ADMINISTRATIVE EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Improving Assessment Procedures

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Holding higher education personnel accountable for measurable outcomes is a relatively new phenomenon. Assessing the performance of administrators may well provide needed and appropriate information about the functioning of the university, but it may represent high stakes assessment for individuals; that is, measures of administrative effectiveness may be tied to promotion, salary augmentation, contract renewal, or dismissal. Little previous research exists, however, on the assessment of administrators’ performance in higher education (Gmelch et al., in press; Seldin, 1988). We develop an evaluation model for assessing and monitoring the effectiveness of academic deans and directors, using generalizability theory (i.e., an approach that focuses on identifying multiple sources of error in performance assessment) as a basis for developing more accurate assessment procedures. We illustrate this approach using faculty and staff assessments of their deans’ leadership effectiveness. We also provide guidelines for improving the quality of assessments by adjusting various aspects of the evaluation model.

Holding higher education accountable for measurable outcomes is a relatively new phenomenon. The increase in competition for scarce resources and the decrease in the public’s trust in higher education practices have resulted in unprecedented demands for campuses to demonstrate their effectiveness and efficiency. Campuses have responded with a host of institutional data ranging from retention and graduation rates to faculty workload studies to job and career placement records. One possible consideration, the performance of administrators, may well provide needed and appropriate information about the functioning of the institution, but it may also constitute a “high stakes” evaluation process for individuals. The evaluation of administrators may be tied to decisions made...
about promotion, salary augmentation, contract renewal, or dismissal. The particular need to ensure fair, accurate, and dependable evaluation is evident. Little previous research exists, however, on evaluating the performance of administrators (Seldin, 1988), and even less about academic deans and directors (e.g., Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, and Sarros, in press).

The purpose of this article is to develop an approach for evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of university administrators, applied in this case to academic deans and directors. First, we lay some theoretical groundwork for developing administrative evaluation systems in higher education. Evaluation is the process of judging the worth of information collected for a specific purpose, such as determining effectiveness (Glasman and Heck, 1996). Second, we illustrate an evaluation approach for administrators using assessments from faculty and staff within a research university on the effectiveness of academic deans. Assessment is described as the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting the information that will be used in making evaluation decisions (Airasian, 1996). We demonstrate how to improve the accuracy of performance assessments by examining the quality of their measurement. Finally, we draw some conclusions and implications for the development of institutional evaluation systems for administrators.

We believe that evaluation is becoming an increasingly important mechanism for policymakers’ efforts to exercise control over higher education productivity. Presently, however, there is little empirical work on the performance and effectiveness of higher education administrators in general, and academic deans more specifically. Our proposed evaluation model utilizes theoretical domains of leadership proposed in the literature on organizations (e.g., Chemers and Ayman, 1993; Clark and Clark, 1990; Yukl, 1989, 1993) and applied in the higher education context (Astin and Scherre, 1980; Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum, 1989, 1992; Fincher, 1996) as a basis for developing more feasible and accurate evaluation procedures.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The focus of personnel evaluation is to provide information for decisions about performance in a specific role. Evaluation is not, however, as rational and straightforward as such a definition suggests; it is rooted in politics. Especially since the early 1980s, reform-related public educational policies have included requirements for evaluating educational practice. Evaluation mandates have therefore often been forces for organizational change. In higher education, for example, the Budget Reform Act of the mid-1980s has resulted in general fiscal tightening and corresponding measures of accountability (e.g., benchmarks, performance standards) in the 1990s.

More than ever, evaluation has become a means for policymakers to exercise a measure of control over institutional outcomes in higher education—an area