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# ACCREDITATION & ACADEMIC QUALITY ASSURANCE

## *Can We Get There From Here?*

BY DAVID D. DILL, WILLIAM F. MASSY, PETER R. WILLIAMS,  
AND CHARLES M. COOK



**A** well-known New England story has a city resident braking his car to a halt in front of a Maine farmhouse and calling out to the farmer sitting on the porch: "Which way to East Millinocket?" The farmer ponders: "Well, ya turn left by the fire station in the village and take the old post road by the reservoir and...no, that won't do. Best to continue straight on by the tar road until you reach the schoolhouse and then turn left on the road to Bennett's Lake until...no, that won't work either. East Millinocket, ya say. Come to think of it, you can't get there from here!"

Those still convinced that the quality of teaching and learning in U.S. colleges and universities must be improved face a similar dilemma, given that the higher education community recently rejected the National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation's (NPB) proposals to link the standards of voluntary accreditation to measurable improvements in student achievement. Which way to quality assurance in higher education? In view of the NPB's failed attempt to reform academic accreditation, it might seem that we can't get there from here.

In retrospect, part of the problem was that the NPB was unable to articulate effectively the inadequacies of the current

processes and standards of academic accreditation. Nor did it convincingly suggest how accreditation could be improved so that it would demonstrate clearly to the public that institutions of higher education are responsible about assuring the quality of their academic programs and degrees. But another part of the problem was that the debate about accreditation and academic quality in the United States was remarkably insulated and disregarded viable alternatives. In particular, those involved in the U.S. accreditation movement mostly ignored quality-assurance developments in other parts of the world, which might offer useful, established models for improving our own processes.

In the following discussion, we first review recent arguments and proposals for changing the structure of institutional self-regulation in the United States and suggest that the real challenge to voluntary accreditation—the inadequacy of collegial mechanisms of educational quality assurance—has not been effectively addressed in the contemporary debate. We then examine various mechanisms for quality assurance—accreditation, assessment, and academic audit—that have emerged in higher education systems across the world. Finally, we offer some concrete suggestions about how the U.S. voluntary quality-assurance system could be reformed for the better.

### **THE NPB PROPOSALS AND THE FAILURE OF REFORM**

During the 1990s, as concerns over the rising costs of higher education and the relative priority given to undergraduate education and student learning have spread across the country, there has been increasing criticism of institutional accreditation as a primary means for assuring quality in colleges and universities. The 1992 amendments to the Higher Education Act

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mandated that the states and voluntary regional accreditation agencies assume new responsibilities in the enforcement of federal standards related to higher education. Congress authorized the states to establish new State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs) with authority to conduct comprehensive reviews of institutions that violated certain standards embodied in the law. College and university presidents also voiced growing dissatisfaction with the increasing numbers of specialized accrediting agencies and with their demands on institutional programs. Finally, at the end of 1993, the national body attempting to speak for accreditation, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), dissolved, at least in part because of continuing disagreements among its members.

Concerned that the credibility of voluntary, academic self-regulation was threatened by potential government control, by conflict among the accrediting bodies themselves, and by public confusion about the purposes of academic accreditation, leaders of regional accrediting agencies and of national higher education associations formed the NPB, which pledged to pursue significant improvements in institutional accreditation. The NPB subsequently proposed the formation of a new, national coordinating body for academic accreditation. The mission of the proposed agency would have included the traditional roles of promoting public understanding and support for voluntary self-regulation through accreditation and of facilitating coordination and collaboration among accrediting agencies.

But the NPB also proposed for the first time a national board to assure 1) that rigorous standards for the assessment of institutional quality were applied consistently in the evaluation of colleges and universities, with particular attention to measuring institutional effectiveness through student achievement, and 2) that there be public disclosure of relevant information on the effectiveness of affiliated institutions and certified accrediting agencies.

The NPB-proposed reforms generated considerable opposition within the higher education community, and despite several attempts to modify the proposals, they were essentially abandoned in the summer of 1995. Many college and university leaders, particularly those from the private sector, were concerned that the NPB's call for uniform, national-level institutional eligibility requirements and for core standards for student learning would infringe on institutional autonomy. There was particular concern that the creation of a centralized regulatory body might prove as intrusive as a government agency, and might provide a vehicle for future government intervention. In the well-chosen words of Robert H. Atwell, president of the American Council on Education, "People saw this thing as national, Washington, bad."

