

Defining Student Success Initiative: Subcommittee on Differentiation for Disaggregation

Teleconference May 3, 2018

Members discussed a draft of the paper by chair, Jeff Slovak. The resulting second draft is below:

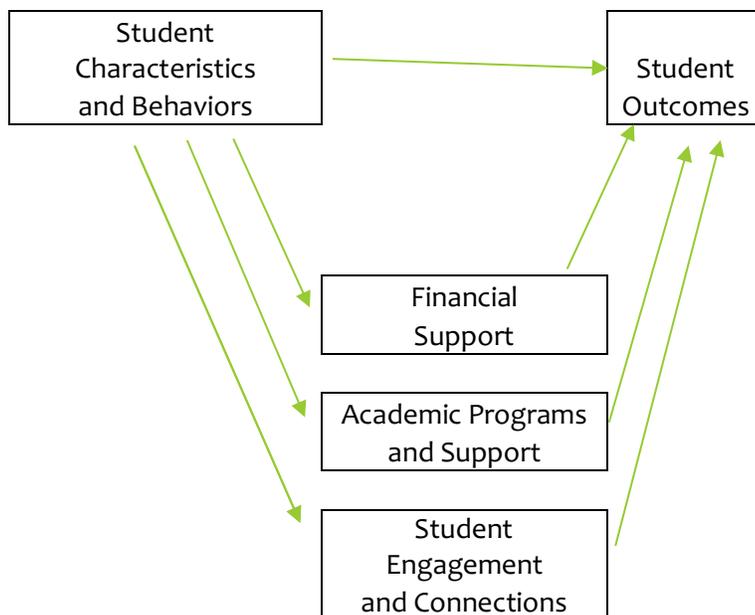
Perspectives on Accreditation

Introduction

Across higher education as a whole, in the U.S. Congress, and in other places where the accreditation of educational institutions is of interest, the discussion is wide-ranging and the issues are many. At the most general level, discussants seem to distinguish between three over-arching models for accreditation: mission-driven, differentiated, and risk-based. The first is more or less the model which currently informs accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Institutions are free to define their own missions and are then reviewed against the HLC Criteria for Accreditation to determine the degree to which they fulfill those missions. “Differentiated” accreditation envisions beginning with a scheme of categories into which all colleges are placed, and then evaluating all colleges within each category according to criteria specific to those categories. “Risk-based” accreditation could, at least in concept, be applied to either mission-driven or differentiated accreditation schemes; its focus is most heavily directed to institutions that are at risk of failing to fulfill their missions and/or to achieve acceptable outcome levels on key educational variables.

An Orienting Model

Each of these types or models of accreditation has its own strengths and shortcomings, which the authors of this essay discussed at some length. As that discussion proceeded, however, it tended to return to an over-arching model of the key variables or clusters of variables that research and practice have demonstrated to be linked to student “success” in higher education. That model is displayed below. Our discussion of the different clusters of variables included mention of the following points:



