Enhancing Program Quality

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Among the most critical issues facing community colleges in the 1980s is quality: its assessment, its enhancement, its relationship to resource allocation. Whatever the long-term consequences of the spirited public and private dialogue about quality, there seems little doubt that we are entering a period of introspection concerning community colleges' purposes and performance. At the least, the changing environment has encouraged us to reevaluate our priorities. The period of rapid expansion has ended; public support has become markedly less predictable, and, as a result, our future seems less secure. Faced with a turbulent environment, quality may be our key to the future.

It is the thesis of this article that all of us concerned with community colleges need to be more self-conscious, reflective, and purposeful about our role as guardians of quality. Instead of accepting the status quo, we need to renew our commitment to assessing and designing for quality. Along with a review and critique of current institutional approaches to quality, some suggestions are made for the enhancement of quality in the two-year college.

Institutional Perspectives on Quality

Concern about quality is a prominent theme in the history of the two-year college, and efforts to design for quality can be traced at least as far back as the beginning of this century and the early history of Joliet Junior College. Yet it is an historical fact that self-evaluation as a basis for program and institutional improvement has been undertaken only infrequently in most institutions. Today there still seems to be reluctance to embrace the complementary issues of quality assessment and quality enhancement.

There is evidence that a growing number of community colleges are engaging in program and quality assessment as a foundation for improvement. Faced with financial constraints, institutions involved in

the evaluation of quality are doing so within the context of financial planning and resource allocation. To maintain quality concurrent with stable or declining support, many institutions are choosing to limit the scope of their offerings through evaluation processes linked to reallocation of institutional resources (Massey, 1981). Quality has become a major criterion in the distribution of limited resources in which the overarching questions are 1) what programs, if any, should be discontinued? and 2) what should be the level of continued program support?

There is a wide range of approaches to designing for quality. Some institutions evaluate quality within the context of their own long-range financial planning models, some use models developed by such organizations as the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), a few colleges use formal program reviews, many undertake quality assessment in preparation for an accreditation visit, and still other institutions rely on informal assessment. In terms of the assessment of quality itself, there are important differences across institutions: some rely on quantitative indicators, others prefer qualitative ones; some emphasize resources and input factors, others emphasize outcomes or "value-added" approaches. These differences notwithstanding, the variety of approaches to evaluating program quality should not obscure the more telling point: most institutional efforts to assess program quality are designed to reach summative judgments about program worth for purposes of allocating institutional resources, especially financial ones.

For example, El Paso Community College, El Paso, Texas recently has established detailed procedures for adding, modifying, and deleting courses. This process was established in the belief that the initial step in achieving quality is through an efficient evaluative process that produces courses and programs to meet community and student needs. To this end, a Curriculum Review Committee was formed and charged with the responsibility for evaluating and recommending various curricular changes. The committee consists of six faculty (three from Arts and Sciences and three from Occupational Education), one administrator, two students (one from Arts and Sciences and one from Occupational Education), a representative from Counseling, and the Curriculum Facilitator for the three-campus district, who chairs the committee. The committee depends heavily on the rationale and documentation provided as part of each curriculum proposal, which may be initiated by a faculty member, staff member, or administrator. Proposals move from the initiator to the department chairperson in the department affected, to the dean, to the Curriculum Review Committee. The final recommendation of the committee is forwarded to the Dean of Instructional Resources and to the Vice President of Instructional and Student Affairs, who has final authority to accept or reject the committee's recommendation. This detailed educational program review takes into account fiscal planning, community needs, job opportunities, state guidelines,

availability of human resources, and facility considerations.

Although the curriculum review committee is not a new creation, faculty and administrators at two Kansas community colleges report that course proposals on their campuses are being analyzed much more intently than in the past. The number of rejections and requests for additional information have increased markedly in the past two years, which clearly seems to reflect efforts to use limited resources in the most advantageous manner.