With the legislative changes in Washington following the 1994 elections, the national political climate became less supportive of federal regulation. The 104th Congress, for example, de-authorized the SPREs and eliminated their federal funding, taking some of the steam out of calls for a national body to replace COPA.

Following the rejection of the NPB proposals, a Presidents Work Group on Accreditation formed to search for a workable reform proposal. Its 1995 report proposed a Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a board designed to recognize and coordinate accrediting bodies. In a national referendum of college presidents this past spring, the creation of the

CHEA was overwhelmingly endorsed by 94 percent of those voting. The CHEA will be similar to COPA in that it will provide information, research, and advocacy on behalf of non-governmental higher education accreditation. However, the proposals for the new CHEA do not mention the substantive reforms in accreditation standards related to student learning advocated by the NPB.

A separate "Accountability Study" by an independent team of thoughtful leaders in higher education—Patricia Albjerg Graham, Richard Lyman, and Martin Trow—recognizes many of the problems of traditional accreditation outlined by the NPB, but suggests a very different function for regional accreditation agencies. The report asserts that individual colleges and universities must retain responsibility for assuring the quality of academic programs and degrees. For this to occur effectively, there must be a strengthening of the internal processes whereby faculty members and administrators collectively assess the quality of and make improvements in academic programs.

The role of accrediting bodies would be transformed from that of directly assessing institutional performance to that of "auditing" both the soundness of an institution's own internal quality-assurance procedures, and whether those internal processes lead to concrete improvements. The basic principle of the report is that any new mechanisms of external accountability should be focused on assuring the presence and effective functioning of *internal* mechanisms of accountability.

While many may argue that the defeat of the NPB's proposals, the rolling back of federal demands to change accreditation, and the recent de-authorization of SPREs have eliminated the need to reform the process of voluntary self-regulation, we would assert that the pressures for improved quality assurance have not disappeared but only shifted, from the federal to the state level. The clear message of the 1994 national elections was that the public wants government to be smaller, local, and more efficient and accountable.

Governor Roy Romer of Colorado argues, in a report on academic quality for the Education Commission of the States, that public higher education in particular will be unlikely to escape from this demand: "As state leaders we have not done a good job of holding institutions accountable for the kinds of results that we really care about or the quality that counts for students, parents or states as a whole." As concern about the cost and quality of undergraduate learning increases at the state level, the "respite" from governmental pressures may be short-lived.

We believe, along with the authors of the Accountability Study, that the most needed reform is the renewal of *internal* mechanisms for quality assurance in colleges and universities, and that the concept of an academic audit conducted by regional accreditation agencies could be a necessary component of this reform. Unfortunately, the Accountability Study, like the NPB proposals before it, does not provide a convincing analysis of the *causes* for the failure of internal mechanisms of quality assurance, an analysis crucial to understanding the need for and nature of reform.

And while the authors endorse the concept of academic audit, they fail to discuss the practical experience with this process outside the United States, for example in Hong Kong, in New Zealand, in the European Union where it was recently

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implemented by the European Rectors Conference, and in the United Kingdom, where it has been practiced in the university sector for over a decade. In the sections that follow, we explore both of these issues—internal mechanisms and experience with audit—as a prelude to a suggested reform in the U.S. system of voluntary academic quality assurance.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE AND COLLEGIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The principal mechanisms for assuring the quality of teaching and learning in any academic community are similar to the acknowledged processes for assuring quality in research—the mechanisms of collegial peer review and evaluation. As Peter Ewell has stressed, maintaining the content and credibility of academic degrees must be the collective responsibility of an institution's faculty and of the academy as a whole. Power and responsibility for the assurance of educational quality in higher education rest with the collegial parties on every campus responsible for designing, reviewing, delivering, and monitoring students' programs of study that lead to academic degrees.

But as recent research demonstrates, this collegial fabric and collective sense of academic responsibility is disintegrating. Educational quality is being threatened by a "hollowed collegiality" in which faculty members' pursuit of discretionary time and academic specialization and their assertions of academic autonomy undermine the campus-based quality assurance upon which the entire structure of voluntary self-regulation rests.

