

Truth without Action: The Myth of Higher-Education Accountability

Associate Professor Theodore Sawruk

University of Hartford

This reflection utilizes Kevin Casey's 2007 article, Truth without Action, as a springboard to address contemporary issues related to autonomy, accountability and accreditation in higher-education. With escalating costs, rising unemployment and deepening consumer debt, it is natural for government officials to seek out a cause, or more accurately, a scape-goat for the evolving crisis. Over the last few decades, starting with A Time for Results in 1980, following with The State Post-secondary Review Entities (SPREs) in 1992; and continuing with the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education Report in 2006, federal agents have politicized American education and issued indictments against higher-education. Tuition costs are too high, graduation rates are too low and student learning-outcomes remain ineffable. With the recent re-election of President Obama, "the Education Department will continue to play an active role in regulating and attempting to influence colleges and universities." (Nelson, 2012) Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher-education at the New America Foundation and former Education Department policy advisor, recently stated, "The President himself, not just his advisors, is very interested in the college cost and the college outcome issue." (Nelson, 2012)

During his first term, the Obama administration overhauled the student loan system, increased Pell Grants and created a "highly controversial" framework for regulating for-profit colleges. (Nelson, 2012) Despite the hoopla surrounding those regulations, and the fierce pushback they inspired from for-profit colleges, higher education was still a sideshow at the Education Department during the President's first term. ... But higher education is poised to play a big role in the second term, in part because Obama has put forward an ambitious proposal to reshape parts of the federal financial aid program and use the money to encourage colleges to hold down tuition price increases. (Nelson, 2012)

In her article, *Examining Who Could Shape Higher Education Policy in Obama's Second Term* (2012), Libby Nelson credits the Spellings Commission, created under the Bush Administration, with shining a spotlight on post-secondary issues. Highly inflammatory, the Spellings Report (2006) presented a scathing attack on the accountability of here-to-for autonomous educational institutions. Kevin Carey's 2007 article, *Truth without Action*, serves to meticulously outline that critical confrontation and can be viewed as "a warning shot fired over the bow." Reading like a chapter out of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (480 B.C.) or Adolf Hitler's *Mien Kampf* (1925), Carey's article presents his ideology, simultaneously warning the defendants and arming the prosecutors.

Carey begins his article (2007) quoting British statesman Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). Justice is defined as "truth in action." He feels Disraeli's aphorism holds two key elements of effective accountability: truth and action. Accountability begins with a conception of purpose. Evaluators look for "real things, events or facts" to "indicate the degree to which the institution has fulfilled its purpose." (p. 24) Carey proposes that educational institutions cannot merely be repositories of knowledge, but must also facilitate a means of action, serving as an agent of progressive change. While successful at gathering information, many academics in higher-education "studiously ignore the need for action." (p. 26)

As a research and policy manager, with a background as a state budget director for education, Kevin Casey openly sides with the criticisms cited in the Spellings Report, and keenly advances state and federal oversights related to academic accountability. Accountability is based on the view that people work best when their motivations are both internal and external. Colleges give students grades because they know that while students may have an innate desire to learn, they learn more if their performance is motivated and judged.

Humans are fallible; they work harder and better if they know someone else is paying attention to how well they do. The same is true for institutions. (Carey, 2007, p. 26)

Based on this attitude, Carey (2007) places little merit on institutional self-study, peer review or self-accountability. Railing against the myth of self-accountability, he expresses skepticism, if not almost disdain, for true institutional independence, program diversity and academic freedom. He states, “Colleges and universities seem to cling to the fundamentally illogical idea that a college or university can be accountable only to itself and its peers.” He continues to ridicule the concept and established tradition of institutional autonomy and internal evaluations. When reciting the attitude he feels many institutions express, Carey states, “The idea can be summed up simply: leave us alone. And if we must be judged, we will judge one another. We will determine the truth and take action as we please.” (p. 26)

