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Through its accreditation function, the AACSB International seeks continuous quality improvement in the content, delivery, and administration of management education. In this essay, Dr. Milton R. Blood, formerly the managing director of the AACSB's Accreditation Services, describes how to spot quality in education. While doing so, he explains how the AACSB developed the new accreditation guidelines adopted by its members in 2003. The reader learns first-hand from one who was intimately involved in the process of revision what the new standards have in common with previous standards, and how they present departures.

Spotting Quality

by Milton R. Blood, Former Managing Director,
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Bulletin Boards! Not the carefully managed ones that hang behind glass, but the bulletin boards that line busy hallways and display both official and casual notices. Over many years of visiting schools and examining voluminous data to spot the quality of education dispensed, I've noticed that these semi-controlled signposts are excellent indicators of educational and intellectual activity of the school where they are found. Some are cluttered with offers of cheap magazine subscriptions, reminders of pitcher night at Bubba's, and temp warehouse work opportunities. Others are filled with notices of distinguished visiting speakers, advertisements for upcoming chamber music series, meeting news from discipline-based clubs, and fliers for summer learning opportunities and graduate study. Bulletin boards reflect the seriousness of purpose both of the persons who post notices and of their intended readers. They provide unobtrusive indicators of educational quality.

Potential students, and also especially their parents, want to know how good a school is before they enroll. Potential faculty members want to know the quality of an institution they are considering joining. Magazines look for indices to use to rank schools. Many people look for signs of quality in education. But no one expends as much ef-

fort on the task of evaluating educational quality as accreditors. They pour over extensive self reports from the schools, examine comparative data, send teams of evaluators to visit the campus where they meet with a wide variety of interested parties, and then they deliberate carefully over all that they discover. Yet even with all of this information, the phenomenon of educational quality is elusive enough that the accreditors constantly ask if they have gathered the correct data and asked the right questions.

A few years ago at a regional meeting of business school deans I posed this question. "Suppose you must choose a business school for your son or daughter. You can choose among as many schools as you want, but you can only know three things about each school. What are the three things you would want to know so that you could choose on the basis of educational quality?" The answers contained the usual ideas about what constitutes quality in education and a few unexpected notions. Among the anticipated answers were, of course, faculty qualifications, curriculum content, job placement of recent graduates, characteristics of the student body including entrance exams, etc. Some of the less anticipated indices proposed were proximity to a metropolitan area, dollars spent on teaching



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technology per student, student body diversity, and strength of programs in the natural sciences. This was an artificial exercise, but one that asked the deans in attendance, "How do you spot educational quality?"

In my time (more than 20 years) directing the accreditation efforts of AACSB International we have twice undertaken a complete review and revision of the accreditation standards. These efforts represented searches for the most effective indicators of quality. In each case, a group of diverse and respected educational thinkers was assembled as a task force to engage this complex task. Additionally, each task force made a concerted effort to draw ideas from the membership and other higher education thinkers so that the resulting revised standards would reflect a broad array of perspectives. No part of the previous standards was "off limits" to a task force. That is, their charge was to create standards that identified educational quality, however different their approach might be when compared to previous approaches. No sacred cows enjoyed privileged status if a strong case could not be made for their inclusion.

Inevitably, the revisions that resulted were influenced by the issues that were current in the higher education and management education communities at the time. Likewise, the revisions were influenced by concerns and emphases of the contributing persons, and as AACSB standards they showed the effect of traditions in business education and in AACSB accreditation. Standards that emerged from the 1991 changes and the 2003 changes had much in common with earlier standards, and at the same time they presented significant differences.

What the "new" standards had in common with preceding standards was a core of key features of quality in higher education. Thus, regardless of changes in the organization or vocabulary of the standards, they were sure to include something about the intellectual capital represented in the faculty, educational content of curricula, and

resources devoted to education. AACSB and business education traditions assured that they would include attention to intellectual contributions of faculty members and to general education as a part of the undergraduate experience. These were not included merely because of the tradition, but because among business educators strong support exists for them in defining quality.

Both sets of revised standards also included features that were new in either focus or emphasis. The standards adopted in 1991 introduced a formal declaration of mission-linked accreditation, attention to management processes, and measured educational outcomes. The 2003 revision brought increased systematic consideration to strategic management and to student-faculty interactions, and it required direct observation of learning accomplishment.

