How can we give due weight to the nonmeasurable aspects of the higher educational experience and due credit to those individuals who foster that experience?

Accountability in higher education

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Demands for accountability in higher education have produced a large number of books and articles on the subject and a large number of long-range planning committees on the campuses. With the demands have also come a number of statements of perspectives on accountability. The following paper is an attempt to accomplish three things. First, we sketch several perspectives which we believe serve jointly to exhaust the opinion field of accountability. Second, we focus upon what we believe to be the two central problems attending accountability in higher education: (a) criteria for faculty evaluation and (b) total systems on institutional accountability. Third, it is our opinion that a resolution of the problem of criteria will almost immediately lead to a solution to the problem of total system accountability.

It might be added parenthetically that much, and perhaps, even most, of the problem of accountability in higher education stems from a confusion of empirical with analytical considerations. For instance, when one raises the objection to student evaluation on the grounds that a charismatic teacher might mislead the students, the objection and its rebuttal are founded on largely analytical considerations. If education is defined as the passing on of tradition then the objection is well founded. If education is defined as a force for change, then the objection is not well founded.

Definitions of accountability usually attempt to answer the question, "Who is responsible to whom for what?" (Dennis, 1975; Dressel, 1976; **Outputs,** 1970). The answers to this question are legion, and the perspectives differ with the writer's profession. Some say accountability means evaluation of faculty output. Others say all aspects of the institution must be evaluated. In any event, teacher accountability can best be looked at as one aspect of a general demand by taxpayers, the federal government, state legislators, students and industry that institutions of higher education be held accountable for resources used and programs offered—for the output of the institution. Let us look first at what the literature has to offer and then consider some thoughts about that literature.

Paul Dressel (1976) suggests that evaluation of faculty is a necessary ingredient of accountability, but that accountability encompasses a wider perspective. "Evaluation has been concerned solely with impact or outcome (effectiveness); accountability adds efficiency—the relation between outcomes and resource utilization" (p. 73).

In **Outputs of Higher Education**, as in Dressel, one encounters the same basic ingredients which are considered necessary for any accountability program. The ingredients are (1) determination of institutional goals and objectives, (2) implementation of one of several alternative programs which have been evaluated for cost effectiveness and (3) evaluation of programs. The big questions become "who sets the goals and objectives?" "Who evaluates?" "Who is evaluated?" and "Who evaluates whom?" If we could answer these questions, probably we would have answered the question of "How can accountability programs be implemented within an institution?"

The focus for evaluation inevitably narrows to the faculty. Let us repeat that for many writers on accountability, faculty evaluation and accountability were synonymous. The faculty are understandably nervous, if not hostile. Accountability means change, and the change may be beyond their control.

Dressel (1976) points out, too, that "those who evaluate may ultimately direct and control" (p. 332). In most of the articles reviewed, the administration assumed the role of evaluator. This assumption is indeed threatening to faculties. The administration has much greater access to the state agencies and legislative committees who ultimately decide the budgets of the institutions of higher education. And within individual institutions, administrators determine how resources will be allocated, although faculty members may have input about how the resources will be distributed. Furthermore, it is the administration of the school that the state legislature ultimately holds responsible.

Accountability can be thought of as an attempt to build in change through program review and development as a part of university planning. Accountability is a means, too, of responding to demands for change. With the appearance on the campus of the so-called new student, demands for relevancy and for more student services to aid minorities to enter and compete in the academic world have been heard more frequently. The response has been to provide new programs to meet those needs. Often, at first, the new programs were supported by federal funds, but eventually institutions are expected to pick up the bill. Accountability programs can facilitate the process of developing and funding new programs and thus of implementing change.

Many of the new programs have brought to the campus a new class of professionals who desire a voice in university governance. While at one time the faculties of institutions of higher education might have argued that they alone should decide issues on the campus, they are alone no more. Counselors and others on the campus, students especially, surely have a right to be included in the planning of institutional programs.

In some states, decisions about academic programs are now being made by state officials in the state education agencies. (Lindemann, 1974; Trow, in **Daedalus,** 1975). These people may have little or no knowledge on which to base specific educational program decisions.

