EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS IN THE UNITED STATES: THE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the context within which the teaching function in U.S. universities is carried out. It includes a conceptual scheme for the evaluation of instruction and suggests ways of analyzing evaluation in terms of (a) those components of the scheme which pertain to the instructor and his institutional context, and of (b) those which pertain to the institution and its societal context. The paper ends with advice for university administrators wishing to devise and implement evaluation for instructional improvement.

Evaluation of instruction has recently become an issue for American universities (see, for example, Pi Lambda Theta, 1967; Eble, 1972; Henderson and Henderson 1974, ch. 9). Increased demands for evaluation have accentuated the importance of the interrelationship between the university and its milieu, and have indicated the need for a more current definition of the mission and functions of the university. Behind the demands for evaluation lies an alleged desire for instructional improvement. Few quarrel with the notion that improvement is a good idea. However, the increased desire of various publics to be provided with evidence for educational accountability, plus a tight economy and a drop in student enrollment are equally notable factors in the demand for improvement (Glasman and Nicholson, 1973; Glasman and Killait, 1974; Mortimer, 1972). Since

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evaluation is a fact of life and will probably continue to be so, as long as evidence of accountability is desired, it has become essential for university decision makers in the United States to analyze the context of instructional evaluation. Careful analysis and deliberate action are needed if decision makers wish to shape the interrelationships between the university and its milieu in times of increased demands. A well-conceived framework is essential for the preparation of tools that will evaluate teaching appropriately and accurately.

This paper is not a review of the literature pertaining to what might be called context of evaluation of instruction in American higher education. It is rather an attempt to describe a perspective of the field of forces which impinge upon the American university and its faculty members. We are concerned here with the milieu in which the teaching function is performed. The first section provides a brief background on the university’s teaching function and its improvement. The second section offers the conceptual scheme for the context of evaluation of instruction. The third section offers ways of analyzing evaluation in terms of those components of the scheme which pertain to the instructor and his institutional context. The fourth section offers ways of analyzing evaluation in terms of these components of the scheme which pertain to the institution and its societal context. The fifth section offers broad guidelines for university administrators in terms of how to devise and implement evaluation for instructional improvement.

The University’s Teaching Function and Its Improvement

Social institutions and organizations derive legitimacy by attaining goals and performing activities which are functional for society. The nature of these activities and goals dictates to a large extent the structure of the institution, its functions and its unique characteristics (Parsons, 1956). The concept of organizational goals is highly problematic and has limited utility for understanding the behavior of organizations (Etzioni, 1964; Weick, 1969; Drabek and Chapman, 1973). Questions which have been raised in this connection are: what should be labeled a goal, where it comes from, how it changes, and what impact it has? (Perrow, 1968). The insight which led organizational theorists to raise these questions has ample relevancy for the university setting.

The university is an institution which advances and diffuses consciousness for the entire society. Its outputs are critical factors for the maintenance and adaptive structures of the social order (Katz and Kahn, 1966). Some call it a “knowledge factory” (Kerr, 1963), since within its domains knowledge is being produced, applied, preserved and communicated. The