Having possibly over-stepped his bounds, while still unapologetically making his point, Carey (2007) back-tracks a bit in the next few paragraphs. He carefully supports the right of colleges and universities to “define their own mission and govern themselves,” but then states that, “independence and immunity from accountability are not the same thing.” (p. 26) “Self-governance means freedom to choose *how* to succeed—not freedom to choose *whether* to succeed.” (p. 26)

While no one would argue the need for colleges and universities to be responsible, successful, and even relevant; many would actively debate who should wield the power to evaluate, punish or execute reform. A pivotal question never asked in this article is: Does any government agency have the right to evaluate, and thereby regulate, an independent academic institution, its faculty or the works they produce? The privilege of scholastic autonomy is a time honored right of educational enclaves first established by medieval monasteries and transferred later to Renaissance universities. Today, those same principles form the corner-stone of academic freedom and intellectual property.

As early as 910 A.D., the French Abbey of Cluny had a written constitution that provided it with freedom from lay supervision and (after 1016) from the jurisdiction of the local bishop. As an independent entity, “Cluny became the fountainhead of the most far-reaching religious reform movement in the middle ages,” with nearly 1000 houses (ancillary monasteries) located in different countries. (Cluniac order, 2011)

In their paper, *The Intellectual and Institutional Properties of Learning: Historical Reflections on Patronage, Autonomy and Transaction* (2012), John Willinsky and Johanne Provencal propose that through a sustained model of institutional endowment, medieval monasteries were able to provide those interested in learning with a safe, stable and productive environment. As this form of patronage did not depend on the reputation or productivity of the learned as was the case with personal patronage, the monks and nuns with such interests could pursue their self-directed studies comfortable within the monastic spirit of humility and selflessness, without having to compete for the attention of patrons. Combined with the papal privileges and the canonical exemptions granted to monastic orders to ensure their other-worldly autonomy, the cloisters provided a quiet, seldom disturbed place in which to pray and pursue one’s studies. (p.4)

In this way, the support of learning and the learned evolved into an ‘act of trust and faith,’ on the part of the lay community. (Willinsky & Provencal, 2012, p. 2) Learning came to operate removed from the secular world, existing in its own sovereign construct. Scholarly undertakings existed within their own unique economic sphere, distinct and separate from apprenticeship, labor and other forms of capital exchange. Based on these foundations, higher education may well be within its rights to shun the current slanderous assaults of politically driven interlopers and reformers.

But that does not mean that monasteries were exempt from criticism and did not periodically fall prey to zealous attacks. While intellectual sanctuary was guaranteed within the network of monasteries, true autonomy was still relative. Intellectual doing was often celebrated within the confines of the enclave, yet revolutionary propositions could easily lead to external condemnation. “The threat of having ones work accused of heresy was always present,” and if rendered true through a court of law could often lead to death. (Willinsky & Provencal, 2012, p. 5)

In the 1860's, King Mongkut (1804 – 1868) of Siam diverted the colonization of his kingdom by outwitting European missionaries, politicians and merchants. Europeans rationalized that the colonization of foreign people was righteous since they were heathens. Domination and subjugation of the natives was necessary to convert them to Christianity and grant them the possibility of salvation. After keenly observing European expansion in action throughout South-east Asia, the king pre-empted the missionaries' basis for occupation. "His awareness of the threat from the British and French imperial powers, led him to institute many innovative activities." (Winichakul, 1997, P 57) Jesuit monks had been present in Siam since 1687. Continuing this tradition, the king renewed privileges, which granted to the Catholic missionaries the right to preach the gospel throughout Siam. Additionally, he hired a British Governess to educate his children in proper European etiquette and protocol. When the missionaries arrived and observed the status of the king and his court, they were obligated to report that they were not barbarians, but were in fact already civilized. (Winichakul, 1997) With no morally valid right to occupy the kingdom, Siam remained an autonomous state throughout the 19th century.