A number of observers have noted the steady increase in faculty discretionary time as professors lessen their commitment to undergraduate teaching, time with students, and academic committee work while investing greater effort in research and scholarship, consulting, and other professional activities. These observations now have empirical support in a national longitudinal comparison of faculty time commitments. James Fairweather has examined changes over the last decade in the proportion of time spent in teaching and teaching-related activities as reported by faculty members in national surveys. In all types of four-year institutions—research universities, comprehensive universities, and liberal arts colleges—the proportion of time dedicated to research rose, and the proportion of time dedicated to teaching declined. Only in community colleges has the time commitment to teaching remained stable.

This decline in time spent teaching almost surely affects the academic quality of individual courses. Moreover, as Henry Rosovsky observed with regard to the faculty at Harvard University, the increased commitment of faculty time to research, public service, and consulting also has led to a decline in civic responsibility for essential *collegial* tasks—those largely invisible but critical activities of curriculum coordination, student assessment, program review, and teaching im-

provement upon which educational quality depends.

The need for these collegial mechanisms of quality assurance has not lessened but become more important. Research on teaching and learning underscores that the cohesiveness and coherence of academic curricula, both in general education and individual majors, is highly predictive of student learning. But increased academic specialization and course proliferation have placed great strain on existing mechanisms for achieving academic coordination and integration. As Massy and Zemsky observe in their 1994 *Journal of Higher Education* article:

...there has been an incipient destructuring—or deconstructing—of the undergraduate curriculum over the last two decades that has resulted in fewer required courses, less emphasis on taking courses in ordered sequence, and greater reliance on students to develop their own sense of how the various bits and pieces of knowledge they acquire in the classroom fit together into a coherent picture.

Surveys by Joan Stark and her colleagues at the University of Michigan show that in many disciplines, faculty members do not easily agree on definitions of coherence or even that specified sequences of learning are appropriate for students; in several disciplines, faculty members believe that the field's diversity precludes consensus on what students should know. At the least, the findings underscore the need for improving collegial mechanisms for quality assurance, at both the subject and institutional level.

Finally, studies of academic departments confirm a high degree of atomization and isolation among faculty members. Communication within many academic fields is fragmented by academic specialization and a frequently defensive form of professional autonomy. Academic courses are seen not as community property but private property.

This resistance to collegial interaction around issues of educational quality is particularly visible in faculty disinterest in peer review of teaching. While student evaluations of courses are common in higher education, peer review—in which colleagues observe and make suggestions for the improvement and coordination of teaching—is still quite rare, mainly because faculty members deny the capacity of colleagues both inside and outside a department to review their teaching. Paradoxically, peer review, so common and accepted in research, typically gets implemented with respect to teaching only upon the active intervention of outside groups, such as higher education coordinating boards.

The net effect of all this emphasis on academic autonomy, faculty discretionary time, and academic specialization is that the collegial mechanisms for assuring academic quality are being compromised by faculty non-involvement or active resistance.

Faculty who perceive academic quality only in terms of the

# The experience of other countries suggests that an essential first component of any balanced quality-assurance system is a formal process for assessing the quality of teaching and learning at the level of individual academic programs.

quality of individual courses fail to comprehend the serious consequences of this collegial erosion. To the public at large (including employers and legislators), academic quality is viewed not in terms of individual teachers but in light of the collective impacts of an overall academic program on the skills and abilities of postsecondary graduates. One major consequence of the decline of collegial mechanisms of quality assurance has been state regulation designed to assure academic quality.

The first wave of public concern was manifested in state requirements for institution-centered practices of student assessment, these to encourage the collective definition of learning goals for students and evidence that students were achieving them. All six regional accrediting agencies adopted student assessment or institutional effectiveness policies as part of their accreditation criteria. But faculty resistance to these reforms was deep, and their implementation has been erratic.

Subsequently, states such as Colorado, Illinois, Missouri, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin adopted a more activist agenda on academic accountability, moving toward public reporting of academic performance indicators. Unlike previous state-level indicators, these new performance measures target instructional processes and outcomes at the undergraduate level. In a number of states, such indicators have been closely connected to the state funding process. Many states have also attempted to directly regulate faculty teaching loads in public universities as a means of assuring that increased faculty time and effort are committed to teaching and student learning.

