

The Assurance of Academic Excellence among Nontraditional Universities
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For some time there has been a growing trend for mid-career adult professionals to return to the arena of higher education. These returning students have sought opportunities to avail themselves of the broad array of learning resources of a university community, without seriously impacting upon their employment and family responsibilities. Consequently, many have flocked to programs for advanced study that provide more flexible arrangements regarding time, residency, study options, application of knowledge and integration with prior learning and professional standing. Similarly, students living in remote locations and those isolated due to disability or incarceration have sought out opportunities for study from within their limiting environments. For these adult students, new educational alternatives have become increasingly popular.

With this sharply rising demand for advanced learning programs spanning time and place, most traditional institutions of higher learning have begun to offer some form of nontraditional distance education. Also, in response to this emerging demand for college alternatives, a vast number of nontraditional universities have sprung into existence. Some have become popular alternatives to the campus environment.

To avoid what they fear might become an overall weakening of educational standards, government leaders and traditional educators have taken quick action to establish strict oversight for quality assurance among nontraditional institutions. Now, for some time, it has been clear that American accreditors should usher in a new paradigm, one that permits varying models of education to be evaluated based upon the same high standards of achievement. However, recent history has shown that change has been slow and severely lacking in leadership.

Insufficiencies within the System of American Accreditation?

Faced with new models of education that they may neither like nor understand, the American system of accreditation has espoused a system of quality assurance based solidly upon traditional methodology. Over the past twenty years, they have acted to apply existing systems and principles in hybridized fashion in accrediting the new nontraditional institutions, coaching them to embrace more traditional models, goals and procedures. Filtering down from higher authorities within the American system of education through the prevailing institution of accreditation have been “invisible” and perhaps unintentional barriers to effective evolution of quality assurance measures particular to these new models of higher education. With insistence upon “traditional-looking” educational structures and a rigid system of traditional peer reviews, even the best of the nontraditional institutions were assured an undesirable outcome.

Nontraditional universities on the path to American accreditation encountered severe modification of their pedagogues and the internal structures of their institutions. Even with clear evidence within traditional research literature to support the quality and effectiveness of many nontraditional pedagogues, the traditional system of accreditation remained steadfast in its intent to reform applicant schools to “look more acceptable” and appear more “brick and mortar” in their makeup, instilling within them unavoidable insufficiencies.

As though to counter this educational evolution over the past two decades, American nontraditional institutions have been browbeaten and excluded by more traditional colleagues. Further, the nontraditional universities have been “coached” by accreditors to fall back upon a hybridized model of traditional education, such as teaching from an automated presentation, distribution of copies of classroom lectures or structured curricula and simulations. For new learners at the undergraduate level, this is often found to be an exceptionally good introduction to the subject matter. However, although traditional research has found this system to be wholly insufficient for mid-career adults pursuing studies at a distance, the hybridized system has nevertheless been adopted as the standard of quality for the nontraditional graduate institution. Supported by legislation from the federal government and the states, American accreditors have easily established guidelines to assure that nontraditional applicants adopt and continue to operate according to these hybridized principles.

Weakened but accepted, accredited nontraditional educational models are now glorified because through them traditional institutions can successfully apply traditional instructional processes through adaptation of new media. This allows the traditional institution to remain in control of the distance-learning environment, even with the known inefficiencies. Even though this system does not effectively foster applied learning, teamwork and creativity, essentials for mid-career learners, it has still been accepted as the standard.

The passing on of academic content by passive assimilation, “teaching by telling” and “learning by listening” is certainly not what mid-career students had hoped for in returning to the educational arena. Unfortunately, it will not be easy for many accredited nontraditional institutions to achieve an “active learning” environment, and surely many accreditors will not understand or support such “strange and different, chancy” educational models (Syllabus June 2002).

