

Tuesday, 21 February 2012, 9:15-10:30 a.m.  
Plenary Session.

State of the (Non)Union: Pressures on and within Higher Education and the Role of Assessment as a (Professional) Response.

David Paris, Executive Director, New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability

Published Program Abstract (page 45):

For some time, but particularly since the Spellings Commission report in 2006, there has been increasing criticism and scrutiny of higher education. The publication of *Academically Adrift* last year simply added fuel to the fire. President Obama recently added his voice to the chorus of critique on the issue of cost, even as his administration urges increased access and completion. Higher education has had difficulty responding to these various demands, because of some conflicts in the demands themselves (lower cost and increase quality) and because of the way in which higher education is structured and understands itself. This presentation describes this situation in greater depth and suggests the role assessment and assessment professionals can play in responding to these demands. In addition, I will describe The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability's initiatives that also provide a professional response to these issues.

Overview of the talk:

1. The Policy questions
2. The growing political pressures on higher education. The Higher Education Act will be considered for reauthorization in one year.
3. Why haven't higher education institutions been better positioned to respond as reauthorization is considered.

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (NLASLA)—uses “quality” in place of assessment.

Questions (for public policy matters)

1. The History question—How did we reach this point? How did we come to consider a problem or proposal?
2. The Conceptual/Political Problem question—What is the problem for which this is addressing?

History

- 1945-1970—the “Golden Age.” Higher education was self-regulating, especially in regard to self-accreditation.

- 1970-2008—there was growing dissatisfaction, from many sources, in higher education. There has been a “crisis of confidence.” There have been questions about cost, waste, quality.
- Who assures integrity? Who insures quality? Who responds to issues of cost? Who governs higher education?
- Accreditation—This is done by nominally private regionally organized entities that are organized to certify institutions. From the federal standpoint, in the postwar years the accrediting agencies have been the gatekeepers for federal aid.
- Spellings Commission.
- The book, *Academically Adrift*—of 2300 students sampled, 45% lacked critical thinking skills, complex reasoning skills, and writing skills.
- There is a disjunction between cost of higher education and what students are learning.
- Why haven’t we responded?
- The American higher education system is characterized by being decentralized, diverse, and diffuse.
- The norm in the American higher education industry is autonomy.
- As with a doctor or a minister, what is the “standard of care” for educators?
- In 1940, the AAUP produced a statement on self-regulation and tenure. In that document, the academic is seen as serving as judge, scholar, and determiner of appropriate professional norms.
- In the United States today, 30-35% of professors are tenured or tenure-track. What does the other 70% look like? The number of adjuncts is growing.
- The speaker argued that teaching is the professor’s primary task.
- Is your institution setting ambitious goals? Is it gathering evidence of student learning?
- Excellent Practice in Student Learning Assessment (EPSLA)—this provides an institutional assessment program and produces transparency in the process.
- Future initiatives—second generation templates and professional education (teaching in graduate school as if teaching matters).