In sum, we argue that the erosion of internal mechanisms for academic accountability is both real and pervasive, and that a failure to reassert collegial processes for academic quality assurance risks ever-greater loss of essential academic autonomy.

How then can academic quality best be assured? It is unlikely that direct regulation of higher education processes—for example, the regulation of faculty teaching loads—will be effective in improving the quality of academic programs. Given the ambiguities and loose supervision necessarily characteristic of academic work, the more likely result of government edicts is a further decline in faculty morale and increased costs.

Academics are correct when they argue that the only effective approach to assuring academic standards is through professional self-regulation. But as Gordon Winston has noted, in the current market condition of higher education, there are few incentives for administrators or institutions to renew or increase their collegial quality-assurance mechanisms. Faculty autonomy and discretionary time are primary attractors for recruiting the researchers who bring the prestige and reputation desired by American colleges and universities. Any administrator who unilaterally forced increased faculty commitment to teaching and quality-assurance activity would place his or her own career and institution at risk.

We believe this situation can change only if there is a structural alteration in higher education as a whole. What is needed is a coordinated program of self-regulation that would require all postsecondary institutions to allocate faculty time and other resources to academic quality-assurance activities as a fundamental business requirement. We suggest that this coordinated effort should be the primary focus of any future reforms in accreditation. The established quality-assurance mechanisms in several European nations suggest how such a reform might be implemented.

## ACCREDITATION, ASSESSMENT, AND ACADEMIC AUDIT

Over the last decade, academic quality assurance has emerged as a major policy issue in many countries. As centralized state systems of higher education have disbanded in the former communist states, and as democratic countries have markedly expanded their higher education systems from elite, to mass, to universal systems similar to those in the United States, new mechanisms for assuring the quality of institutions have had to be developed. An international association of organizations engaged in academic quality assurance has emerged—the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)—representing over 50 countries. Within this network, three basic approaches to quality assurance have evolved: accreditation, assessment, and academic audit.

### Accreditation

1. The accreditation process determines whether an institution or a program meets threshold quality criteria and therefore certifies to the public the existence of minimum educational standards.
2. Accreditation encompasses both the objectives and the implementation of objectives: for example, it determines whether the objectives are appropriate for the institutional or degree level, and whether the resources are available to produce the desired outcomes.
3. Accreditation is criterion-referenced; that is, it compares observed performance against preset standards usually determined by the accrediting agency.
4. Accreditation generally involves a combination of performance indicators (PIs), self-study, and peer review.
  - a. PIs provide quantitative data on resources and performance: examples might include funding levels; facilities, equipment, and libraries; student profile and selectivity indices; and student attainment rates.
  - b. Self-studies represent an institution's evaluation of its own performance in relation to the accrediting agency's standards, as well as its own particular aspirations, based on both PIs and subjective factors.
  - c. Peer review relies on the experience of outside

experts who visit the campus and form their own opinions about performance in relation to standards.

5. Accreditation is always performed by an agency external to the institution itself.
6. Accreditation may be performed at the institutional or program level, with program-level accreditation being most common in professional fields like accounting, business, law, and engineering or for institutions offering degrees below the bachelor's level.
7. Accreditation cycles are typically in the range of 10 years, unless serious problems are uncovered; such problems will lead to shorter cycle times or probationary status.
8. The final outcome of accreditation—whether the institution meets threshold quality standards—is always published; such publication is necessary for accreditation to perform its certification function. However, details may be withheld to avoid adversarial relationships and, thus, to protect data acquisition and enhance accreditation's improvement agenda.

This form of quality assurance is well understood in the United States and is rapidly spreading to other countries to meet their needs for minimum quality certification. In the former communist countries such as Hungary, institutional accreditation is being implemented as a substitute for central state control of higher education. In many developing countries, accreditation is being considered as a means of controlling the proliferating branch campuses of universities from other countries (often of unknown quality, and also often U.S.-based), a phenomenon fed by the rising demand for postsecondary education. Professional accreditation, historically less common outside the United States, is also flourishing as universities in various countries seek acknowledgment that their programs meet international standards.

