PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND RATIONAL MANAGEMENT TOOLS: A Comparative Assessment of Projects in North America and Europe

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Performance assessment projects have appeared on the landscape of higher education at public and independent universities in North America and Europe. This paper represents work in progress that develops a classificatory schema to critically compare these rational management initiatives along several dimensions, for example, conceptual underpinnings, governance, levels of aggregation, usage patterns, and the like. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these initiatives for organizational change and some lessons for institutional researchers in North America and Europe.

Higher education in Europe and North America is under review from a variety of quarters to document the quality of effort in achieving educational goals. The notions of accountability and quality are at the forefront of discussions today because the basic metaphor guiding the dialogue about education has changed. Conceptually, higher education has moved from a type of "public utility" to a "strategic investment" (Ewell, 1991). Effective performance has become a part of the contemporary lexicon about excellence and quality as the public debates society's return on its investment.

This paper describes the current state of affairs in the design and implementation of assessment mechanisms in a variety of settings in North America and Europe. Second, these performance indicator and assessment initiatives are compared in terms of nine basic dimensions: (1) locus of control, (2) degree of governmental involvement, (3) focus of performance indicators, (4) sources of quality variation, (5) data selection, (6) intended audiences, (7) emphasis of use, (8) impact on student learning, and (9) relationship to institutional mission. The paper closes with a discussion of implications for institutional
OVERVIEW

Critics have begun to examine meanings about excellence and quality that have been developed by stakeholders in higher education. For example, assessment projects are beginning to move beyond traditional reputational and resource approaches to a "talent development" perspective (Astin, 1985; Jacobi, Astin, and Ayala, 1987). This changed emphasis is part of a larger movement to gradually introduce a rational management perspective in the operation and governance of higher education. An emphasis on strategic investment has created its own architecture that, in turn, has shaped the design and implementation of performance assessment systems. Other rational management tools under the broad umbrella of quality assurance carry such labels as student achievement/outcome assessment, faculty productivity measurement, and administrative performance review.

Whether symbolic or substantive, performance indicators as a class of rational management quality assurance tools have been introduced by a host of agencies. State, federal, or national governments in many countries are calling for assessment systems through executive initiatives or accountability legislation. Regional or national administrative agencies, such as accreditation review activities, have presented a wide range of approaches to accountability measurement.

More recently, mass media publications in Europe and North America have discovered a political vacuum in the higher education environment and have created numerous "reports" that masquerade as measures of quality. For example, Money magazine, U.S. News and World Report, Barron's Profiles of American Colleges, Peterson's/AGB Survey of Strategic Indicators, Maclean's, and the "league tables" in the United Kingdom are evidence of the growing popularity of public rankings. From some perspectives, this unfortunate movement toward undisciplined consumerism appears to be gaining momentum. Although this approach has been labeled "fundamentally dangerous" and "largely devoid of meaning" (Webster, 1992), its popularity is growing and its effect on institutional decision making is increasing.

A rich variety of performance assessment initiatives has been launched in the past twenty years. A sample of the range of programs in Europe include OECD's International Education Indicators project (Bottani and Delfau, 1990), Great Britain's Management Statistics and Performance Indicators (Jarratt Report, 1985; Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/Universities Funding Council, 1990; Ball and Halwachi, 1987; Gordon, 1992), and projects in Holland, Germany, Finland, Netherlands, and Sweden (Acherman, Welie, and Laan, 1992; Maassen and Van Vught, 1988; Frackmann, 1987; Höltä,