

8-2010

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Aaron W. Hughey

Western Kentucky University, aaron.hughey@wku.edu

Monica G. Burke

Western Kentucky University, monica.burke@wku.edu

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Recommended Repository Citation

Hughey, Aaron W. and Burke, Monica G.. (2010). External Confirmation of Adherence to Standards: As Applicable to Academic Programmes as to Business and Industry. *Industry & Higher Education*, 24 (4), 257-262.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/csa_fac_pub/36

External confirmation of adherence to standards: as applicable to academic programmes as to business and industry

Aaron W. Hughey and Monica G. Burke

Abstract: *The development of, and adherence to, performance standards is imperative for success in today's competitive global market. This is as true for academic programmes in higher education as it is for the manufacturing and service sectors. Just like their counterparts in business and industry, it is important that graduate career preparation programmes are subject to an external validation process that can substantiate whether or not they are indeed following applicable standards. In this paper the authors discuss the current status of accreditation for graduate programmes designed to prepare tomorrow's leaders in the student services profession and argue for the development of a new certification system based on the standards established by the US Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS).*

Keywords: *performance standards; graduate career preparation; certification; accreditation; compliance*

Aaron W. Hughey is Professor and Program Coordinator and Monica G. Burke is Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, TPH 417-D, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA. E-mail: aaron.hughey@wku.edu; Monica.Burke@wku.edu.

The benefits of standards have long been recognized by business and industry as being essential to long-term economic success (Hoyle, 2007). Standards are inherently designed to capture best practices within the context of a concise set of guidelines. When implemented as part of a comprehensive business strategy they offer a number of tangible benefits. First, standards form a solid foundation for sustainable growth

by providing a mechanism for efficiency and market security (Przekop, 2005). Second, they tend to stimulate competition through the promotion of knowledge capture, shared insights, and reduced risk (Hoyle, 2009). Third, they promote innovation by facilitating knowledge transfer and response time to changing market conditions (British Standards Institution, 2010). Fourth, standards help to boost consumer confidence by

giving some guarantee of quality, consistency and reliability (Hoyle, 2007). Finally, they encourage and foster brand loyalty for those companies that are seen as doing an exceptional job of providing goods and services (British Standards Institution, 2010; Przekop, 2005).

Even though the advantages of adherence to standards are generally well-accepted in most fields, they are not without their critics. The disadvantages often associated with standards include the assertions that they are not relevant to particular fields, that they tend to inhibit innovation, especially in companies that are on the leading edge of their industries, and that they are more applicable to products than services (British Standards Institution, 2010). Other purported criticisms include the notion that the resources needed to ensure compliance can be prohibitive and that sometimes organizations are asked to adhere to standards when they were not given an opportunity to contribute toward their initial or subsequent development (Hoyle, 2007; Creamer, 2003). It is important to note, however, that even though they may contain elements of truth, the generally accepted view is that these objections to standards do not hold up under close scrutiny (Goetsch and Davis, 2001).

The increasing relevance of student services

The unprecedented growth of colleges and universities following the First World War precipitated a heightened need for more effective student support services and programmes (Allen and Garb, 1993). As this growth in the higher education sector continued throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the current millennium, specialized student services continued to proliferate in number and scope (McClellan and Stringer, 2009). Student services typically are designed to complement and support the academic dimension of the university or college experience; they are considered increasingly crucial to overall student success (Miller, 1999). Among the functional areas typically associated with student services today are admissions and recruitment, registration and records, financial assistance, conduct and discipline, housing, athletics, activities and organizations, academic advising, career counselling and leadership development (University of Louisville, 2008). It is also important to note that the development of the profession has not been uniform: for example, the USA, Canada and the UK have more fully-developed student support services, while other countries have retained a more traditional emphasis on academics (Lipson, 2008; Osfield, 2008).

Effective leadership is as relevant to the academy as it is to any other sector of society (Smith and Hughey,

2006). Moreover, as access to higher education has become more egalitarian in nature in many parts of the world, the student services profession has experienced enhanced value and credibility (Badke, 2003; Manning, 1996). The leadership provided by administrators of student services has been a key factor in achieving this improved status (Sandeen, 1991). In a very real sense, student services professionals are increasingly contributing to the success of the overall enterprise, so that these individuals are playing a much more critical role in the never-ending quest to ensure that higher education meets its overall societal goals (Ruben, 2007). Even academic staff are acknowledging their emerging status as valuable and necessary partners in the educational process (Beodeker, 2006; Philpott, 2003).

The bottom line seems to be that higher education is becoming more germane to the long-term success and stability of the global economy; certainly, the employability of more and more of the world's population is increasingly linked to colleges and universities (Warnock and Duncan, 2005). As the student services profession continues to evolve in response to both internal and external forces, there needs to be some assurance of quality and uniformity in graduate academic programmes designed to prepare individuals for leadership roles (Creamer, 2003; Morgan, 1997). However, as is historically the case with any emerging profession, the development of standards has lagged behind the development of the discipline (Hoyle, 2007). Professional standards of practice had been developed for the field of student services by 1986 (CAS, 2009); unfortunately, the development of a formal system designed to validate compliance with these standards has yet to be realized (Hughey, 2009).

