Transparency in higher educational student learning assessment as seen through accreditation

Krzykowski, Linda M.

2012

This study is about transparency in direct assessment of student learning information in higher educational institutions. Using content analysis, the self-study reports from institutions recently reaccredited by two different regional accreditors [the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA-HLC) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)] were examined. Data about transparency to various internal and external stakeholders, rationales for being transparent to these stakeholders, and the mechanism by which the information was shared were analyzed. The framework for a Targeted Transparency Policy (Fung, Graham and Weil 2007) was applied and institutional characteristics were correlated with transparency to determine what factors are influencing transparency.

A Total Transparency Score was developed from the content analysis. Summaries, trends and themes were extracted from the self-study narratives. Key findings include: (a) institutions accredited by NCA-HLC were more transparent than those reaccredited by NEASC; (b) this finding is more pronounced in private institutions than in public ones (c) assessment information is being shared with internal stakeholders more than external ones; (d) institutions studied do not have well-developed and articulated transparency strategies and appear to be developing their assessment practices to comply with the changes in accreditation standards and (e) institutions with student/faculty ratios 15:1 and greater showed more transparency than those with student/faculty ratios below 15:1.

Several factors contributing to enhanced transparency were identified. Institutions with separate organizational structures to (1) support, train and promote assessment and (2) review and track assessment reports and progress had higher Total Transparency Scores. While institutions did not have an intentional transparency mechanism, websites were frequently used as repositories for assessment information. Involving students in assessment can have a positive impact on assessment transparency. Based on the self-study reports analyzed, it does not appear that a Transparency Action Cycle (Fung, Graham and Weil 2005) is working effectively. However, the wording of accreditation standards does appear to influence institutional transparency. Examples of assessment transparency trends and practices are provided. Implications for research and practice as well as directions for future research are discussed.