1. **Student Characteristics** includes all of those background characteristics of students and their families or households that we know to be linked to success, including sex, race/ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status, and status as a first-generation-in-college student, to name but a few. This cluster also includes **Behaviors** that we know to be linked to outcomes as well. Full-time/part-time attendance patterns, stopping or dropping out, and time spent working at an unrelated job (whether by choice or necessity) are examples.
2. **Financial Support** includes the amount of financial assistance a college can provide its students to preclude them from either needing to work extensively to cover their educational costs or to graduate with extraordinary levels of indebtedness.
3. **Academic Programs** includes the menu of certificate/degree options offered to students at a college and the associated pre-requisites, program requirements and expectations which characterize those programs. **Support** includes the various means of support or assistance a college can offer students as they pursue their academic programs, but especially those “high impact” practices that research has shown to be especially conducive to students achieving higher levels of success.
4. **Student Engagement and Connections** includes the variety of means by which a college can encourage and facilitate the forging of connections by its students to each other, to the faculty and staff, and to the larger college culture. This is, of course, the category of variables tapped in surveys like the National Survey of Student Engagement and the other data collection vehicles that have been developed to tap the “belongingness” of students to their colleges.
5. **Student Success** includes the retention, persistence and completion measures that are most commonly treated as measures of collegiate success. There are special definition and measurement issues here that need resolution, especially (but not exclusively) for associate-degree-granting institutions. The problem of tracking and counting students who successfully transfer from a college of origin to another college of destination without earning a credential at the former is well known and is particularly although not exclusively relevant at associate-level colleges. There are also special ways to partition the idea of completion; the Indiana example of completion of a core curriculum at either a two-year or a four-year institution is a case in point. Further, the category can be and probably should be far more extensive than this. Levels of indebtedness at graduation or separation, post-collegiate earnings, loan repayment and default rates and similar measures included in compendia like the CollegeScorecard would be included here. Additional measures of success might include: rates of student continuation into graduate or professional school; rates of winning prestigious grants or fellowships for further study; rates of post-college entry into the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and other high-profile service settings; and any other of a host of worthwhile outcomes or “successes” toward which a college might be directing its students. Finally, and lest we overlook them, there are students at many colleges who enroll in and complete courses without any intention of acquiring a degree, certificate or other formal credential. Definition and measurement issues surrounding the success of such students are many. Key to any or all of these, however, is the need to employ a trend-based approach – an approach that examines any/all of these rates over an appropriate time interval, and not just for a single year or point – to assessing college performance in generating student success. Without such a time-based analysis, it is simply impossible to determine whether a college or university is consistently performing at an optimal or even a minimally acceptable level, and whether it is organized adequately to generate and sustain that level of performance.

Without meaning to be prescriptive about specific variables to be included in such a model or about specific levels of student success to be deemed acceptable (or not), we were in general accord that the model displayed and discussed above was sufficiently general to be applicable to all of the institutions accredited by the HLC (or by any other regional accreditor).

Some Implications

Adopting a model like this one as the basis for rethinking accreditation carries some significant implications. Those deserve extensive further discussion. For now, I can think of three. I offer below a brief discussion of each.

There is first the matter of specifying “student success” as the key – and, as presented here, as the sole – standard against which colleges should be accredited. Granting that there are many ways to operationalize this general concept, and that colleges may vary in the specifications they think most relevant to themselves, it is at least arguable that this stance renders much that appears in current college mission statements to a distinctly secondary level of importance. Efforts to provide community service, or to promote neighborhood redevelopment, or to offer cultural events to the larger community, or to motivate the production and publication of research are only important for accreditation purposes to the degree that they are offered as elements of producing “student success.” It is certainly possible to make such arguments. A research university will want to educate its students to the production and uses of research; such an institution will want to promote faculty and student research so as to achieve student success in that realm. (It might as a result require accreditors to start looking at graduate-level graduation rates as well as baccalaureate completion rates.) An institution that is committed not just to student success overall but also to closing gaps in success rates among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds might consider its community-related activities essential to furthering that goal. (It might require accreditors to start looking at the success rates of students from specific groups in comparison to the institution’s overall rates.) An arts-focused institution that offers to its surrounding community cultural productions generated by its students and faculty is offering those productions as part of its efforts to achieve student success in that realm. (It might as a result require accreditors to start looking at rates of student participation in those efforts.) An institution that is committed not just to student success overall but also to closing gaps in success rates among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds might consider its community-related activities essential to furthering that goal. (It might require accreditors to start looking at the success rates of students from specific groups in comparison to the institution’s overall rates.) The point here is that these sorts of efforts, when they are not closely linked to student success, would be rendered pretty much irrelevant in the accreditation context. When they are so linked, they probably require additional operationalizations of “student success.”

