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March 21, 2007

Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that working for results or “outcomes” in terms of disciplinary or professional content is different than using the concept of outcomes as the basis for political action to change the focus of higher education from content to quantitative assessment, rankings, comparisons, and the images they produce, or to promote centralization. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding these issues is important for you and your institution.

In our fifth briefing letter, we talked about the relationship between ends and means. I promised to provide some explanation of why assessments, once universally thought of as means, are now regularly presented and acted upon in policy contexts as though they were ends. How have assessment and assessment results become so deeply conflated with education and educational results? What are some of the forces producing these conditions?

There are many answers. Let us start with a positive one. First, educational assessment is a field of inquiry and practice. Like other such fields, self-motivated practitioners continue to learn new things and develop new techniques. They work to make their field as influential as possible. A second factor is technology and the expectations it raises. Computers are especially good at large scale math problems and data storage and retrieval. Rapid technological advances also produce the illusion that everything could or should work just the way technology does. If we could just digitize everything, write the right program, and put it into universal circulation, our problems would be over. A third factor is managerial responsibility. The further an administrator is from the location of actual work in a large and complex delivery system, the greater the desire for accountability mechanisms that have instant credibility, especially to others. A fourth factor is the residual power of scientism in our national consciousness, a positive in the sense that it drives discovery and application in the scientific domain. We love to consider ourselves scientific, so there is a tendency to believe that anything can be explained and ordered by the empirical methods of science and manifested in a technique or technology. But pure scientism can be a negative. It often leads to a non-negotiable position: anything that cannot be quantitatively ordered and explained by the scientific mode of thought is suspect or fraudulent. This view ignores many other ways of working in and apprehending the world – artistic, historical, and intuitional for example.

Each of these four conditions and perspectives can be factored into larger more holistic efforts to improve teaching and learning and to address other goals of higher education. Assessment techniques, technologies, management assurance necessities, and scientific methods and expectations can all be used productively in judgment-based systems applied to dynamic situations, and especially where answers are local and specific rather than universal. But using each of these four conditions and perspectives to discredit such judgment-based systems produces a serious problem. Here, disciplinary content considerations are shunted aside, parts or aspects are asserted to be the whole, and local expertise is discredited.

Of course, there are far more factors involved in producing the present policy environment in American higher education. The term “outcomes” is not just a signifier of results or of using assessment techniques to serve larger educational purposes. “Outcomes” also refers to a movement with political ambitions. We prefer to talk about this movement in terms of ideas rather than people. How can the presence of this political effort be identified and separated from considerations of outcomes as results and assessment as service to content? There is a simple, reductionist answer: when the term “outcomes” is being used to create mistrust, it is usually being used in the service of political action. There are other indicators. A large set of assertions and assumptions appear regularly in the promotional arguments of the outcomes movement. The first is that educational institutions are 100% responsible for student learning. This assumption is based on a belief in a degree of sameness among individuals that cannot be sustained by empirical evidence. It also represents a denial of the mutual responsibility between institution and student; institutions are considered factories processing identical people, and producing identical products that can be monitored and compared through quantitative assessment. The outcomes movement asserts that the math problem is simple, and the simple answer, fully representational. But consider this: without the 100% formula, the mathematical aspect of the assessment analysis becomes inordinately difficult. For example, in a small institution of 2,000 students, what happens to our math problem if students are 50% responsible for their own learning? Thousands of factors must then come into the equation. The real differences among individuals in terms of talents, orientations to work, study habits and so forth must be considered along with specific institutional and program missions, and mode of thought and disciplinary differences. Some of the factors in the equation are changing constantly. To deny reality by pretending that institutions are 100% responsible is to build a whole system of thought and action on a great fallacy and its orbiting illusions.

Here are several other themes regularly sounded by the outcomes movement. Experts in fields and disciplines cannot be trusted to evaluate because they represent special interests – their fields *and* the profession of teaching. All significant educational results can be determined the minute a particular program is over. High quality work is driven by coercion or fear of public embarrassment. No one cared about student learning until the advent of the outcomes movement, and to this day, no one but the outcomes movement cares sufficiently about it. The outcomes movement is the arbiter of success or failure across all of higher education, including work in disciplinary and professional content, even though outcomes movement proponents do not and could not create “outcomes” as results in more than one field, usually assessment itself.