What is clear but not yet fully acknowledged is the fact that the proliferation of nontraditional institutions has presented higher education with a unique opportunity to address a new paradigm of accreditation and establish superior quality pedagogues that are fully supported by the scholarly research. In other words, if nontraditional institutions would be required to practice what the traditional institutions preach, we could be assured of high quality programs and effective outcomes within the nontraditional arena. For example, by applying a nontraditional model, adult learners could receive what they need, an ability to apply new learning within real “communities of practice” rather than within a classroom-like setting in isolation from the real world (Syllabus June 2002).

Why the Upsurge of Diploma Mills?

On the downside, uncontrollable demand for alternatives in higher education by adult learners has given rise to a broad array of new institutions that have adopted weakened standards of academic quality and questionable institutional integrity. Many have turned their back upon the arena of accreditation and instead, have adopted a counterculture stance refusing any form of third party intervention. In part, this has become the driving force behind the adoption of more traditional standards for accrediting nontraditional universities.

Back in 1988, David W. Stewart and Henry A. Spille laid out in an exceptional manner the depth of the emergent problem of nontraditional education. Their popular book published by the American Council on Education, *Diploma Mills, Degrees of Fraud* has become so well known in the USA, that it has become one of the “bibles” used by some state legislatures in structuring laws governing private unaccredited colleges.

In their book, Stewart and Spille characterize the problem, as follows:

“Basically a diploma mill is a person or an organization selling degrees or awarding degrees without an appropriate academic base and without requiring a sufficient level of postsecondary-level academic achievement.” (Stewart and Spille (1988) pp. 9-10)

By “an appropriate academic base” they mean at its foundation, a reputable educational institution must maintain scholarly and fiscal standards and procedures that assure the educational institution can achieve its stated goals and its institutional mission. To avoid the diploma mill stigma, a university’s faculty must have appropriate credentials and training to effectively set the foundations for the subject matter espoused by the institution. The content and standards of degrees must be based in sound strategic planning and be conducted and overseen by persons expertly trained and experienced in the academic fields under instruction. Stewart and Spille identify other essential quality issues including adequacy of library and learning resources, instructional support services, academic protocols, maintenance of academic records, and sufficiency of financial base. (Stewart and Spille, 1988)

By “sufficient degree of post-secondary-level academic achievement,” they mean that the learning objectives and expectations of the programs and courses should be appropriately set and the evaluative process and standards should measure achievement at the degree level pursued by the student. (Stewart and Spille, 1988)

While the authors point out that it is easy to identify the more blatant diploma mills, they point out “marginal organizations,” to be “a clearer threat to the integrity of credit and credentials.” These marginal institutions issue degrees based upon weakened academic requirements, with many stating that they offer “programs tailored to the unique needs of adult learners.” Stewart and Spille indicate that while all appears well on the surface with these marginal schools, the actual delivery of their programs and the actual student outcomes are far below necessary standards of achievement.

Stewart and Spille have clearly and effectively challenged nontraditional universities to establish and maintain quality assurance mechanisms that address traditional standards and outcomes of higher learning in such a way as to be transparent and easily opened to “third party” assessment. Because of a few “bad apples” otherwise effective modes of education have been seriously called

to question. In part, this situation has not only delayed the evolution of quality nontraditional institutions, it has also complicated the move toward an integrative system of American accreditation.

Are Nontraditional Models Effective?

Stewart and Spille were undoubtedly attempting to fend off what appeared to be a terrible onslaught that could serve to ruin the degree progress. They pointed out essential matters of concern. However, they did not make it clear in demanding a “sufficient degree of post-secondary-level academic achievement” what standard a multiplicity of pedagogues might effectively address this outcome. What outcomes should be required? Upon what foundations could these outcomes be established as appropriate and meaningful?