To better define the intentions residing in the most recent standards, I wish to direct your awareness to the three major subdivisions of the 2003 standards. These reflect the thinking of the task force that educational quality can be spotted in these three categories of educational characteristics—strategic management, participants, and assurance of learning. These categories became the organizing structure for the standards. While many of the specific accreditation requirements of the standards within these categories are familiar from prior standards, these organizing domains, themselves, convey intentional meaning about what creates quality in business education.

Strategic Management

Strategic management, simply put, is a focus of resources and efforts toward established priorities. It is about operations and implementation, not planning and documents. It is about what happens in the daily, weekly, and annual activity of organizations. Whether or not the organization has something called a "strategic plan" is not the focus of this set of standards. In fact, the standards ask for only a minimum of official documents that guide opera-

tions and form part of the fulfillment of the strategic management standards.

The accreditation applicant must have some way to state its priorities publicly. The standards ask for a "mission statement" to accomplish this. Of course, it is not having a document by that name that is important; the critical factor is that the applicant school operates from an explicit indication of its operating priorities whether in something called a mission statement, a vision statement, both a mission statement and a vision statement, or in some other document(s). These days most schools put this statement on a web site, in catalogs and brochures, and other materials that describe the purpose of the school. In some way, this statement answers the question, "How is the world different because this school exists?"

This priority statement (mission statement) must have certain features. It must be publicly available so that it is known to major constituents. It must demonstrably play a role in decisions made in the operations of the school. Its construction and its periodic review should involve various constituents of the school. It or other documents should state the school's expectations concerning faculty members' intellectual contributions, and it should describe the student populations served by the school. Major and critical characteristics of the priority statement are to distinguish the school from others and to clearly state important aims of the school.

As another part of the documentation of its strategic management, the applicant school must also list its "action items," those actions to be taken in the next year or two to enact the priorities shown in the mission statement. The action items may be a diverse set of steps such as hiring or replacing a faculty member, reviewing a curriculum, renovating classroom space, etc. Importantly, the action items must be consonant with the priorities revealed in the mission. That is, the action items show how the school is creating and enhancing quality in the declared areas of em-

phasis. Further, the school is expected to disclose the financial implications of the action items. This ensures that action items that require additional resources are not just a wish list. Of course, all action items do not require new funds. Some will require no new funds (e.g., review the BBA curriculum), and some will generate funds (e.g., implement a fee-for-service distinguished speakers series).

It is not enough that the school has these minimal documents, that is, a mission statement and action items. The school must show a pattern of strategic management of its activities that implements the mission statement through a focus of resources and efforts on the stated priorities. For schools that have achieved accreditation and are in the maintenance of an accreditation program, these strategic management activities assume even more importance; they become the focus of the periodic five-year reviews. Thus, having demonstrated the level of quality required for initial accreditation, the school shows how it deploys resources and efforts to maintain and improve quality and to achieve the distinguishing priorities it acknowledges in its mission statement. This leadership toward quality embodied in the strategic management standards is the first arena in which the accreditation process spots quality in business education. These standards look at the stewardship of resources and whether the school applies resources toward the most important ends.

Participants

The second domain of accreditation standards spots quality by looking at the participants in the educational process. This includes faculty, students, administrators, and staff. The standards inquire about the characteristics of participants and about schools' processes for serving student and faculty constituents in accord with the mission. They also speak to the specific responsibilities of faculty, administrators, staff, and students in fulfilling their roles.

In addition, a standard regarding faculty sufficiency raises the issue of interaction between and among faculty and students. Interaction among participants is a feature that educational researchers have found to be extremely important as a part of the student learning experience. The interpretive materials for the standards enunciate a new set of principles to describe the expectations with regard to interaction (AACSB International Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation, 2005, p. 38).

The shift to assurance of learning is the largest conceptual change in the 2003 standards. It signals a strong concern for the products of our schools, and it is in line with programs in other areas of higher education and in the larger society that call for enhanced accountability.

Student-Faculty Interaction Principles

1. *Interaction opportunities are available to meet unique needs of individual students.* Students have opportunities to gain assistance regarding idiosyncratic questions and needs in interactions with faculty members, staff, and other students.