A major problem in instituting accountability programs has centered around the question of what should be the goals and objectives of higher education. Should higher education concern itself only with

measurable objectives? Often listed among the benefits of higher education are a number of abstract concepts, generally labeled as social goals, which cannot be measured and which may not emerge until after the individual leaves the institution. For example, a college education is supposed to instill a greater tolerance of diversity and acceptance of social change. Institutions of higher education are also considered to be factories wherein new knowledge is produced and then applied for the public good.

There are no adequate measures for evaluating the quality and quantity of these outputs, especially for individual institutions and for individual faculty members. Two leading experts in systems analysis, C. West Churchman and Alain C. Enthoven, suggest that not all objectives can be measured and that it would be dangerous to disregard such goals as developing the inquiring mind (Churchman, **Outputs,** 1970) simply because the goals cannot be measured. However, Enthoven states that "a cost analysis may identify some bad choices even without being able to indicate the right ones. This point is clearly related to another equally important one about program analysis; that is, analysis should be conceived as the servant of judgment, not as a substitute for it" (**Outputs,** p. 54).

Enthoven suggest that in higher education, efforts should be made to obtain the best measures that are available in order to facilitate decisions:

> I would not waste much time trying to develop an index of total knowledge, discovered or transmitted, in the hope that I could then use it to evaluate alternative programs ... Rather, I would begin by trying to understand very well where we are now, and on what basis allocation decisions are now being made, and what might be done to improve that basis (p. 53).

While we have stated that faculties are threatened by accountability, we should also note that more is involved here than is encapsulated in any description of faculty members subjective responses or hypotheses about causes of these subjective responses. **What is ultimately at issue is the question of criteria.** Faculty members of leading institutions are supposed to set the standard for excellence—and if this premise is accepted, by what standard are they to be evaluated? For example, a piece of sociological research is evaluated in terms of practices and canons of sociological research espoused by Merton, Parsons, Homans, Davis, Coleman, etc. **What these men practice is the standard,** and what they call sociology is sociology. Thus it might collectively be charged that a demand for evaluation is ultimately a demand for conformity—conformity to the practice of the leaders in the field.

On the part of faculties of less prestigious schools, the foregoing objection can, in large part, be met by posing the following argument:

At the introductory level, it is quite proper to expect conformity to the standards of the discipline. The teacher is expected to introduce his or her students to a certain body of concepts and practices which are called psychology, sociology, literary criticism, etc. In doing this, the teacher is simply instructing students in the use of certain words with no necessary commitment to the adequacy of the system of concepts embodied in the words.

At some higher level, admittedly vaguely defined, the teacher will be permitted to take issue with the ways of talking espoused by his colleagues. But two important considerations attend the above practice: (1) When the teacher takes issue with some established way of talking or doing, it is quite clear to his students, his peers, and himself, just what it is he is taking issue with. (2) The teacher will have demonstrated at least the minimal competence needed to be a carrier of culture, realizing that to be a carrier of culture is not to be a creator of culture. Thus we can verify that the public is getting something for its money.

However desirable faculty outputs are finally defined, and whatever criteria is finally employed to measure those outputs, it is the writers' opinion that educational institutions will eventually reach some more or less "fixed" solution. When a fixed solution is arrived at within any given university, it will then be possible to evaluate the total institution.

For when the twin questions of "What should the Faculty do?" and "What measure will count as determining that they have done what they are supposed to do?" are answered—then standard business optimization techniques can be employed. Ultimately, the market, i.e., student demand, will determine where adjustments will be made. Whether a new counselor for student services is hired or whether a new philosophy instructor is employed will be determined on the basis of "marginal utility," based upon some measure of quantity versus quality tradeoffs within the respective departments. In principle, the formula could and probably will be applied across the board to include maintenance men, public relations personnel, and indeed, the entire faculty and staff of the university.

Although "fixed solutions" (in two senses) are anticipated, the cautions of Churchman and Enthoven should not be ignored. We must not disregard such desirable nonmeasurable objectives as "developing the inquiring mind." But can these soft objectives be protected and maintained in the anticipated "university as a business" sketched above.

And thus the central problem for researchers in the area of accountability in higher education emerges: "How can we give due weight to the nonmeasurable aspects of the higher educational experience and due credit to those individuals who foster that experience?"

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