In the simplest of terms, an effective institution of higher learning through its own high standards of quality and integrity and its model of education must successfully address the needs of the learner. To better understand this statement, it will be helpful for us to reflect upon some of the traditional academic literature and examine the relevance of the findings. For instance, one of the more effective nontraditional models, mentorship, allows students to receive one-on-one guidance and tutorial from qualified academic instructors and professional advisors. Among the nontraditional delivery models, one-on-one mentorship has been determined to be more effective at providing necessary feedback to students, increasing student study interests, and in promoting critical independent thinking. Mentorship is also capable of more clearly presenting and explaining the subject matter, and in helping students better understand the principles, concepts and theories of the coursework. Nontraditional universities that use mentorship are capable of instilling in their students a questioning critical attitude that is accepted as one of the hallmarks of higher education. This effort to develop an analytical disposition along with the skills of critical thinking among students is an almost universal aim among traditional university professors. (Au, 1993, p. 108)

The scholarly research shows that autonomous learners pursuing individualized programs of study, on their own initiative, learn both from themselves and others, establishing a relationship of mutuality between themselves and their learning environment. Student autonomy has become associated with concepts such as self-responsibility, helping learners assume accountability for their own learning, and self-determination, based upon a perception of needs and interests. Consequently, if the target audience of a nontraditional university is limited to mid-career individuals, able to reflect in detail upon their professional field and the academic subject matter, such students have high capability to become accomplished autonomous learners.

It is generally recognized in the traditional academic literature that as students move toward autonomy, the teacher should remain in authority but transition progressively less in authority and more a facilitator as the student develops. Structures and boundaries must remain as features of the learning system but aspects of these should be less imposed and more negotiated. Teachers of effective autonomous learners must combine the roles of manager, facilitator, and resource person without excessively imposing their wills upon the students. (Elton, 1988, p. 219-220)

The research literature further indicates that to effectively address the individual needs of adult learners, particular attention must be paid to adaptability. Individualization of an adult student's program is understood not only to be an effective technique, but also essential for the reflective adult learner. Individualized learning can occur at the program level by selecting courses that address academic and professional needs of the student and at the subject matter level through flexibility in designing subject matter assignments. Traditional academic research clearly finds that this innovation of combining distance learning and individualized study plans serves genuinely academic ends, enhances the learning of facts and fundamentals, and the acquisition of skills. Unlike outcomes of distance education alone, adding program adaptability relieves the danger of merely transmitting facts and opinions. As adult students search for facts in details, relationships, problems and solutions on their own, they perform a truly effective academic activity. (Holmberg, 1992, p.12)

The greatest departure from traditional education by individualized distance learning is its explicit recognition that education should be measured by what the students know rather than how or where they learn it. (Perraton, 1982, p.7) During the late 1980's, with the support of the Fund for Advancement of Education, a number of colleges experimented with large programs of independent study. Few differences were found between achievement of students working independently and those taught in conventional classrooms. (Holmberg, 1992, p. 11)

The weight of evidence from traditional experimental studies suggests that approaches that individualize instruction are reasonably effective at improving the acquisition of subject matter content over more conventional subject matter approaches such as the traditional lecture and discussion. This learning advantage appears to occur without giving rise to undesirable side effects in terms of negative student attitudes toward instruction, increased withdrawal rates, or increased time required to meet course demands. (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, p. 89-93)

Research demonstrates that students experience more effective outcomes by pursuing a process-centered curriculum. Through this activity, students are more involved in identifying learning needs, setting goals, planning learning activities, finding resources for learning, working collaboratively with colleagues, selecting and defining learning projects, and creating problems to tackle. The more effective process-center systems are those where students are involved in choosing where and when they will learn, using teachers as guides, mentors and counselors rather than mere instructors, reflecting upon the learning process, and making significant decisions about these matters. (Lewis, 1988)

When the mode of instruction includes the establishment of project-oriented learning environments for each student, truly effective outcomes are possible. Under such conditions, faculty are free to coach their students to view learning as an active process over which they should take initiative and exercise a great deal of control. The focus is upon moving student learning to higher levels of cognition, whereby they are required to create and evaluate, do independent and original thinking, make judgments, communicate unique ideas, feelings and experiences, and design effective solutions to "real life" situations. The nature of this type of outcome is highly contributory to the development of effectiveness for the mid-career adult.

