

The Move to Openness and Accountability: Evolution, Not Revolution

By Joseph A. Alutto

Despite much vigorous debate on the subject, higher education today is not changing its fundamental purpose or way of operating. Universities are, however, moving away from undefined rhetoric about what they do and moving toward being more open in their decision making. This shift is a normal evolution, continuing higher education's history of responding to changing societal or market needs. It is not a revolutionary development that changes the very nature of higher education.

Certainly, we are seeing a growing demand for measures of accountability that are more quantifiable, consistent, and independently assessed. In the past, the academy tended to assess and assert the quality of its efforts through idiosyncratic institutional perspectives or mystical and imprecise assessments by peers. Both of these approaches provide indirect evidence, are open to multiple interpretations, and are vague in terms of connection with the actual value of our programs.

A move to more-open budgeting systems and market-driven approaches to university decision making will demystify what has been the standard rhetoric of university life.

Many would argue that the humanities, for example, have already made such adjustments. In some cases, the need for more undergraduate humanities instructors has been met not by adding faculty but by increasing the number of doctoral students, teaching assistants, and adjunct faculty, thereby lowering the overall costs of teaching.

But at the same time, the quality of the classroom experience has not been assured, and the larger numbers of doctoral students has had the effect of diverting the best faculty to doctoral seminars. Some universities have thus drifted into becoming commodity providers in markets where the cost per credit hour, rather than quality, dominates; where courses taught by teaching assistants do not enhance student-recruitment efforts; and where there is little ability to generate net revenues sufficient to support activities that fail to support themselves.

Nonetheless, a more explicitly market-driven approach should be welcomed by any institution truly committed to the critical assessment and free flow of information. As universities go forward, the pressure will not come from wondering how to return to a past where accountability was vaguely defined, and where university leadership was unfettered by the need to acknowledge connections between inputs and outcomes.

Instead, the future will be one in which universities are expected to articulate their mission and their strategy for achieving it. This will require the use of multiple sets of objective and subjective data, as well as information about the distinctiveness that is built into programs through carefully guided investments of resources. Open alignment among investments in programs, and clear measures of effects and outcomes from such investments, will be necessary.

In other words, universities will have to decide what they can and will support, as well as what they will not.

Until now, we have failed to develop a valid, reliable assessment process. This is a critical failing, because the more undocumented beliefs about our performance we assert, the more difficult it will be to secure support for overall institutional goals. Instead we have to be thoughtful, systematic, and open about what we are attempting to do and how well we are doing it. We must accept the reality that regardless of how "metric driven" we are, there will always be imprecision in our accountability measures. We must also support innovation and investment in important scholarship, teaching, and engagement.

The ability to find the balance between centralization and decentralization, between short-term netrevenue generation and investment in low-revenue-generating activities, ultimately will differentiate successful from unsuccessful institutions.

The fundamental nature of universities and the way they have operated in the past will not be changed by these moves toward greater openness. However, as universities respond to market realities, they will have to build different internal allocation and planning structures. University leaders at all levels will have to be focused, disciplined, and prepared to clarify the goals and metrics associated with success, articulating connections that in the past were never even considered. Such actions will ensure that universities fulfill their commitment to seek ever greater discovery, learning, and engagement in a fast-changing world.

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