From the Editor: Quality Assessment

By Amanda Hankel, editor

Accountability and assessment are common themes in the discussion about improving quality in higher education today, but ideas about how to practice assessment and encourage accountability are complex and diverse. Some educators speculate that accreditation provides one answer and attempt to examine its impact on quality. Others view the accreditation process as an enforced element that does not necessarily encourage the kind of “buy in” that leads to self-initiated continuous process improvement. These are the questions facing higher education institutions today, and the questions colleges and universities will continue to face as educators work to improve the quality of higher education.

One of the key ways a higher education institution can be assessed, and held accountable for providing quality education, is through accreditation. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, oversees the accreditation of colleges and universities in a 19-state area ranging from Michigan to New Mexico. Recently, the HLC reviewed and amended its accreditation criteria. The new criteria became available earlier this year, and have created discussion about the impact on assessment and accountability in college and universities.

This issue of the Higher Education Brief takes a broad look at assessment and accountability in higher education, not only from an accreditation perspective, but also in terms of overall quality improvement in higher education, and even career development.

The article, “Changes in the Higher Learning Commission Accreditation Requirements: An Overview,” by Julie Furst-Bowe, outlines the recent changes to the HLC accreditation requirements, and addresses the ways in which universities and colleges might consider aligning themselves with HLC in terms of assessment and accountability practices.

Meanwhile, in the article “U.S. Higher Education and Accreditation: A Quality Perspective,” authors Stephen D. Spangehl and Henry J. Lindborg provide some background
and history on accreditation, and discuss its true impact on quality assurance at higher education institutions.

Nicole Radziwill’s article, “Using SIPOC to Define Your Research Agenda: A Tool for Junior Faculty,” addresses assessment from a career development perspective. How do junior faculty assess and define a research agenda in order to ensure success in meeting tenure-related goals?

Meanwhile, in the article, “Does Assessment Automatically Lead to Improvement?” author John Dew astutely observes the marginal advances that the field of education has attained because quality methods are not necessarily part of the core curriculum in education administration programs. He says higher education leaders must truly understand and implement quality measures and apply them pragmatically within the educational framework by co-aligning collection and analysis of data with improvement strategies. Unless or until quality initiatives reflect this symmetrical construct, assessment alone will not lead to the improvement our society needs.

Finally, this issue is rounded out by some additional resources on accountability and assessment, including the articles:

- Online Programs Face New Demands From Accreditors
- A Faculty-Driven Accountability Model
- Why Do I Like Assessment? Let Me Count the Ways

Have an opinion about accreditation in higher education? Or how to improve assessment and accountability among colleges and universities? Email me at ahankel@asq.org