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Let's Ease the Tension Between Access and Quality in Higher Education

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Let's Ease the Tension Between Access and Quality in Higher Education

Recently a thoughtful academic leader asked me if I thought there was a tension between the goal to promote “access” and the aspiration to deliver “quality” in higher education.

It's a good question.

I started this blog last September so it could be the nexus where quality and access could meet on equal ground. I was concerned that as we pushed ahead to dramatically increasing the percentage of adults with college degrees, we could inadvertently push aside a focus on quality. And, in so doing, we could miss the point. Access to higher education only advances the national agenda if that education produces essential learning outcomes. We may measure degree completion, but what counts is what the students learn.

Although some people might argue for a meritocracy, most academics see the worth and potential in all of our students, regardless of where these students test upon entering. And the faculty and staff whom I know, at all types of institutions, get up every day trying to produce education that will transform the lives of the students they serve.

What creates the tension is not that some of us value access and others value quality. It is that we all value both, and that both are expensive. What creates the tension is that it is not easy to see how to allocate limited resources in ways that adequately fund both access and quality. That is, it is not easy to keep cost low, scholarships high, and still fund all the programs that we know have high-impact retention and learning outcomes.

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability just published a guide for discussing educational quality and taking action to improve it called [*Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education*](#). The publication, which has been endorsed by 27 national higher education organizations, is available on the new Leadership Alliance [website](#).

The 16-page *Committing to Quality* publication provides general improvement strategies focused on measurable goals, gathering evidence, public reporting, and continuously working to improve results. As I read them, the guidelines reflect the long-proffered expectations of our regional accrediting bodies and provide a framework for charting and tracking institutional progress.

Who would argue against that? It is a helpful set of guidelines.

But we also need to do more sharing of specific, cost-effective strategies that make it possible for us to fund our quality initiatives, while still keeping education affordable and accessible for students.

I will be exploring some of those strategies in upcoming posts. Maybe that way we can ease a bit of the tension between access and quality.

Jamie Comstock