The program review process is an important beginning in the search for quality, but there are major weaknesses in many current approaches to designing for quality. Most institutional approaches are limited because they are based largely on traditional approaches to evaluation, approaches adapted from four-year colleges and universities and accrediting agencies. With few exceptions, most institutional assessments have used limited and narrow criteria to evaluate quality (Kuh, 1981). Judgments about quality are based largely on inferences about resources (such as adequacy of the learning resource center), input variables (such as faculty qualifications), and products (such as job placement rates of occupational students and transfer success of program graduates) in lieu of systematic evaluations of what a program or institution does with its students, faculty, and resources.

To be sure, resources, inputs, and products can provide a partial foundation for making judgments about what quality looks like. But such an exclusive reliance on them can also induce a complacency about subtler, yet equally vital, questions of quality (Conrad and Pratt, 1983) Questions about the process—such as what is the quality of teaching and learning; what is the degree of intellectual excitement among students, faculty, and staff; and what does a program or institution actually contribute or "value-added" in terms of student learning and development?—should also form the basis of any evaluation and design for quality.

Mauksch (1980) has suggested that for much too long we have failed to examine course content and teaching in higher education and treated it as a "secluded activity under the mantle of academic freedom." Challenging the methods and techniques of the researcher is accepted and expected, but examination of classroom activities are viewed as an intrusion on the instructor's right to choose content and method. Mauksch argues that if teaching is a scholarly activity it too must be opened to peer scrutiny just like research, not necessarily through classroom visitation but through evaluation of the teacher's course outline and resources. "The course outline, currently a bureaucratic requirement, can become a scholarly document reflecting the teacher's competence and scholarship" (Mauksch, 1980, p. 7).

In any discussion of teaching evaluation, the part-time instructor, often in the majority at two-year colleges, must be considered. The college interested in quality must expect part-time faculty as well as full-time faculty to stay abreast of their academic field, maintain

high academic standards, interact with students outside of class, and understand and support the college's mission (Maher and Ebben, 1978). To achieve these goals, the institution must establish a hiring procedure and an assessment plan to identify and reinforce these characteristics.

A recent California study of community colleges (Eaton, 1982) suggested, among other things, that academic standards and competency expectations be examined. Following an examination of grading procedures, the study recommended that expectations be established. Coincidental to that point, one California college found that placing class grade rosters in the faculty member's personnel file caused an immediate drop in class G.P.A.s and an abatement of grade inflation. One might assume that focusing on grades caused faculty to grade more stringently. As standards are established for courses or groups of courses for degrees, students have a clear expectation of what is required for successful completion. Departmental examinations often can promote consistent achievement across courses.

Any discussion of academic standards and competency expectations at the two-year college would be incomplete without mention of Miami-Dade's recent work in that area. Changes in their program came about with the realization that they were often credentialing without proper student achievement (Dubocq, 1981). The school has now established standards of academic progress, which include close monitoring of course work and minimum standards of performance in order for students to remain in good standing. These performance standards are accompanied by intervention measures which provide assistance to the student who is not making satisfactory progress. There is evidence that student performance is improving through the academic alert system. In fall 1980, 4,171 students were put on academic alert; 82 percent improved enough to avoid being placed on academic warning. Another group of 600 students raised their grade averages by .88 after taking advantage of assistance programs. Those who did not participate in assistance programs suffered a further average decline of .44 (Dubocq, 1981).

While these efforts to address quality focus on formative evaluation and intervention to improve performance, that is not always the case. Unfortunately, almost all institutional efforts to assess quality are exclusively summative. Evaluation aimed solely at reaching summative decisions about the future of programs is threatening to administrators, staff, and faculty—those who share responsibility for preserving quality. Ironically, it may evenwork against quality enhancement by lowering faculty and staff morale. Moreover, the exclusive reliance on summative evaluation means that not enough attention is paid to the relative strengths and weaknesses of programs and, more important, the ways in which they might be improved.