2. *Interactions are consistent with the school's mission and characterized by integrity and respect among participants.* The interactions that students have with faculty members, staff, and operations of the school are consistent and reliable. Students' views and circumstances are not neglected in the learning experiences. A level of professionalism is practiced among participants.

3. *Constituent groups have opportunities to learn from each other.* Learning experiences provide opportunities for sharing of knowledge and experience from faculty to students, from stu-

dents to faculty, among students, and among faculty. A learning community is established that allows free expression and continuous learning.

4. *Students have access to disciplinary experts in curricular and extracurricular situations.* Students have access to faculty members who have in-depth expertise in their fields of teaching. Course material, feedback on student performance, and extracurricular interactions are informed by faculty knowledge that is both current and relevant.

5. *Interaction among faculty members produces a coherent and integrated learning experience.* Degree programs result from coordinated faculty efforts to provide systematic, cumulative learning.

The concern for interaction among participants is a new issue introduced with the 2003 standards revision. It has high relevance for spotting educational quality.

Assurance of Learning

The third domain of interest for spotting quality in the accreditation process looks at direct demonstration of student accomplishment. The 1991 standards had introduced the concept of outcome measures, but that term was broadly defined to include both direct and indirect measures of student learning. The 1991 outcomes approach was in addition to the traditional look at curricular content. With the most recent standards change, the focus has been narrowed to only direct measures of student learning, and the prescriptive curricular approach has been dropped. In the thinking of the standards-generating task force, the previous curriculum standard indicated what the school intended to teach; the new assurance of learning approach is about what the students have actually learned. It is up to the school to set learning goals for each degree program and to demon-

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am convinced that the educational experience offered at Coastal Carolina will bring significant benefits.

Some of my associates and colleagues will argue, with Stanley Fish, that institutions of higher education, Coastal Carolina included, should continue to focus on "teaching students" in the classroom without regard to molding citizens. Even so, when it is evident that a more thorough understanding of classroom instruction is achieved through "hands-on" practical applications, why shouldn't we, as educators, use the proven learning process to address critical social concerns?

Acknowledgement: I am grateful for the contributions of my colleague David Millard in preparing this commentary.

Endnotes

1. Stanley Fish, "Why We Built the Ivory Tower," *New York Times*, 21 May 2004, sec. A, p. 23.

2. The "public notice and goodwill" I have in mind are illustrated in a recent editorial and front page article printed in the Myrtle Beach, S.C. *Sun News* reporting on the University's Public Engagement Initiative: Editorial, "A Better School Alternative," *Sun News*, 9 January 2005, sec. D, p. 4; and Johanna D. Wilson, "Strand Students Increasingly Request Model Mentors," *Sun News*, 29 January 2005, sec. A, p. 1.

3. While I cite the Jekielek et al. article at

<http://www.childtrends.org/Files/MentoringBrief2002.pdf>

which summarizes the significant mentoring literature through 2002, I also refer readers interested in further public engagement research and resources to The Corporation for National and Community Service at

<http://www.nationalservice.org/>

and the National Service-Learning Partnership at

http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/service_learning/organizations.cfm

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at

<http://www.servicelarning.org/index.php>

provides valuable resources that are indexed on the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). ERIC offers a rich database of journal and non-journal education literature. Coastal Carolina's public engagement and mentoring website address is at

<http://www.coastal.edu/cec/mentoring/index.html>

4. The text of *Foundations for the Future* report funded by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education is available online at

<http://www.che400.state.sc.us/InfoCenter/FoundationForTheFuture.htm> ■

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strate that students' success at meeting the learning goals is evaluated with the results informing management of the learning process.

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Conclusion

The three major divisions of the accreditation standards indicate AACSB International's definition of how to spot quality. The accreditation process is a systematic evaluation of the operations in place in higher education institutions. Accreditation truly represents ideas and contributions from business educators worldwide. While the proc-

ess is more involved than observing bulletin boards, it is an effort that provides tremendous informational value to participating schools (and to reviewers). Schools should use the process for their own benefit through bringing the careful and conscientious quality-spotting capacity of qualified professionals into the service of the school. ■