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Assessment in the Next Normal

In mid-September, the American Council on Education asked 300 presidents to identify their most pressing concerns. Campus mental health was a top concern (faculty, staff and students). Long-term financial viability was also a major issue, including the reality that available revenue is down and costs are rising due in large part to the pandemic.

It is no surprise that enrollment is a major worry. Almost 80% of the respondents indicated that total student enrollment had decreased. And almost 70% of the institutions had already or soon would be having layoffs. Combine this with the uncertainty of the future and COVID-19. it is hardly hyperbole that a summary of this research study published in *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* starts with, “It is a bleak time to be a college leader in America ...”

In my previous articles, I have chosen to define this time in higher education as the “next normal” rather than the “new normal.” I believe that we have yet to see the totality of changes that we will be facing. As leaders, we need to be ready for each change when it comes... and they keep coming.

My sense is that presidents and key leaders need to solidify their institutional foundation. The next normal does not call for new practices, but rather strong and consistent practices. I have previously argued for the value of a servant leadership model. And in this series of articles, I contend that clear, consistent assessment practices are an important key to facing realities.

Assessment has been the mandate from accrediting agencies for years. For many institutions, assessment is primarily an exercise conducted in preparation for an accreditation report or visit. If accreditation is an embedded practice in the institution, it tends to be cursory and unevenly administered. After all, in good times, assessment only applies to problem areas.

My argument is that a pervasive and regular assessment program will support better decisions about reductions in programs and services and in layoffs of personnel. The pressure to make decisions in the pandemic world must be difficult. Decisions based on a solid foundation of assessment data will not necessarily be easier, but they will be more defensible, more equitable and will better serve each institution’s mission and goals.

There needs to be a complete assessment program at every institution that applies to all personnel (faculty, staff and administrators), all programs and services, and all curricular programs and students. And if presidential assessment is not of the same rigor and intensity as all other assessment practices, then presidents are obliged to challenge their boards to develop assessment programs that are robust and transparent.

In the remainder of this article, I will expand on the key elements that I believe to be essential for effective assessment in the next normal. If assessment becomes an essential precursor to all decisions, and if assessment-based decisions become both necessary and regular for optimal campus leadership, then assessment must be more than just an exercise. Assessment needs to be

embedded in your leadership style because you need to do it, not because you have to do it to satisfy external requirements. Taking time to review and/or build an assessment program may seem like a misplaced priority while you are in the midst of crisis management. But the crisis is not going away any time soon, and the foundation for strong leadership and good decision making is essential. So here are the essentials of assessment in the next normal as I perceive them.

First, assessment needs to be ongoing, not annual or biannual. It is typical in higher education to conduct some degree of assessment at the end of the semester and a formal assessment at the end of the year. This makes perfect sense in the “old normal.” But COVID-19 neither knows nor respects the academic calendar. And decisions will need to be made about personnel, programs and policies on short notice and at any time during the year.

Assessment needs to be ongoing and part of day-to-day life. I do not mean formal or traditional assessment. But presidents need to embed a culture of assessment in the life of the institution. While it may admittedly cause some level of stress on campus (just what you need, more stress), everyone on campus needs to understand that their performance and priorities are being assessed regularly, and everyone needs to be an assessor. Assessment needs to be transparent and collaborative. Just like leadership needs to be shared, assessment needs to be owned by every faculty member, every member of the staff and every student.

Second, goals and priorities should not be printed in permanent ink or made into campus signs. While they should be public and shared, the connection with assessment is that goals and priorities will need to be changed, modified or replaced on short notice. While in one sense it is easy to decide to move to fully remote from hybrid instruction based on the coronavirus infection rate or numbers, it is less clear when you need to rebalance your budget again and again.

Decisions related to goals and priorities need to be based on good assessment data. You might need to add goals, shift priorities or make cuts. Open positions, low enrollment or high costs do not always correlate with quality education. Assessment needs to be meaningful and pervasive so that you have the opportunity to make informed decisions in the best interest of your students and your entire institution.

Third, assessment needs to be directly connected to the strategic and operational plans. Too often, assessment practices are dictated by form and process. But if your strategic and operational plans are up to date and are living documents, then they need to be connected to the assessment plan. Performance and efficacy of people, programs and service must reflect fidelity to mission, values and goals. Assessment decisions must be defensible based on your strategic and operational plans.

Finally, assessment practices must be transparent, fair and equally applied. While there will always be some degree of confidentiality necessary when dealing with personnel, this requirement is often used as a convenient excuse to obfuscate decisions. In my years as the president of five institutions, there was very little that I could not share publicly. Confidentiality creates mystery, but it also creates mistrust.

Assessment measures, procedures and most of these results can be legally shared and it is our moral obligation to do so. To the degree possible, all assessment must be fairly and equitably administered. The scope and depth of ongoing assessment should be the same for the president and the dining hall service worker, the vice president and the security guard. Full time faculty and adjunct faculty are all faculty. Tenured faculty and newly hired faculty are all faculty.

In the next article, I will share thoughts about assessment measures and practices. But these decisions may need to be determined by your institution. Assessment needs to be owned by everyone. So, let everyone have a voice.

I am reminded every day that at most institutions, every staff member, every faculty member, every board member and every student cares deeply about their institution. We should not confuse disequilibrium with disinterest. Ongoing assessment is part of the next normal. Everyone on your campus needs to own a share of responsibility.

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