Within the international quality-assurance community, however, accreditation is generally not perceived as sufficient to assure the quality of teaching and learning. For these purposes, the additional processes of assessment and academic audit have been developed.

### Assessment

1. The assessment process evaluates the quality of specific activities—such as educational or research quality—within academic units. Assessment goes beyond accreditation to make graded judgments about academic quality levels rather than binary judgments relative to threshold standards.
2. Assessments generally are directed at the subject or program level, evaluating their delivered performance.
3. Assessment uses a combination of performance indicators, self-study, and external peer review.
4. Assessment can be organized by an external agency (such as an independent or quasi-independent government body), an institutional consortium, or by institutions themselves.
5. Assessment results generally are public and often are pub-

lished in a way that permits comparison of institutions.

6. Assessment defines quality relative to an institution's mission, not according to some universal standard of academic excellence to which only elite institutions can aspire.
7. Assessment cycle times tend to be in the range of 5 to 10 years.

This international definition of the term assessment differs from its use in the United States, where it generally describes the procedures used for evaluating what has been learned by individuals or groups of students. The international concept of assessment is closer to what Americans might describe as systematic program review, save that assessments in other countries generally address either teaching quality, or in separate exercises, research quality. Our use of the term in the following discussion focuses on assessments of teaching quality—the evaluation of the quality of student study programs and the campus provision of teaching and learning.

External assessments of teaching quality are now rapidly being implemented throughout the world, but the two model systems are those developed in England and the Netherlands. In England, quality assessments of teaching in all university

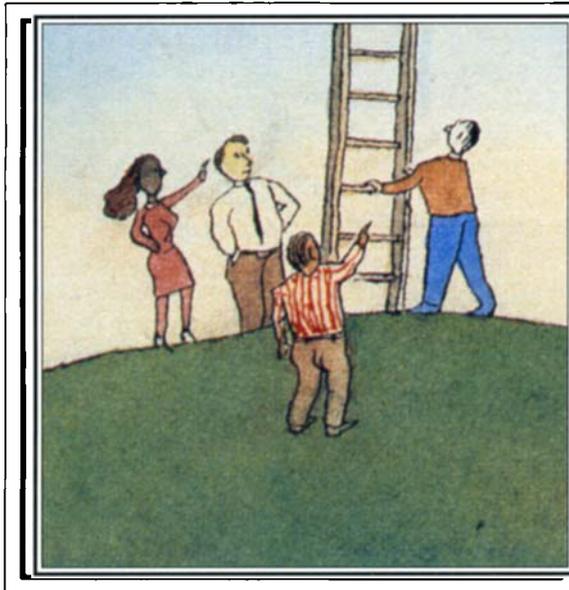
disciplines or subjects were initiated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), using self-studies and external peer reviews. The quality assessments of teaching evaluate—among a number of factors—the curriculum, approach to teaching and learning, nature of students, student achievement, student employability or progression to further study, and academic management and quality control.

The external peer reviews involve a four-day visit, which includes interviews and classroom observations. Each academic subject is rated on a four-point scale for each of six elements: curricu-

lum design, content, and organization; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; and quality assurance and enhancement. The resulting "graded profile" gives rise to a summative satisfactory/unsatisfactory judgment published in a publicly available report. Following the assessment of all the university curricula in a particular field, subject overview reports review what was learned about the field as a whole.

As of January 1997, a new quality-assurance agency will be contracted by the HEFCE to assess all academic subjects of the English universities over a multiyear timetable, as well as to conduct the academic audits outlined below. The HEFCE also plans to link fund allocations to the quality assessments of teaching, a decision that has already been implemented in a separate exercise for assessing research.

A similar process of assessments has been developed in the Netherlands under the auspices of the Association of Universities (VSNU). The Dutch process also examines educational



quality at the programmatic level across universities; because of the relatively small size of the Dutch university sector, it has been possible for a single team of external reviewers to visit all programs in a particular discipline. The assessments focus on such topics as the content of the academic program, student progress and support, performance of program graduates, qualifications of academic staff, and program quality assurance. While assessments—including comparative information across institutions on relevant criteria—are made publicly available, the Dutch (unlike the English) model makes no graded summary judgment of each program. The published reports do, however, include an overview of the knowledge gained about the academic field. The VSNU now has completed a first review of all Dutch academic programs and has begun a second, 5-year cycle. There is no current plan to link these assessments with funding decisions.