Traditional research literature shows overwhelmingly that distance learning can achieve cognitive outcomes equal to those achieved by more traditional means of educational delivery for adults. In fact, distance learning is understood to have an advantage over more traditional strategies when learning is closely aligned and related to the reality of life and work, such as under conditions where students remain fully engaged with their professional tasks while under the mentorship of qualified academics. The association of academic projects with the work situation of the student permits effective integration of new learning with experience and the genuine tasks of the practitioner. This form of outcome, applied and integrated, differs greatly from simply providing disconnected sets of theories, principles and practices, no matter how well organized or flashy the presentation.

Integration of knowledge that is done by students is likely to be more meaningful than integration that is done for them. Thus, engaging the adult student in creating and evaluating knowledge is viewed as a more viable epistemology. It is this vital factor that justifies the systems of mentorship, independent study and external projects, since this engages adult students in organizing their own knowledge, rather than simply storing the inferences and appropriate sets of data that were put together by the experts. This advanced epistemological approach requires that the educational institution treat knowledge more open-endedly, allowing students to theorize for themselves, giving them greater access to the data, greater responsibility and freedom, and the opportunity to engage in critical thinking, matching theories against available data.

If an essential goal of higher education is to help students develop the ability to continue learning after the formal education is complete, it seems reasonable that they should have a good deal of supervised experience in learning independently. This may be carried out through experiences in which qualified mentors help the adult student formulate problems, find answers, and evaluate their progress themselves. The value of independent study, however, is greatest for the adult learner of high capability with a good deal of background in the area to be covered, since this student will be less likely to be overwhelmed by the difficulties commonly encountered in such studies. (McKeachie, 1986, p. 143)

Toward a New Paradigm of Quality Assurance

Before proposing an effective route for establishing quality control among nontraditional institutions, let us review an important question posed by David W. Stewart and Henry A. Spille:

The key question facing the nation now is this: How can the integrity of academic degrees in America be maintained without discouraging innovation aimed at meeting the needs of new groups of clients? How, too, can the brakes be put on diploma mills without developing rigid prescriptive mechanisms either inside the academic establishment or within government agencies that have regulatory jurisdiction of certain aspects of postsecondary education? (Stewart and Spille, 1988)

The control of academic quality in teaching and learning must be of primary importance throughout the structures and operations of the institution of higher learning, itself, if it is to be a quality institution. The institution must view quality control issues as primary and integral to the conceptual design and conduct of degree studies. For instance, each individual subject within

a program, and the services and measures that support and assure student progress, must be brought into focus. The curriculum must be structured, instructional methods selected, support services designed, and research operations governed by administrative and faculty expectations formed primarily for the purpose of bringing about the competencies and higher level cognition identified as essential for the professional and academic success of the targeted students. Colorful philosophical language is insufficient and never replaces the hard tasks of data gathering, fact-finding, strategic planning and academic development.

To be effective, learning objectives for individual degree programs must have a firm base, being derived soundly from the organizational mission, educational philosophy, and goals of the institution, and most importantly, from the demonstrated needs of the desired target audience. The student audience must be carefully identified and defined, the academic and professional needs and the occupational expectations of the profession understood, and the needs and expectations for learning dispersed in an integral manner and addressed throughout the programs constructed for the defined audience. It is upon these defining factors that a quality institution will establish individual programs and select the subject matter objectives that become the focus of the quality control process.

As a consequence, each instructional element, learning resource and learning activity must be derived directly from and designed and selected specifically to serve the outcome objectives established for the program. Far too many institutions of higher education have established their subject array in a willy-nilly fashion, and regardless of the grandness of their reputation as an institution, they fail to fully address the basic needs of their students.

To protect against this outcome and correct existing shortcomings within a educational institution, the assessment and examination vehicles for each program must be adjusted to effectively evaluate student knowledge and competencies against defined learning objectives derived from the needs of the audience. Likewise, assessment vehicles relative to faculty performance must evaluate the success of faculty in delivering the educational programs that achieve these quality assurance goals. Without effective evaluative systems, programs will wander and, over time, will no longer effectively serve the needs of the students. Students will continue to graduate, but their capability and effectiveness within the professional environment will suffer.

