

Report of HLC Board OF Trustees Seminar Discussion On Re-imagining Accreditation for the 21st Century

April 8, 2018

Panelists

1. Dr. Ted Mitchell, President, American Council on Education, former Under Secretary of Education, Facilitator
2. Dr. Chris Bustamante, President, Rio Salado Community College
3. Dr. Stephanie Davidson, Vice Chancellor, Ohio Department of Higher Education
4. Dr. Sylvia Jenkins, President, Moraine Valley Community College
5. Dr. Robert McMahan, President, Kettering University

Introduction

Board Chair Johnson-Odim introduced the five panelists.

Dr. Mitchell started the discussion by noting the main issues he sees in the higher education landscape.

1. The stakes are high because there is concern about student success and the value of higher education.
2. There is a lack of clarity about quality and the role of the Triad (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], states and accreditors).
3. The ways in which concerns about quality intersect with the growing ecosystem of post-secondary education.

He asked that during the discussion today Trustees think about what they want their legacy to be. He then asked each of the panelists to discuss the landscape from their perspectives.

- One institution was an early adopter of online education and is planning to launch a national online program. Their mission is to serve the nontraditional student, and they are redefining transfer.
- They are in the innovation space and would like to see options available for innovation in the accreditation space. There is a need to experiment with the concept of seat time, and they would like to do that in a safe space. To that end, the Partners for Transformation (Partners) have proposed a safe zone for innovation for institutions with a good reputation.
- He feels like a square peg in a round hole. His institution is often triggered in the Non-Financial Indicators because of its unique approach.
- Accreditors have a role in encouraging states not to disinvest in higher education.
- Regular and substantive interaction with faculty is a concern at the U.S. Department of Education, which has an impact on institutions such as Western Governors University that offer competency-based education.
- The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) has worked well and should be maintained going forward.

- How to provide services to underserved students is important.
- Another representative is starting to get many questions from the General Assembly asking them to defend the value of higher education. In the past both Republicans and Democrats supported higher education. That is no longer true. This is a real threat and something we need to battle.
- One state is focusing on completion (degrees, apprenticeships, certificates) while also addressing equity gaps with performance-based funding.
- Affordability is also a big issue. The state is dealing with this by supporting programs such as early college and dual enrollment for which the cost is shared by K-12 and higher education. The hope is that in the long run students will graduate more quickly and with less debt.
- The state has aggressive articulation and transfer agreements among institutions and is starting to look at 3 plus 1 programs in which students complete three years at a community college and complete the fourth year at a participating bachelors institution.
- Sixty-two percent of one institution's students are part-time and the majority of are not prepared to complete.
- The hope is that HLC continues to partner with them in innovative practices. For example, they now label students as degree-seeking or non-degree-seeking instead of full-time or part-time.
- Open access institutions have a different challenge than selective institutions. Her institution has students who do not read at a fourth-grade level and therefore need developmental classes. Legislators don't always understand this and think the institution is wasting money.
- One institution was founded as an experiential learning institution. Experiential and classroom learning are given equal weight. Students enter a rotation, 12 weeks in the classroom and 12 weeks "on the job." As they advance in their professional roles they advance in their classroom experience.
- The institution has a complex delivery model. It works with 600 companies worldwide. Quality is assessed every 12 weeks by the companies and graduate schools that employ its students. They receive a lot of dynamic feedback from the companies with which they work.
- Social mobility of the students is among the highest in the country. The placement rate is between 99% and 100%.
- The model is very powerful, but it makes them sensitive to issues of innovation and accreditation.
- The institution sees the demand side of higher education very strongly. Employers' needs are evolving rapidly. How this evolving ecosystem will affect quality assurance and quality improvement is very pertinent to them.
- HLC is a trusted partner in the higher education community.
- One organization has conducted polls and focus groups about the questions related to higher education. Their pollster says the scars of the great recession are hard to heal. Even

though it was true during the recession that college graduates had higher incomes, the same was not true for families.

- There has been a general deterioration in confidence that runs counter to the historic stability of higher education as a tool of social mobility.
- Most surprising is the political polarization in opinions about higher education, especially the sharp decline in confidence among Republicans.
- There has been a steady weaponization of freedom of speech.
- Half of the white working class thinks higher education is a risky proposition and is not likely to lead to a positive outcome. Debt, cost, short- and long-term job outcomes are cited as concerns.
- Associations are coming together to think of ways to create a public relations campaign that (1) better articulates what is happening in the real world for college graduates, certificate holders, etc., and (2) deals with the negative narratives that have some truth to them and looks at what we can do better.
- First generation, Latino, and African American families still see the value in higher education.
- We should come up with lane lines. What are things the Associations can do, what are things accreditors can do, what are things institutions can do, and what are things companies can do?
- Accreditors, not the federal government, should mind the quality store. HLC is out in front on this issue. The C-RAC graduation rate study is a great start.
- We must combat the message that higher education is perfectly satisfied with itself. How can accreditors demonstrate that higher education is open to change?

Discussion Themes

Dual Enrollment/Faculty Qualifications

- One representative was very glad to see the change to HLC's Assumed Practices. HLC brought a spotlight to this, and people started paying attention. The representative gets complaints from high schools that students are getting too many credits from dual credit courses, because high schools must pay for it.
- In another state the issue was complicated because there were not sufficient funds to allow faculty to complete their education. There is a lot of concern at high schools. The institution will meet the requirements but not without consternation and difficulty. The change also affected regular faculty at institutions. The institution needed the extra time allowed by the extension.
- There has been a perception that K-12 has been taking advantage of dual enrollment.
- In some states every faculty member teaching a college-level course should have the proper credentials. It is very important that we hold to this commitment. Asking a college to accept credits from a high school that does not have the proper credentialed faculty is problematic. There was an example of a course that was taught at a high school by one of the institution's faculty members.