The second implication has to do with differentiated or categorical accreditation, as that term was defined in the introductory paragraph to this essay. If the orienting model offered above is indeed generally applicable to all of the institutions accredited by HLC, then there seems little reason to consider partitioning institutions into categories for accreditation purposes. Colleges and universities can be more or less specialized along a number of dimensions, including the types of students they predominantly recruit and serve, the kinds and levels of degree programs they offer, and their affiliations with larger organizations: states or counties, religious denominations, or parent corporations, to name but a few. More specialized institutions might well be expected to vary on each of the major variables included in our over-arching model as generators of student success relative to their more generalized peers, and those variations might be more (or less) conducive to registering higher levels of student success. Even so, the model seems no less applicable to the most generalized institutions than to the most specialized. For all of them, student success is the key outcome.

The third implication has to do with risk-based or risk-focused accreditation. As noted in our introduction, the term implies that accrediting agencies will focus most heavily and most frequently on those institutions that fail to meet a standard for accreditation. By our lights, that standard is the achievement of high, or at least acceptable, levels of student success along whatever dimensions that term is defined. Even with a trend-based perspective on student success, the development of numerical standards for success or at least numerical standards for acceptable performance may well be unavoidable. The development and testing of those standards will involve a major empirical research project.

Changes in Accreditation Practice

The analyses and arguments that are compiled for the re-affirmation of the accreditation of a college or university by the HLC, and the practices of accreditors conducting re-affirmation visits at those colleges or universities, are generally synchronic in nature. Unless an “embedded report” dealing with an issue from a prior re-affirmation is required by the HLC as part of a comprehensive review, the Assurance Arguments compiled by those colleges generally address their missions, structures and operations at one point in time, the present. Because their primary mission is to validate claims made in Assurance Arguments, the members of HLC visiting teams are working within an equally synchronic framework. To be sure, some documents relevant to a more diachronic approach are included with Assurance Arguments. Visiting team reports generated by prior visits, audited financial statements for the three fiscal years prior to the current review, and copies of annual institutional updates as reported to the HLC are examples. The contents of these documents may or may not span very many years of institutional history and operations. Even where that span is relatively long, however, the contents of these documents are not organized or displayed in a fashion conducive to a more diachronic assessment of college operations or outcomes.

We have already noted in this essay the importance we attach to making comprehensive reviews more diachronic in nature. There are two dimensions to accomplishing that. The first is to require as a part of every Assurance Argument an explicit discussion by the college being reviewed of major changes it has experienced since its last HLC comprehensive review. These changes should be tied to the core components for re-affirmation by HLC, so as to limit them and their discussion to the most important developments since that last review. (We recognize in this regard that college structures and operations as they pertain to some of the core components may well not have changed since the last review.) The second is to require as a part of every Assurance Argument a data display and a discussion of selected measures of each of the major components of the model with which we began this essay. The display and the analysis should portray measures over time, so that both levels and trends in the achievement of student success – however that is defined at and for the institution being reviewed – can be readily observed. The span of time to be covered by these displays should probably be in the range of five to seven years, a sufficient span to enable a reader to distinguish trends from anomalous single year occurrences. Similar presentations for measures of the other variables included in our model should also be provided over that same span of time. With these, the colleges and universities being reviewed can offer data-informed discussions of major changes in the factors that have produced those levels and trends with regard to student success.

Through the annual update process, HLC’s member colleges and universities already provide it with a variety of data elements at least some of which might prove useful in developing and implementing the suggestions for trend displays and analyses that we make here. Some additional data might need to be gathered during that process, to more fully implement our suggestions; we are confident that HLC could specify and include them without making the annual update process unduly cumbersome or complicated. HLC also provides on a regular basis training seminars and programs, both on-line and face-to-face, for its peer reviewers. Both kinds of training would probably need some revision were the suggestions we have offered here be actively pursued and implemented. We are confident that HLC could implement those necessary revisions.

Implementing these suggestions as part of the process for re-affirming the accreditation of colleges and universities would, we believe, more closely focus that process and the activities of which it is composed on the key variable against which colleges and universities should be assessed. That key variable, of course, is student success.

J. Slovak

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Questions?

Please contact luminaproject@hlcommission.org.