### **Academic Audit**

1. Academic audit is an externally driven peer review of internal quality-assurance, assessment, and improvement systems. Unlike assessment, audit does not evaluate quality: it focuses on the processes that are believed to produce quality and the methods by which academics assure themselves that quality has been attained.
2. Audit is founded on the principle that good people working with sufficient resources and good processes will produce good results, but that faulty processes will prevent even good people and plentiful resources from producing optimal outcomes.
3. Audits of educational quality generally take place at the institutional level and focus on the formalities of quality assurance—on policy statements, rules and procedures, guidance notes, and meeting minutes. Audits do not address academic standards, or determine the quality of teaching and learning outcomes, but evaluate how an institution satisfies itself that its chosen standards are being achieved.
4. Audits at the institutional level follow “audit trails”—three or four extensive investigations undertaken on a sampling basis by looking at records and interviewing faculty members, staff, and students at the subject level. Such interviews may uncover the important informal dimensions of quality assurance, including whether faculty have internalized quality improvement and assessment processes.
5. Audit cycle times can be significantly shorter than those of assessment, because audits are inherently simpler.
6. Audit reports, similar to financial audits, are always made public.

A form of audit has been implemented in Hong Kong (where it is called the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review), in New Zealand, in the United Kingdom, and in the European Rectors Conference, which recently initiated a pilot program of institutional audits for European universities. The concept of an academic audit was first developed in the mid-1980s by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) of the old universities in the United Kingdom in response to government concerns about quality assurance in higher education.

In its original form, academic audit focused on those areas deemed crucial to the delivery of high-quality higher educa-

tion: it monitored for each institution the design and review of its programs of study, the adequacy of its pedagogical techniques and awareness, and its means of verifying the effectiveness of the learning enterprise as a whole. The auditing process itself involves the scrutiny of briefing documentation supplied by the institution, a three-day visit to the institution by a team of outside auditors experienced in higher education to examine the effectiveness of the quality-assurance systems in situ, and the writing of a report that is made available first to the institution, then to the broader public.

Very importantly, the audit process *assumes* the presence of rigorous assessment by institutions of their own programs, teaching, and degrees; assessment is seen as a central prerequisite of a quality-assurance process and continuous activity. Further, academic standards can be defined and internally policed only when a supportive collegial culture exists—a culture built around institutional policies and requirements, faculty expectations, and departmental practices. In this context, the role of an external academic audit is to verify the effectiveness of the institution’s assessment procedures and their implementation.

### **LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

What can we learn from other countries’ implementation of teaching assessments and academic audits that can help us reform the U.S. process of academic accreditation so as to address the problem of hollowed collegiality?

Any academic quality-assurance system must attempt to balance the seemingly polar goals of accountability and improvement. The ideal system would select a portfolio of quality-assurance elements that, when combined, best balance the advantages and risks associated with each goal. In the United States, where today only the process of accreditation exists to assure the public of the quality of campus teaching and learning, the goals of accountability and improvement both appear to receive insufficient weight, particularly when compared to academic quality-assurance systems in other countries.

As we argued earlier, it is imperative that effective steps be taken now to restore public faith in the capacity of the higher education community to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning in U.S. higher education. This can be done in two ways—first, by encouraging quality assessments of teaching and learning at the institutional level as a new means for strengthening the internal performance of colleges and universities, and second, by promoting academic audits at the regional level as a means of external accountability. In the arguments that follow, we suggest how such a system might work.

The experience of other countries suggests that an essential first component of any balanced quality-assurance system is a systematic process for assessing the quality of teaching and learning at the level of individual academic programs. Abroad, such assessments have encouraged increased attention to teaching and learning within universities, promoted communication and coordination among faculty members in subject fields, and measurably improved departmental mechanisms of quality assurance.