Instructional staff delivering an institution's educational offerings must be carefully selected, based upon the effectiveness of their academic preparation, career achievements, and current professional involvement, as well as their demonstrated depth of commitment to the discipline and furtherance of excellence in the profession. An institution is more likely to achieve this goal, if the faculty are expected to hold doctoral degrees from recognized institutions within their fields of instruction and have significant achievements in their professional field, not just in the areas of research and presentation of scholarly papers. A concerted effort must be made by the institution to actively outreach for and select instructional staff that represents quality and leadership in the subject matter fields.

A principle concern to the university must be the identification of an appropriate target audience for student recruitment, researching the professional and occupational needs of these career

groups. Faculty leadership must continually monitor the professional arena of the target student audience, identifying the changing training needs. Such factors must play a role in designing effective entry requirements and program objectives for the target groups.

Nontraditional universities need to avoid the pitfall of accepting all applicants, but should establish an effective system for identifying and “weeding out” students that lack necessary prerequisites for study. The admission system must help the institution to assure it is actually serving the target population for which its programs are intended. In granting admittance to a student, nontraditional institutions must select mature, self-directed adults who have the requisite academic preparation and can be relied upon to fulfill academic responsibilities within an agreed-upon time frame and at the expected level of quality.

English-language institutions must be assured their students have proficiency in written and verbal English-language communication skills. To validate that students have achieved at least the minimum language abilities, it is highly advisable that the admissions process include a review of substantial written work of the applicant and that an oral interview be conducted. As a bottom line, it is highly recommended that applicants demonstrate TOEFL examination achievement with a 550 score or above.

Nontraditional institutions that follow asynchronous distance learning venues should require that students interact and come under the guidance of a qualified local mentor. Quality mentorship must be understood as essential and foundational to a quality doctoral program. In addition to providing an important means for face-to-face tutorial, as needed, the local mentorship can assure the student has access to appropriate field placement sites, essential laboratory or supplemental training facilities, equipment and qualified personnel. Local mentorship can also be called upon by the university to guide the student toward appropriate outside seminars, conferences, workshops and retreats and the possibility of membership in professional associations and societies.

Students working via asynchronous mentorship must be expected, at minimum, to demonstrate access to a computer, a telephone, and for the duration of their program a confidential email account and the Internet. Many nontraditional institutions rely upon these electronic vehicles to support their major teaching and learning activities, as a means to support effective interaction with mentors and to transmit formal documents, instructions and written assignments. Students should be required to certify the availability of essential means for communication and participation in the program for which they will enroll.

As another essential fundamental, nontraditional universities must maintain adequacy in availability and access to learning resources. Whether these are online or in hard copy, resources should include access to academic librarians, appropriate academic journals and texts. Fully external doctoral institutions, as appropriate, should provide their students access to academic databases, video- and audiotapes, online resources, relevant reference materials, and manuals for effective research and writing. These are required materials through which foundational theories, principles and practices, and advanced concepts are founded within a program of study. Simply expecting that students “demonstrate” they can independently access this wide array of necessary materials is unreasonable and not likely to achieve a quality outcome.

To achieve a standard of quality in learning resources, the institution must assign qualified faculty to monitor the effectiveness of student learning materials, library resources, information technology, field resources, research support tools, tutorial and professional guidance. Furthermore, this faculty leadership must continually assess the needs of the student body for academic services and learning activities that lend enrichment and effectiveness to the overall academic program. This task must be placed under the control of trained academics with extensive background and experience in assessing student needs, identifying sources of learning resources, and establishing effective student support services. It is essential that faculty leadership identify a comprehensive listing of professional texts, journals, compendia of professional meetings, examples of scholarly writings by university faculty and students and other essential learning resources.

