

# **The Call for Accountability in Higher Education**

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Robert Lockwood and Gerald Hadd

Having long viewed itself as the ascendant source of knowledge on all subjects, academe has traditionally espoused a position that is above uniform indicators of accountability. Although rightfully pointing out that career schools have a different mission and serve a different clientele than non-profit private and public institutions, the for-profit sector is not exempt in the broad scheme of calls for improvement in accountability and accreditation. Measurements of engagement are a precursor to providing transparent accountability and implementing strategies for institutional improvement.

There are three compelling reasons why American higher education – including career schools – needs to focus more on documenting outcomes.

Globalization is the first reason. The impact of globalization has taken competition to an entirely new level. Education and its attendant proficiencies are the main source of intellectual capital in the global knowledge economy.

Technology is the second reason. Technological change is adding productivity by making it possible for fewer people to accomplish the same or more than in the past. Career schools need to assure that they are helping students acquire skills that are relevant and demonstrably marketable in today's global marketplace. Isolated success stories are not enough. In order to earn the business of educating tomorrow's workforce, career schools need to provide compelling evidence that their product reliably delivers the desired results.

An aging population is the third reason. As baby boomers retire, there will be more people leaving the workforce than joining. America needs to be razor-focused on equipping students to fill those roles, many of which will require both secondary and postsecondary education. Those jobs will otherwise be filled by people in the nations that have overtaken the U.S. in student achievement and other measurable higher education outcomes.

A 2007 position paper observes, "Nothing in the accreditation process concretely measures student learning, instructional quality or academic standards. If the accrediting process were applied to automobile inspection, cars would 'pass' as long as they had tires, doors and an engine -- without anyone ever turning the key to see if the car actually operated... Parents and students deserve to know whether an institution successfully teaches its students."<sup>1</sup> Through the utilization of the right measures, Gallup research correlates linkages between student engagement and student learning outcomes.

That mindset is at the core of public debate regarding accountability for use of federally insured student loan monies. It is at the core of public debate about possible federal oversight of accreditation. It is at the core of student expectations that higher education will enhance their capacity to secure good jobs and live comfortably. These issues are as important for career school students as for any others.

Myth maintains that the Chinese character "Weiji" combines the concept of "danger" with the concept of "opportunity". Actually, Weiji combines the concept of "danger" with "incipient moment" or "a crucial point at which things begin or change". In some fields, such as math and science, America has been

surpassed as the world's best educated nation. When it comes to accountability, we are at a crucial point that many people hope will be the incipient moment when things begin to change.

In a nutshell, demonstrating accountability boils largely down to a question of lagging versus leading indicators. Traditional higher education performance measures are lagging indicators because they do not reveal links to real-world outcomes.

In some respects, for-profit schools have been on the leading edge of change in higher education. For example, for-profit schools have worked hard to align educational certificate and other programs with marketplace needs.

Great successes have come from applying time-tested business principles to higher education. For example, treating students as customers has reverberated throughout higher education, with positive results. Many constituencies overlap in higher education, and optimal outcomes rely on engaging each of those constituencies. One key aspect of that principle in the business world is that today's employee and customer engagement link strongly to tomorrow's business outcomes. For example, Gallup has yet to find a customer base that is more engaged than the employee base serving them. And, fully engaged customers are the most profitable customers. Levels of engagement are leading indicators of future business performance. These are the sort of leading indicators that career schools will need to demonstrate in order to sustain their future.

In general, the global marketplace is pressing for "fit" between people's talents and the work roles they perform, between people's needs and the products available in the marketplace, between employees' needs and employers' needs, etc. The best science in the business world suggests that optimal fit requires looking at organizations holistically rather than as separate departments, units or groups. That principle also applies in higher education. In order for any educational community – including career schools – to thrive in the future, students, faculty, staff and administration need to be aligned and engaged.

Because competitiveness in the marketplace of the future will require it, career schools need to focus on leading indicators which provide solid evidence that, "...students who have placed their hopes for the future in higher education are actually achieving the kind of learning they need for life, work, and citizenship."<sup>2</sup> Achieving those kinds of educational outcomes will be most feasible if career schools have a holistic view of the "fit" and degree to which students, faculty, staff and administrators are all highly engaged.

<sup>1</sup> *Why Accreditation Doesn't Work and What Policymakers Can Do About It*, Policy paper from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, July 2007, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *College Learning for the New Global Century*, Position paper from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 1.

Robert Lockwood is a Partner with the Gallup Poll.

Gerald Hadd, Ph.D., is principle researcher in the Gallup Institute for Campus Engagement.