

**What we don't know  
can't help us**

**or**

***Is Accreditation Really Adrift?***

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# Are we *adrift*?

Is accreditation able to focus institutional and programmatic attention on student learning outcomes and on variation in and determinants of those outcomes—both within and across institutions?

Do we have the empirical means to describe the *status quo* and/or to find improvements

# **We've come a long way... sorta**

Light's assessment maxim (c 1990):

*A little bit of data can go a long way.*

Wilson's assessment axiom (2012):

*We're drowning in data, devoid of analysis.*

# How did we get here?

- Capstone experiences/projects
- Assessment coordinators
- Course/departmental learning objectives
- Portfolios / E-portfolios
- Annual assessment retreats

**Thank you Middle States (and friends)**

# Where Accreditation Stands

- Outcomes now central
  - + Data is central to the enterprise
  - + Public reporting increasing (CHEA 12b)
- Case Study format predominates:
  - + Comprehensive view of institution or program
  - + Contextualized, mission-sensitive account
  - Uneven quality as regards depth of analysis
  - Incommensurable—can't tell a bigger story

# Are we adrift or on course?

**On course**, but (partially) shifting paradigms

- **Not** to regulatory scrutiny or 'monitoring'
- **Rather, toward:**
  - Better data *quality*—reliable, valid data use
  - Better data *systems* for more powerful analysis
  - Better *designs* allow innovations and test links
  - Broader *transparency* (reporting, benchmarking)
  - Building *new capacity* in partnership w IHEs

# Two 'Better's

- Better data management/analysis systems
  - Pretty pie charts aren't enough
    - + From description to analysis of relationships
  - 'Our student record system won't tell us that..'
    - + Tools to allow analysis of complete data sets
- Better research designs can answer questions
  - Compliance with a format can be mandated, but
    - + Innovation can only be fostered/supported
    - + Quality control systems invite/answer questions

# What *Academically Adrift* Shows

- Measurement of student learning gains over time is possible, but far from the norm
- Variation in learning can be captured and is meaningful across and w/in institutions
- Any individual measure is limited:
  - E.g. while the CLA Performance Task is promising, it is not an actual 'performance' with consequences (Sternberg's *IHE* review)



# What *Academically Adrift* Shows

- Results? A mixed picture:
  - Evidence of 'not much' learning in 18 months
  - Extensive analysis of how the 'not much' varies
- Succeeds in pointing out:
  - + Analyses that institutions could carry out
  - + Important questions of achievement & variation
  - Limitations of relying on one or few measures

# Lessons and Opportunities

*Do assessments allow comparisons across units, so that areas in need of improvement can be identified and needs addressed?*

Comparison is two-edged: Internal efficiency/productivity pressures for such comparisons could trigger Campbell's Law--let the gaming begin!

Regardless of the unit of comparison, data management systems supporting a thorough quality control system opens possibilities

# Lessons for Accreditation

*Is there evidence that administrators are symbolically and substantively supporting undergraduate learning and academic rigor?  
Are organizational incentive structures aligned with promoting academic rigor and learning?*

One can look for evidence of institutional commitment to quality outcomes

***Internal*** audit of a the quality control system can provide clarification and motivation

# Lessons for Accreditation

*Is there evidence that faculty have assumed individual and collective responsibility for ensuring academic rigor?*

Programmatic accreditors may require program faculty approval of the self study report, and interview faculty about the evidence

Evidence of a functioning quality control system that supplies data to inform decision making moves the conversation in that direction

# Lessons for Accreditation

*Is there evidence that student evaluation is based on meaningful academic standards?  
[Do transcripts include information on course difficulty?]*

Outcome data should provide trustworthy evidence of accomplishment. The more transparent the better.

Inter-institutional benchmarking and efforts like the Degree Qualifications Profile might provide leverage across institutions.

# ***Staying the Course***

Accreditation can coordinate and support **peer collaboration** in:

- + Standard setting
- + Quality assurance review
- + Continuous evidence-based improvement
- + *Public performance reporting*
- + ***Joint research and innovation***

**Thank you!**