If higher-education is willing to adopt the lesson learned from this historical event, there is a way to derail the impending oversight of federal agents. Educational institutions must actively endeavor to secure and promote scrupulous self-accountability. The power to access, critique and reform must remain within the confines of the academy. Alverno College is a good example of a small liberal arts college that has successfully addressed student-learning outcomes, and achieving a stellar reputation nationally, thereby staying off external impositions.

Central to Carey's critique (2007) is the failure of, or more precisely the lack of, real accountability through institutional or curricular accreditation. He acknowledges that most institutions currently meet state and federal accreditation standards. The problem with this situation is that the existing standards often conceal "the most important accreditation related information about institutional quality," thereby misleading the general public. (p. 26) "Little data is gathered about the quality of teaching or the level of student learning." (p. 27) Carey is primarily interested in the documentation of student skills related to areas like critical thinking, analytic reasoning and communication.

The realization that some measures of accountability may be only marginal or remedial is not a revelation to the academy, which regularly attempts to revise the measures used in self and peer evaluation. With the recent attempts by state lawmakers to tie public funding of higher education to colleges' performance, there has been a heightened concern for accountability. In an article, *Better Measures of College Performance* (2012), Paul Fain debates the issues concerning valid performance assessment criteria and tools, concluding that the "measuring sticks that reflect the difference between institutions and who they serve are hard to find." (p. 1) Graduation rates are often used by policymakers as a measure of success, but they fail to address detailed information related to incoming students and their prior academic preparation and personal risk factors. Addressing this enormously complex combination of variables, strategists associated with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have put forth a number of research papers dubbed the "Context for Success." The seven papers center on three primary outcome measures: "Student progression and completion, labor market results and the direct assessment of student learning." The researchers said, "Nuanced ways of measuring college performance are important as policy interest in higher education grows, thanks to deep concerns about student debt and workforce development." (p. 1) Without "good" data, comparisons can be misleading and do as much harm as good through bad policy decisions, misguided student choices and counterproductive incentives.

Softening his approach, Carey continues, "Accountability is really just responsibility—to the students whom colleges educate, to the governments who provide funding, to society at large. Responsibility creates obligation and limits freedom, but at its best it also creates mutual, cooperative relationships." (p. 29) although this statement appears to be the offering of an olive branch, he openly brandishes a stick in his other hand. To give bite to his bark, Carey reminds college and university administrators that since the federal government ties accreditation to student aid, an institutions inability to meet stricter or more far-reaching accreditation

requirements could lead to a “financial death penalty.” Posing and an ally or concerned friend, Carey concludes his article (2007) by warning higher-education of the possibility of federal impositions or market marginalization, if more transparent and rigorous accountability is not soon exercised.

In conclusion, accountability itself is not in question here. Scholastic enterprises will always be reviewed and tangible results expected. There will always be a need for sincere academic accountability. As such, the need for responsible administration is also not in question, as faculty, deans and provosts are acutely aware of curricular inconsistencies. The key question is: who has the right to police the curriculum activities and learning outcomes within the confines of a public or private institution, department or classroom? And finally, how much influence should specific benefactors, even governments, be allowed to exercise within the confines of the greater academic enclave?

References

- Carey, Kevin. (2007) Truth without action: The myth of higher-education accountability. *Change*, (September/October 2007).
- Fain, Paul. (2012) Better measures of college performance. *Inside Higher Ed.*, (October 22, 2012).
- Lawrence, C. H. (1984) Cluniac order. *Medieval Monasticism*. Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition, (11/1/2011).
- Nelson, Libby. (November 8, 2012) Examining who could shape higher education policy in Obama’s second term. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Welch, Anthony & Aziz, Aminudin. (May 29, 2012) What happened to autonomy? *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Willinsky, John & Provencal, Johanne. (2012) The intellectual and institutional properties of learning: Historical reflections on patronage, autonomy and transaction. *Academia.edu*.
- Winichakul, Thongchai. (1997) *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.