DEFINING ‘QUALITY’ IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY AARON W. HUGHES

The writer is an associate professor in the department of educational leadership at Western Kentucky University.

HIGHER EDUCATION in the United States is at a crossroads. Since about 1980, colleges and universities in this country have been increasingly under the microscope. The quality of the academic programs, both in terms of course offerings and the performance of the students, has become a major issue for discussion. Many educators claim to be experts, but few know for sure what the market will demand. The writer is an associate professor at the University of Louisville.

The quality of much of what actually constitutes “quality” within the higher education arena seems to be the most elusive. Without a doubt, it is certainly the most divisive. What does it really mean when we say that a particular institutionprovides a quality educational experience for its students? Are we referring to some philosophical dimension that relates to enhanced awareness and a higher level of functioning (you have to love the way the typical phrase things in academia)? Or do we mean that the institution’s graduates seem to do well once they leave the institution; i.e., do they receive jobs in their majors? Or do we simply mean that the academic programs and services offered are high quality? The professors tend to show up on the blackboard to the balance sheet. Such dimensions are critical to such important considerations as institutional support, faculty and staff compensation, faculty and staff involvement in the learning process and community service. Quality also encompasses such intangibles as underlying educational philosophy, delivery systems, and facilitation of student involvement in the educational process. These dimensions are contingent upon the nature of the students served and the financial resources available to the institution. By definition, the highest quality is achieved when the institution’s graduation rates and financial resources are sufficient to provide a solid education. Those who derive their livelihoods in the academic world would probably spend a little more time thinking about what really constitutes quality in their delivery of services. Are we continually trying to do a better job of assisting students in the attainment of their educational goals and objectives? Are we continually looking for ways to improve our internal operations to make them more efficient and effective? Are we continually striving to work as a team within the institution?

Every institution has some room for improvement on all fronts—from the faculty to the staff to the board of education. But with all of its inherent problems and difficulties, higher education is still a bargain. The return on investment, both tangible and intangible, is truly enormous. During the course of a lifetime, the average college graduate can expect to earn approximately $400,000 more than those who do not acquire a degree (there’s the financial factor again). Yet this is relative. Higher education has an impact on an individual’s total quality of life. Being “educated” entails more than just knowledge and skills and job security. It is something much deeper.