How has so much that is so wrong, insupportable, and even nonsensical, become so accepted? The simple answer is repetition. Without a serious, visible opposition, repetitions of these notions have been doing their work to produce automatic acceptance for about 25 years. But there are many other reasons why the outcomes movement has gained so much influence. Here are a few of the many political and psychological forces at work. The outcomes movement promises simple “scientific” answers to complex questions. It promises a kind of democratic leveling through standardized evaluation and comparison. It promises power without reference to content and therefore is attractive to those who value process over content, and images over substance. It supports bureaucratic expansion and central control. It treats institutions as though they were competing factories and is thus consistent with the kind of competition that creates clear winners and losers, again a model embraced by many in our society. It meshes beautifully with the rhetoric of transparency and accountability. It is consistent with vocational goals for education, this in contrast to intellectual, artistic, and professional goals. It claims to address and reduce the escalating costs of higher education for students and their families. It is consistent with the concept of education as a business and the student as a consumer. There are many others, but one

of the most powerful is that the outcomes movement both uses and is nourished by the culture of accusation, argument, and denunciation that dominates so much of our journalism and public life.

All of these issues and conditions put American higher education in a challenging place. There is reason to be concerned that this place is not a good one from which to make wise decisions that will protect and advance the full range of American higher education over the long term. Effective policy cannot be built on false assumptions, even if they are congruent with aspirations, notions, and images that seem attractive. But critiquing the outcomes movement is difficult because it has created a sound bite word prison. Any criticism is answered with the assertion that the criticizer does not want to be accountable and thus cannot be trusted. This rhetorical protection has been effective for a long time. It is used regularly against content-based professionals who object to the one-process-fits-all approach of many assessment regimes, and it strikes fear among those in higher education who must explain what the academy does to those on the outside.

The resultant failure to debate has created a significant problem. Accepting the tenets and assertions of the outcomes movement results in a significant loss of perspective. The assessment part is substituted for the educational whole. Procedure is substituted for content and reductionist indicators are substituted for educational quality. Bureaucratization and standardization of outcomes produces an anti-innovation climate. The outcomes movement constantly increases time taxes on productivity by conflating the reporting of results with the production of results. But most tragic of all, the outcomes movement produces its influence by fomenting mistrust in all educational systems and educational professionals. If outcomes assessment procedures or outcomes stewardship were ever deemed adequate, the movement would lose its reason for existence. Therefore, it cannot ever agree that outcomes efforts or reporting are sufficient. To survive, it must continually escalate its criticism and its demands.

To the extent the foregoing analysis is correct, it is easy to see why from its beginnings, the outcomes movement attacked the accreditation system. Accreditation, traditionally conceived, is deeply concerned about student learning but works on it from a far richer and more realistic set of assumptions and practices. Specialized accreditation organizations create assessment approaches based on the natures of various disciplinary and professional contents. Engineering accreditation and arts accreditation assess differently, for example. Accreditation is able to enfold and use the concepts of outcomes as results and assessment as a service, and in fact, it had done so long before there was an outcomes movement. In response to political and public relations pressures created by the outcomes movement, many accrediting agencies have embraced outcomes rhetoric and developed programs consistent with seeking outcomes as results and using assessment techniques more effectively. But before and during the work of the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, it became apparent that all this effort was not sufficient to gain the respect much less the approbation of the outcomes movement that is operating as a political force. True to the requisites of its existence, it found higher education and accreditation guilty and escalated demands for more attention to outcomes. The permanent indictment against higher education continued.

It remains to be seen whether a sufficient number of leaders in higher education and accreditation will see the portents of this situation and create a countering force. The danger is great. Many are concerned that the Department of Education now wishes to use the federal relationship with accreditation as a means for asserting comprehensive control over higher education. But the philosophical enabler, operational driver, and public relations basis of this federal initiative is the outcomes movement and the values and assertions we have just described. Twenty-five years of promotion have come to fruition in an oblique but potentially devastating attack on educational

freedom and independence. The federal connection with accreditation is just the most available means at the moment. For all those years, many in higher education, when they said "outcomes," thought they were promoting results or assessment in service of content, or using the language of the moment as a matter of rhetorical convenience. But tragically, and in most cases inadvertently, they were also giving credibility and delegating influence to a movement that has obfuscated the content-based center and achievement of higher education and sold legislators, bureaucrats, and many in business on the notions that accountability is a simple matter that can and should be quantified, standardized, and centralized, and that individual and local decisions are best replaced by outcomes specialists who are agents of central governmental control.

The next briefing letter will deal with accreditation and the public interest.

Thank you for your attention and best wishes.

Samuel Hope
NASM Executive Director