In Europe, the initiation of quality assessments of teaching and learning has often been the responsibility of external agencies. But as experience with these systems accumulates,

there is increasing recognition that external subject-level assessments have drawbacks. First, when conducted by external agencies, educational assessments often lead to a “culture of compliance” in which time and energy that should be focused on educational improvement are dissipated in gathering information, providing mandated reports, and (sometimes) in staging presentations designed to mislead external reviewers. Second, the growth in assessments conducted by external agencies can result in uncoordinated visits by external reviewers that are difficult to integrate with institutional processes of planning and budgeting. Third, the management of subject-level reviews by outside parties permits institutions to avoid developing the sense of collective responsibility essential for effective quality assurance; it delays the accumulation of professional knowledge and the collegial interaction across departments that are necessary to quality assurance and that indeed improve teaching and learning.

Because of these problems, and because in a country the size of the United States the sheer scale of the enterprise makes systematic external assessment of all the varied academic programs prohibitively complex and expensive, we would argue that, at the subject level, quality assessments of teaching and learning are best made by individual institutions.

The superficial similarity of such quality assessments to institutional-level program reviews—reportedly carried out by two-thirds of public institutions and one-third of private institutions in the United States—may lead some to believe that the necessary mechanisms for internal accountability are already in place. Existing program-review procedures, however, fall well short of the ideal. Program reviews tend to focus on program productivity and on external reputation as measured by research and scholarship. Very few such reviews explicitly focus on the quality of teaching and learning, much less lead to observable improvements in student learning.

One would look long and hard to find in the United States subject-level reviews conducted by a team of academic peers who observe individual classes, examine how a program evaluates and enhances the quality of its teaching, and inspect how the program monitors the relationship between program aims and course delivery as well as how it assesses student learning—procedures characteristic of quality assessments of teaching in the United Kingdom.

Development of more careful and systematic institution-based assessments of teaching and learning, both in subject fields and in general or liberal education, represents a crucial first step in reforming the quality-assurance system in the United States. The experience of other countries also suggests that quality assessments of teaching and learning are unlikely to receive the attention and energy they deserve unless these processes are subjected to rigorous, external, and publicly available academic audits.

The lessons learned from the implementation of academic audits in continental Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Hong Kong suggest several critical components that are essential to an effective audit. First, the purpose of the academic audit is not to assess academic performance; it is to verify the rigor and reliability of each institution’s system for assessing the quality of teaching and learning, as well as its overall academic quality-assurance procedures and the effectiveness of their implementation. Academic audits should be

clearly focused on evaluating the institution’s own quality-assurance processes and its efforts at internal improvement. In contrast, the broad range of issues covered by the traditional U.S. accreditation process—and the consequent demands upon accreditation review-team members during their campus visits—prevent the type of in-depth investigative procedures characteristic of academic quality audits in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong.

Second, external audits should be conducted by trained teams of academic peers and other professionals knowledgeable about and experienced in the process of institutional-level quality assurance. Because audit teams evaluate the process of academic quality assurance rather than academic standards themselves, audit teams (in the Netherlands, for example) often include foreign academics, as well as individuals experienced in quality assurance in business and government.

In the United States, which prides itself on its international reputation for academic quality, academic audit teams might reasonably include experienced academic auditors from other countries, as well as U.S. professionals involved in quality-assurance activities in either public or private non-academic organizations. The latter participants would boost public confidence in the validity of the process and, through interactions among team members and the relevant institution, could increase knowledge about effective quality-assurance processes within higher education. These participants would also form, over time, a group of independent public observers able to speak knowledgeably about the validity of academic quality assurance.

Third, while the quality-assurance process for an institution must be determined by the institution itself, audit teams should ascertain whether academic staff have given careful thought to quality assurance and can articulate and defend the choices made. In Hong Kong, for example, academic audit teams organize their inquiry according to the following five sub-processes:

1. *Curriculum Design*: By what processes are program curricula designed, reviewed, and improved?
2. *Pedagogical Design*: By what processes are the methods of teaching and learning decided upon and improved?
3. *Implementation Quality*: What processes are used to monitor teaching performance, review performance evaluations, and reward teachers?
4. *Outcomes Assessment*: How do staff, departments, faculties, and the institution monitor outcomes and link outcomes assessments to teaching and learning process improvement?
5. *Resource Provision*: Are the human, technical, and financial resources needed for quality made available when and where needed?

