



In Search of a Standard of Quality

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I became interested in the issue of quality in higher education when I was a graduate student in the late 60s. My dissertation explored the frog pond effect, whether it mattered if one was a less successful student in a high quality college or vice versa. And I accepted the standard definition of a high quality college as one that had great students and great faculty. My perspective changed drastically when, in the mid 80s, Sandy Astin pointed out that, since the job of colleges and universities is to develop the talents of its students, quality should be a function, not of how much talent the school had attracted, but how much talent it had developed. Since then, the issue of talent development - of how to promote more and better learning during the college years - has been at the heart of my work as a teacher, scholar and administrator.

Over the years, I have come to believe that one important step colleges and universities can take is to establish learning goals for their students, goals that are grounded in their educational missions. Correspondingly, because missions vary so widely, I have long thought that it would be inappropriate to ask all institutions to conform to a common set of learning goals. So you can imagine my first reaction when I heard that the Lumina Foundation had sponsored an effort to develop a standardized degree qualifications profile.

When I calmed down a bit, reviewed the document that Lumina had produced, and thought about the circumstances that gave rise to the effort, I became more receptive. Here's why:

It's becoming increasingly clear that the public is expecting more from higher education than it is getting. College costs continue to increase and employers complain that too few graduates have the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. And with no way to assess whether students learned more or less at one institution versus another, those inside and outside the academy continue to judge the quality of a college largely by how much talent it has attracted rather than how much talent it has developed.

Pressures to address these problems are mounting and are unlikely to go away until we do at least two things. First, our institutions need to reach some consensus about a core set of learning goals that all students should achieve. Then we need to adopt a common set of standards for meeting those goals that is appropriate for awarding particular degrees. These things are exactly what Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile provides. And because it does it while avoiding any effort to define "what should be taught or how instructors should teach it," it constitutes as good a starting point for this effort as any I have seen.

Adopting the Lumina learning goals and degree standards will require my institution to adjust, to a substantial degree,

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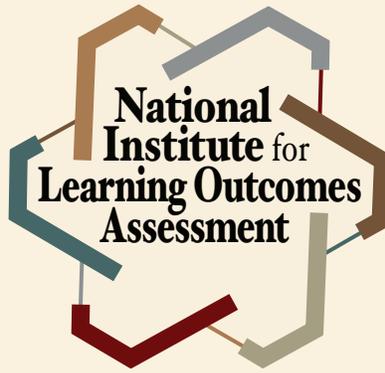
the goals and standards it has already developed and adopted. And even though we can add our own elements to the ones Lumina has developed, making these adjustments will not be a welcome exercise for faculty like mine who have spent countless hours over six full years doing this work in a serious and sophisticated way. Nonetheless, if higher education is to rebuild public confidence in the substance and meaning of the degrees we award,

I believe all of us will need to agree, in broad terms, on the learning required to earn a given degree, whether it is earned at a public, private or for-profit institution.

Given the rising chorus calling for higher education to be more accountable and transparent, we can no longer afford to adopt a defensive posture and insist that all forms of standardization amount to an unwarranted intrusion on our academic prerogatives. Nor can we afford the luxury of letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. We can spend the next decade tinkering with this and adjusting that, and still end up with an imperfect system. Or we can accept the Lumina Profile as a starting place, work to improve it, and then adopt some reasonable version.

This profile won't help the public differentiate schools according to quality but, if used widely and appropriately, it should help us improve our performance and, at the same time, reassure the public that all students who have earned a particular degree have met a recognized standard of quality.

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