Peer Review: A Key to American Educational Excellence

I have had interesting opportunities in recent years to converse with representatives of several European, Latin American, and UK countries about their quality assurance processes in higher education. In each case, the dynamic was that, because I represented an American accrediting agency, I probably had a valuable body of knowledge from which they could draw. They would speak of the high regard with which the global community held this nation’s educational establishment, assuming that accreditation must be playing a valuable role. They were curious about how this arrangement was working here and how its elements might enrich their work.

Before long, we would typically discover that we each stood in distinctly different paradigms. The core piece of how accreditation is done here was simply outside their frame of reference. In most cases, the drive to ensure and improve educational quality was relatively recent. More critically, however, their paradigm framed accreditation as descending from the government, from an office or ministry funded by and answering to the country’s top government. With the government being the primary funding source for the country’s public institutions, this seemed to be a natural connection.

In America, accreditation arose from the academy; it did not descend from the government. Members of the educational community in proximal states came together (originally, independent from the government) to define how quality could be verified and improved in their institutions. These educators had multiple reasons to care about this form of self-monitoring. For example, when students sought to transfer credits earned at another institution, the receiving institution needed assurances that these students would, in fact, bring a solid educational foundation with them. Similarly, students and families wished to invest time and resources into a college or university that would match their expectation. And employers standing ready to hire graduates sought some level of third-party verification before extending job offers.

Until you have lived within this paradigm, it can be difficult to grasp all the reasons why this is such an advantageous structure for conducting the critical work of quality verification and improvement. The obvious benefit is that the people making the judgements – the peer reviewers – are themselves immersed in the milieu of vocabulary, processes, and outcomes that define the complex world of higher education. They know what questions to ask and how to vet the answers they get. As they read an institution’s self-study report, they bring years of experience to the terminology, to an appraisal of substance behind the words, and to the triggers that may spell out a deficit in practice.

Peer reviewers go well beyond checking boxes. They discern how all the pieces fit together, tracing cause-to-effect processes as they are linked to each institution’s unique mission. They hold brisk conversations with each other, triangulating their findings, challenging each other’s assertions, making sure that this high-stakes endeavor is accurate, helpful to the institution, and accountable to the multiple stakeholders who are counting on them to speak truthfully.

An aspect of peer review that is less evident is the way in which it does in fact create a learning community. Drawing on the metaphor that the rising tide lifts all boats, the collective learning that results when hundreds of volunteers scrutinize other institutions against defined standards
of quality means that the shared knowledge about educational quality pervades the entire membership. When consulting with an Eastern European government agency, I recall being asked several times, “How much do you pay your peer reviewers for all their effort?” When I said we only cover expenses but pay them nothing, the incredulous next question was, “Then why do they do this?” “Because they learn so much,” I would reply.

A core assumption with peer review is that all the participants really do want to improve. Reviewers are jealous for the reputation of their fellow educators. In my work as an accreditation professional, I have accompanied over 150 site visit teams. Believe me; they do not hand out free passes! I have yet to see a reviewer gloss over an institution’s area for improvement under the standards. The more likely conversation is around how best to ensure that the institution understands and embraces needed change.

True, accreditation in America is not detached from the government. In fact, various government agencies have invested their confidence in the peer review process to such a degree that they respect the judgments of the accrediting agency in determining which institutions merit federal financial support. The “chain of confidence” remains clear: The government trusts the accreditors – their processes and standards – and the accreditors trust their peer reviewers.

For decades, these arrangements have been recognized for elevating the review process to higher levels of analysis, for shielding institutions from uncertain political influences, for relieving governments from having to mount huge bureaucracies, and for embedding the concepts of continuing quality improvement across large sectors of the higher education establishment. Taken together, I am satisfied that peer review really is a key to excellence in American higher education.