our willingness to make changes.

I believe the strength of our accrediting process is the use of peer reviewers supported by professional staff. Just as the legal and medical professions use peer reviewers to assess competence and effectiveness, our nation's institutions of higher learning have long used peer review to assess institutional effectiveness on our campuses. We know what to look for, and we know when we see it . . . and when we don't. And, because "everyone is watching" (state boards, legislators and other constituencies), we take the process of peer review seriously.

I can honestly say that in my 45 years as a professor, administrator, and now a college president, I have never known someone involved in the accreditation process who was not ethical, professional and committed to supporting institutional improvement while preserving the integrity of the process.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that our accreditation system is not perfect, and needs work—from within. Among our critics are federal government officials, who argue that measures of institutional effectiveness are indirect measures at best, and do not directly address student learning outcomes. They tell us that graduation rates, retention rates, and even graduate placement data are indirect measures. These metrics presume learning, but do not reflect actual student work.

The good news? We have a timely opportunity to move forward on implementing a nationally accepted model of assessing and measuring student outcomes, a model that could be incorporated into existing accreditation standards. I am referring to a model developed through a recent nine-state project that is now ready for broader implications.

Connecticut was one of the nine states in the Multi-State Collaborative Project (MSCP) — Utah, Massachusetts, Oregon, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Indiana being the others—and Eastern was one of five institutions in Connecticut involved in the project.

The MSCP has the potential of providing a model of assessing student learning based on actual student work that can be used to align with the broader accountability expectations of accrediting agencies, state boards, state legislators, and other stakeholders. The project, which ran from 2013-15, was based on a similar project that was completed in Massachusetts.

AAC&U's VALUE rubric (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education), was used to assess the broad intellectual skills of critical thinking, written/oral communication, and quantitative literacy. The VALUE rubric parallels NEASC's Standard Four and AAC&U's Common Learning Outcomes, a reminder that the educational community shares a common interest in improving the tools we have available to assess institutional effectiveness.

The project assessed the actual artifacts of student work—the portfolio of a graphic art student; an award-winning educational video produced by early childhood education students; or a robotic prototype built by a computer science student.

By focusing on student work, the project avoided standardized tests, something faculty have consistently told us cannot properly evaluate the diversity and richness of individual student learning. Another key to the model was that the review process was undertaken by out-of-state faculty reviewers who did not assign the work or come from the same campus.

An assessment model that looks at the outcomes of applied learning—senior capstone projects, undergraduate research, service learning, internships—can improve teaching/learning and student outcomes while providing data to support accountability measures at the state level and as a criterion that could be used as part of our national accreditation system.

The Multi-State Collaborative project recognized that campus assessments and statewide protocols are distinctive data systems, so the project allowed for variations in institution's size, sector, resources, needs, and assessment readiness.

This provided comparisons across mission/size/sector to identify best practices and assessment measures, an important consideration for developing a national assessment model that can accommodate private and public institutions, as well as two- and four-year campuses.

With 20 percent of the states of the Union now with experience in the MSCP student outcome assessment model, it would seem to be a wonderful opportunity worth pursuing more broadly at the national level. Some of the questions that need to be researched and answered include: Can we aggregate data generated at the sector, state, and national levels for the benefit of students while also meeting accountability expectations of key constituencies? How we align this model with emerging occupational sectors at the state and national levels, i.e. STEM, Health/Life Sciences? Can we scale up a campus-level assessment model to the national level? Can this model be applied across the various sectors within the higher education community? And can student learning outcomes truly reflect educational quality?

Certainly our campuses are ready to focus on student learning outcomes as a major element of measuring institutional effectiveness and as a possible new criterion in the accreditation process. An AAC&U report released just this week found that 85 percent of institutions have a common set of intended learning outcomes and most are tracking student achievement against those outcomes.

Almost all institutions are offering applied learning projects as a concrete way for students to practice and demonstrate their learning; this aligns with the fact that the majority of the nation's employers feel such projects will improve a student's career prospects.

As we work on developing a possible model of assessing institutional effectiveness using student learning outcomes, college presidents and advocacy groups would do well to respond to U.S. Senator Marco Rubio and other politicians who have been at the heart of recent scrutiny of the accreditation process. The Senator's major arguments:

- (1) **The accreditation process is not “tough enough.”** Apparently regional accrediting agencies have not closed enough campuses in recent years. That isn't our goal. The goal of regional accreditation is to evaluate institutional performance and work closely with campuses to address weaknesses. My own experience going on focused site visits to other campuses, as well as helping institutions on probation to overcome serious challenges, is echoed by the experiences of my colleagues. Peer review works, especially with the excellent follow up and continued scrutiny that is delivered by site teams and accrediting agency staff. This heightened scrutiny and the imposition of sanctions demonstrate that accrediting agencies and their members take accreditation standards seriously.
- (2) **Regional accrediting agencies thwart innovation.** I would argue that innovation and relevance are at the heart of today's college campuses. For instance, many state universities began as normal schools in the 1800s. These institutions, as well as flagship universities and private colleges, have strong teacher preparation programs, which are the source of pedagogical innovations, advances in educational technology, and other improvements on campus. Other fountainheads of innovation on college campuses include the many consortia, professional associations, and other educationally focused groups that reach out to faculty and staff to provide professional development opportunities. With so many private sector businesses selling various forms of education today, traditional campuses have had to respond with new, creative approaches to classroom learning.
- (3) **The accreditation process is dominated by traditional campuses and does not support low-cost or alternative educational providers, or non-traditional students.** Senator Rubio cites online education and technical training as examples of alternative forms of higher education, and says they are not covered by regional accreditation. This is not always the case. In my state of Connecticut, we have an exclusively online college (Charter Oak) that is fully accredited, and technical education is provided by 12 community colleges—all accredited. What we cannot support are for-profit organizations that offer low-cost convenience without substance or real learning.

Senator Rubio also encourages the use of internships and credit for work experience to help nontraditional students complete their degrees. The fact is, we do all that. On my own campus, veterans use the ACE model to receive credits, while a variety of other programs help adult students gain credit for work experience. The same is true for student interns. Other campuses do the same. We need to make sure that these “value added” elements of our mission are articulated in our public message.

While we work diligently to validate an assessment model that focuses on student outcomes and adopt that model across the various higher education sectors in this country, college presidents must also continue to articulate the fundamental value of higher education and the need for renewed public support for our nation's colleges and universities.

Fifteen years ago, America was #1 in the world in the percentage of adults with a college degree. We are now 14th. We have actually marginally increased our percentage of adults with a college degree, yet at the same time, 13 other nations have surged past us.

The level of educational attainment among a nation's citizenry is a measure of innovation, productivity, and national strength. For our free democracy, education is America's insurance policy for maintaining an open, unfettered public discourse on the issues facing our nation.

It is not coincidence that tax support of public universities and colleges has eroded at the same time that our educational position among the world's nations has declined. We need to reinvest in our higher education system, including making a college degree affordable for low-income and minority families, if we are to regain our status as the most educated people of the world.

This is especially true when considering the educational requirements of today's jobs. Georgetown University researchers project that two-thirds of all the jobs created in the United States in the next decade will require a two- or four-year college education. The social mobility of our people and the economic security of our nation lie in the balance.

With such high stakes, we must protect and sustain our national system of higher education accreditation at all costs, for it has been this system that has demanded and ensured the **quality of education** on American campuses for 230 years.