Quality Assurance

- Quality continues to be an issue. There is skepticism about the quality and reliability of higher education. Another critique is the sense that we're perfectly satisfied with what we're doing and there's no impetus for change. What are the ways accreditors can continue to hold a high-quality mark but provide a space for innovation? The lane lines are important. HLC is already way at the front of compliance issues. The C-RAC study is providing important insights.
- Organizations that hire students are starting to invest in job-ready competency experiences. In the past it's been too expensive for corporations to have their own universities. Now they're looking at things like MOOCs and competency-based education. Accreditors are not the only providers of quality. We must be prepared for competition in the quality assurance space from alternative providers. As a traditional university, the institution is looking at ways to innovate on the edges. The question is whether we can innovate fast enough.
- HLC can help set the framework and language used in the debate about quality. He counseled against using "either/or." As we try to navigate this space and celebrate diversity of institutions, our language is critically important. We should talk about careers, not jobs. We shouldn't use terms like "consumers of higher education" – it is dangerous to commodify students. We should think about alternative models. Rather than discussing higher education as if it were Google or Silicon Valley, we should discuss it in terms of the social good it performs, like the fire department. It's too important to be left to the free market.
- The HLC Criteria for Accreditation assume that quality links to integrity. Do the Criteria prevent different understandings of quality? They are currently based on very traditional notions of higher education. Colleges risk student education and donor money, while Silicon Valley risks venture capital funds.
- HLC's trustees can guide the conversation related to risk. Innovation is linked to accepting risks in behavior, in the education model, and in which institutions can be accredited.
- Many players could argue that they're more capable and qualified to determine quality than HLC. They look at outcomes, not inputs. Students and trustees would be willing to take on risk if there were an assurance of outcomes.
- The notion that accreditors look at inputs, not outcomes, such as counting books in the library, is 20 years old. Accreditation has been almost exclusively about outcomes for years now. The discussion about risk needs to take into account the type of institution.
- HLC could promote innovation with a different kind of approval process that's more iterative – approve a concept, work with it, then report on it.

Changing Perceptions of Higher Education

- What we're seeing now is the end game in a set of forces that began in the 1940s. At that time college was a luxury. With the GI Bill, it became something you worked for and earned. With the Higher Education Act in the 1960s it became a mass market. By the 2000s it became a necessity. It's now transactional instead of transformational. Higher Education will not revert to what it was before this evolution.
- Our message has been that going to college is a ticket to a better life. We've been selling its transactional value. Those who have not had success in our society still have a level of trust in the change agency of higher education.

- Pressure is coming from corporations and organizations that are buying this “product.” They ask how it can be done easier, better, quicker, cheaper.
- The GI Bill affected white people, not those who are disadvantaged. It’s true that people who get a college education make more money. What has changed is that the people who are newly disadvantaged are those who went to liberal arts institutions and are living in their parents’ basements – and are largely white. Foundational education is very important, but so is vocational education. Also, we don’t know what jobs we’re preparing people to perform. As technology changes, only the foundational tools will allow people to succeed.
- One immutable law of higher education has been that the world understands and values us as we are and in the same way as we value ourselves. Now there’s a disconnect – people don’t understand how valuable we are. If higher education is truly a transactional good that drives an economic outcome, the credential becomes important. Where you get it becomes less important. This is the macro force to which we must respond.
- There are political trends that have exacerbated this problem, such as anti-elitism. There is also the question of whether college is a personal gain or a public good. Is it important to have job skills or a liberal education? There has been a big shift in congressional districts. Very few are competitive because of gerrymandering. Republicans declare that education is broken, defund it, then privatize it.
- Knowing how distrust in higher education arose must go hand-in-hand with looking at it from a risk-management perspective. It’s difficult to manage risk if you don’t have failure built into the model. Accreditation should allow more risk than it does now. Failure needs to be encouraged and rewarded.
- Much of the notion of going to college just to get a job is a class-based issue across ethnicities. Higher education needs to take on that polarization and reframe the discussion.
- The way in which governing boards are responding to challenges needs to improve. A cadre of leaders who are “battle ready” needs to be created.
- Native Americans have some of the lowest rates of enrollment and completion. Many tribal colleges are struggling with accreditation. Most are in remote areas and are under resourced, but they do value higher education. HLC’s emphasis on diversity is making a big difference for us. If you go to a tribal college commencement, you’ll see the parents’ pride.

Leadership

- There are three key things for HLC to consider: (1) there are more and more non-traditional students, yet we still function on credit hours; (2) there is no difference between vocational and theoretical education; and (3) there is a need to build leadership and governance mechanisms to support these changes.
- Job descriptions of presidents need to change. They should focus on the kind of students they want to create. In the community college sector there is a large problem with turnover of presidents. We need to encourage mentorships.
- Education is the development of leaders. Who will step forward and lead? After the recent school shooting in Florida, it was high school students who stepped forward because political leaders wouldn’t. Who’s going to take the leadership for the changes in higher education?

Community Colleges

- Community colleges are not as confused about their role as other types of institutions. It's very transactional. Students are attending college to get a job and want an affordable education. Also, there are many undereducated people who are working. We need the ability to give students a resource to finish their education online when they can't finish on campus.
- Community colleges lost sight of who they were and turned themselves into little universities. Many don't focus on their core mission; they suffer from mission creep. If we don't know what we're trying to sell to the public, we can't sell it.
- As a comprehensive community college, depending on your location and the industries in your district, mission creep may become necessary. We do our best to encourage our students to continue their education beyond community college. Community colleges define quality as the ability to fill out the application and start classes. There is a three-legged stool of access, retention and completion. A fourth leg is continuing their education.