It should be established as a primary mission for quality assurance in nontraditional institutions, to reflect the university's commitment to a broad scientific knowledge base. A continuing objective of quality assurance is then to take leadership in improving access and expanding availability to a broad array of library resources and support services and providing ready electronic access to academic resources and support services under control of the university. This is absolutely essential, since it is fundamental for graduate students, most especially at the doctoral level, to progress through a meaningful review of the academic literature upon which the major discipline is established. These precepts include the foundational theories, principles, and practices, and the historical, philosophical, and social-cultural implications of the discipline which define the field of study and establish the underlying foundations upon which advanced study, field exploration, student research, and professional achievement can be based.

In addition to the academic competencies specific to their fields of study, graduate students should be expected to demonstrate high-level abilities to interpret the writings and research of other scholars and make maximum use of the literature in their chosen discipline. They should be able to analyze, summarize and report the essence of the subject matter to their professional colleagues and effectively integrate new learning within their professional setting. Final comprehensive examinations, with both oral and written components, are a standard means to determine the student's level of competency, before authorizing the structuring of proposals for student research.

The nontraditional university must establish and monitor policies, protocols, standards and guidelines for the conduct of effective student research. To assure quality, faculty members who are experienced academic researchers should provide oversight and control the quality of experimental, applied and philosophical research and inquiry. This faculty leadership should have an extensive research background and experience in conduct of research and quality reviews. They must have knowledge of and commitment to effective research goals and an understanding of how quality research supports realization of the educational mission of the institution. Leadership in research must also be committed to participation in a rigorous process intended to control the integrity and meaningfulness of student research.

As a universal premise, doctoral students are expected to demonstrate an ability to complete an original and independent work of research. However, they must also be expected to substantiate

an ability to relate well with fellow scholars and colleagues within the wider professional setting and apply what has been learned through research in a creative manner in addressing real world situations. Doctoral research demands that students learn the critical features of sound quantitative or qualitative research including subject selection, research design, and statistical analysis in order to develop a sound research proposal. They must be expected to define applied problems or theoretical issues, which they wish to investigate, articulate rationales for the study of the problems or issues, and propose and implement quantitative or qualitative methods of evaluation of the issues or problems. Doctoral students must be expected to complete a thorough scholarly literature review on the topics they wish to investigate and select research methodologies that assure valid and reliable evaluations of the effects of variables on individuals or groups being studied.

At assure academic quality and proper standards and reviews of doctoral-level research, the nontraditional institution must assure that students have the competency to examine applied or theoretical issues in their field. Furthermore, they must be capable of implementing programs of intervention that are cogent and scholarly, and that make an original contribution to the body of knowledge in the discipline or the principles and practices in the related professions.

Through faculty leadership, the nontraditional university must periodically review the written standards, policies and procedures for the conduct of student research. These research leaders must monitor the effectiveness of established standards and guidelines for research and make effective recommendations for improvement, assuring the continued enrichment of student research.

Concluding Remarks

This paper does not resolve the conflict among traditional and nontraditional educators, nor does it pretend to adequately set the foundation for an integrative system for American accreditation. However, ground has been broken for renewed discussion and movement can be made toward a new paradigm of quality assurance reviews whereby traditional and nontraditional institutions may be equitably evaluated under the same standards.

In simplest terms, let us agree that nontraditional institutions need no longer uproot or reassemble their pedagogy, perhaps weakening their ability to achieve superior quality outcomes. Let us set aside the debate relative to the effectiveness of nontraditional approaches such as mentorship, external projects, independent study, project-oriented environments, and the process-centered curriculum. Let it be concluded that a more effective plan is for American accreditation to establish a new and integrative paradigm for quality assurance based solidly in assessing systems relative to outcome measures and serving the needs of our students.

In accepting this challenge, we can move together along a more effective path whereby we are open to educational models that demonstrate successful student outcomes, regardless of how strange and nontraditional their delivery model might seem. Let me not forget to ask the already accredited nontraditional institutions how they can be assured they effectively serve the needs of their students relative to the expectations of their professions and the cultures within which they must apply themselves?

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