As a further example of formative evaluation to enhance performance, Kansas City Kansas Community College recently has adopted a plan to evaluate and improve administrative activities. The plan not only monitors and intervenes to improve performance but also

rewards merit. In March each administrator develops three to five measurable, personal objectives that mesh with institutional goals and the individual's functional responsibilities for the preceding academic year. These objectives are reviewed and progress evaluated by the developer, his or her immediate supervisor, and one other, usually the college president, in March, October, and the following February. After the February review the administrator is evaluated for retention with no raise, a cost-of-living raise, or merit pay. Meritorious performance is rewarded through merit pay, plus a professional allowance for travel funds, and a choice between accruing days toward a sabbatical leave or additional days of vacation. After one year the procedure has been so successful that the bargaining unit is reported to be considering the plan for faculty.

In spite of these promising beginnings toward the enhancement of quality, one of our most fundamental concerns about institutional efforts to address quality is the widely shared assumption that financial resources and program quality are inextricably tied. By linking quality assessment to current and future resource allocation, institutions are indicating that the maintenance and enhancement of program excellence are primarily dependent on financial resources. Money has come to be viewed as the *sine qua non* of quality.

While money can and does make a difference, Howard Bowen has found that "affluent institutions could perform as well, or nearly as well, with less money [and] many institutions could achieve greater results with the same money. ... Increases in affluence do not automatically result in improvements in performance" (1980, pp. 166-167). Although they are not disposed to admit it, many faculty and staff in the trenches know they can perform as well with less money. Indeed, there are many things that money cannot buy: an active commitment to quality is but one of those things (Conrad and Pratt, 1983). Ironically, it appears that much of the current interest in quality has been spawned by limited resources, not affluence.

Designing for Quality

The time has come for institutions to acknowledge that designing for quality must reach beyond the limited designs of current assessments, must be more than a justification for resource allocation decisions, and, most important, must address the genuine concerns about quality that have become graver in these times of retrenchment. We who are ultimately answerable for the quality of our programs and institutions must assume more fully the responsibility—and the opportunity—to both preserve and enhance quality. In this spirit, we propose that individuals, programs, and entire institutions engage in self-regulation and monitoring of quality through ongoing assessment and action. Bailey (1982) has further suggested that institutional efforts toward quality can be enhanced by an improved accrediting process and state funding formulas that reward an institution's academic performance rather than increased numbers of students.

The important point of departure for discussions about quality is for both individuals and groups to engage in systematic self-evaluation. Most important, systematic and holistic approaches must be employed in which multidimensional definitions of quality are reflected in appropriate criteria for evaluation. This suggestion is supported by the Florida Community/Junior College Inter-Institutional Research Council recommendation that multiple program characteristics should be identified when evaluating program quality, since quality is a multidimensional concept. Concurrently, designs should encompass inputs, outcomes, the educational process, and the integrality of all these elements. Finally, formative designs for quality should utilize a range of both quantitative and qualitative indicators consistent with shared understanding concerning the meaning and measurement of quality.

The key point in designing for quality is just that—designing, developing a formative framework which seeks to improve quality and not merely to summarize it for purposes of reward—whether that reward is improved status, accreditation, or increased financial support. A commitment to excellence needs to be encouraged. Designs for quality that identify program strengths and weaknesses, as well as point the way toward quality improvement, may go a long way toward renewing that commitment.

Conclusion

Today most administrators and faculty are understandably concerned about resource acquisition and efficiency. But too many decisions are being made for expedience rather than long-term planning for enriched educational experiences. Decisions about faculty and staff utilization, planning for program cutting, recruitment, and retention are receiving far more attention than the quality of the educational process. It matters very much that we engage in a vital appraisal of what we are about, and then implement practices to eliminate shoddiness and strive for excellence. For as Gardner has so succinctly noted, "the society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water" (1971, p. 35).

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