Fourth, effective academic audits avoid focusing on the formalities of quality assurance—policy statements, rules and procedures, meeting minutes—and instead follow “audit trails” leading to selected academic programs, which involves conducting interviews with faculty members and students to determine whether the staff have internalized the institution’s quality improvement and assurance process.

Finally, academic audits must be made available publicly. In other countries, this frequently means making the reports

available to government agencies and to the general public. In the United States, this would likely mean, at a minimum, distributing academic audits to institutional governing boards, foundations, and (in the public sector) to state coordinating boards and appropriate legislative committees. The form of the published reports—such as those already implemented in the United Kingdom—should include an outline of the institution's process for assessing teaching and learning, as well as its quality-assurance procedures, along with an analysis of features worth commending or improving.

Given the potential benefits of institutionally based quality assessments and of academic audits for addressing issues of improvement and accountability, how can such processes best be implemented in the United States?

## REFORMING THE U.S. SYSTEM

While the implementation of subject-level quality assessments and external academic audits has had a number of positive effects on the quality of teaching and learning, these processes would not have been initiated in other countries without the active prompting of government. Here, however, a federal initiative on behalf of academic quality assurance is unlikely to be successful for several reasons, not least the antagonism within the 104th Congress toward federal interventions in higher education. The recent experience with the federal government's effort to develop goals for K-12 education also suggests that federal initiative is not a propitious starting point.

While state initiatives in academic quality assurance are active and likely to increase (particularly in the absence of voluntary reform), differing state standards and procedures for academic quality assurance are likely to prove inadequate in the national (and increasingly international) market for higher education. Furthermore, the large number of colleges and universities in the private sector are unlikely to be covered by such state regulation.

For all these reasons, and despite the recent rejection of the NPB proposals for reform, we continue to believe that the well-established system of regional, voluntary self-regulation offers the best potential vehicle for correcting the imbalance in the current U.S. quality-assurance system. We suggest that a critical role for the newly emerging Council for Higher Education Accreditation would be to restore public faith in voluntary self-regulation by encouraging the development of institutionally based teaching and learning quality assessments and experimentation with academic audits.

The first goal—to encourage quality assessments of teaching and learning at the institutional level—could be pursued by a research and dissemination project initiated by CHEA. This project could study the effective practices of such quality assessments already implemented at the subject level in other countries, disseminate to colleges and universities proven

models of how these quality assessments might effectively be implemented, and encourage institutional experimentation with this new form of quality assurance.

The second goal would be for CHEA, working closely with the regional agencies, to facilitate experimentation with academic audits as a new mechanism of external accountability. While we see the concept of academic audit as most effective if it is ultimately part of the regional accreditation process, academic audits could initially be pilot-tested in a number of organizational forms as a means of developing necessary experience and support for the concept. For example, academic audits might first be developed on a trial basis by one of the regional accreditation agencies and offered to institutions in its region on a voluntary basis. Or a consortium of private colleges, such as the Associated Colleges of the Midwest or the Great Lakes Colleges Association, might collectively develop the concept of academic audit as a means of signaling to the public the member colleges' commitment to high-quality undergraduate education. Or a state system, such as the University of North Carolina, might develop academic audits for its system campuses to confirm for the people of the state the system's commitment to quality teaching and learning.

If several solid experiments with academic audit could be pilot-tested, we believe the practice would likely spread throughout the higher education system. The U.S. system has one distinctive structural feature lacking in other countries—institutional governing boards. The members of these boards routinely expect as part of their fiduciary obligation to review financial audits designed to assure the financial integrity of their college or university. These members are also frequently familiar with quality-assurance processes common to business and the non-profit sector.

Should a viable process of academic audit be developed within the higher education system, we are convinced members of each governing board would insist that this form of external quality assurance be applied to their own institution as a means of assuring its academic reputation and integrity. The innovations of teaching and learning quality assessments and academic audit would thereby spread throughout American higher education in the same manner as other forms of academic innovation, through institutional efforts to gain comparative advantage in a competitive system.

Following a number of such experiments, we would also anticipate that the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, working with regional agencies, could facilitate the development of consistent and reliable academic audit procedures as well as relevant audit training for colleges and universities.

Which way to quality assurance in higher education? We believe that a known route exists: a new, mutually reinforcing system of institution-based quality assessments of teaching and learning and a coordinated regional system of external academic audits.