Current status of accreditation

As alluded to previously, it is imperative to recognize that standards, as is the case in business and industry, play a central role in maintaining quality and efficiency in colleges and universities (Higher Education Academy, 2010; Ruben, 2007). Indeed, closer adherence to more well-defined standards is a primary impetus behind most efforts to reform higher education (Middaugh, 2009; Revised Higher Education Standards, 2006). This is particularly true when considering graduate programmes designed to prepare individuals for leadership positions in the provision of student services (Young and Jansosik, 2007; Mable, 2005). In the past, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs in the USA (CACREP) accredited graduate programmes aimed at preparing professionals to deliver effective and efficient

student services in institutions of higher education (Bobby and Kandor, 1995). However, with the introduction of the 2009 CACREP Standards, the agency eliminated the 'student affairs professional practice' category in preference to one that favours college counselling, completely different to administration and management (CACREP Standards, 2009, as retrieved 2010). This move has its roots in the 'counsellor identity' movement championed by many in the counselling community (CACREP Standards, 2009). While that may help sharpen the focus for the accreditation of programmes preparing counsellors and therapists, it also creates a substantial problem for those responsible for coordinating advanced career preparation programmes for future higher education administrators (Hughey, 2009).

Currently, the closest process to formal accreditation for these programmes is a voluntary self-assessment aimed at demonstrating that they are 'compliant' with the standards produced by the US Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) for graduate preparation programmes (Dean, 2006). To be fair, there is some value in achieving this designation as it does tend to make a positive statement about the quality of the graduate programme to which it is applied (Young and Janosik, 2007). But 'voluntary compliance' does not carry nearly the same weight as 'accreditation' and it is not widely understood by those outside higher education (Creamer, 2003). In fact, the lack of a formal accreditation system has placed programmes in jeopardy at some institutions (Sandeen and Barr, 2006). Whereas a formal accreditation process comparable to International Standards Organization (ISO) certification may not be necessary or even desirable, it is essential that some form of formal recognition of graduate preparation programmes that meet adopted standards is pursued (Hughey, 2009).

Assessing graduate career preparation programmes

CAS has developed professional standards in nine different areas for graduate preparation programmes in student services administration (CAS, 2009):

- (1) mission and objectives;
- (2) recruitment and admission;
- (3) curriculum policies;
- (4) pedagogy;
- (5) the curriculum;
- (6) equity and access;
- (7) academic and student support;
- (8) professional ethics and legal responsibilities; and
- (9) programme evaluation.

In order to facilitate the self-study process, CAS has published Self-Assessment Guides (SAGs) using a rating scale designed to facilitate the self-assessment (Dean, 2006). These SAGs are deliberately structured to provide programme coordinators and other institutional leaders with a relatively concise yet remarkably effective tool for determining programme efficacy and areas for potential improvement (Young and Janosik, 2007).

In order to demonstrate that a graduate preparation programme adheres to the CAS standards, a structured framework can be employed which consists of five steps. The first step is the preparation of a self-study which examines the nine different standard areas in extensive detail (Young and Janosik, 2007). This self-study is initially prepared by the programme coordinator and academic staff, with additional support being provided by students, alumni, employers, and other administrators. The second step entails an extensive review of the self-study by an internal set of reviewers not associated with the programme and not involved in the preparation of the self-study (Phillips, 2009; Creamer, 2003). Once their input has been incorporated into the report, the third step involves inviting an external review team, consisting of academic staff and practitioners from other institutions, to conduct an on-site visit (Ruben, 2007). They typically attempt to validate the self-study by reviewing documents and interviewing programme academic and other staff, students, alumni, employers and other administrators. Once the site visit has been conducted, the external review team deliberates and prepares a report that details the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, and provides a set of recommendations that outline how the quality of the programme could be enhanced (Young and Janosik, 2007). The report is then submitted to both the programme and the oversight bodies and the latter makes the final decision as to whether or not the programme complies with the CAS Standards. The outcome and the declared status of the programme is then posted on the appropriate Website. This is essentially how CACREP utilized the CAS Standards when it was the *de facto* accrediting agency for graduate preparation programmes in student services (CACREP, 2009).

Case study: Western Kentucky University

During the spring of 2008, the Master's degree programme in student affairs in higher education at Western Kentucky University underwent an extensive review using the nine CAS Standards for graduate preparation programmes as outlined above. This process involved the preparation of a comprehensive

self-study that was developed by the programme academic staff using the SAGs as a conceptual framework. Employing a somewhat innovative strategy, the entire process was facilitated online using Blackboard Learn™, a comprehensive, proprietary web-based application primarily used to deliver online courses. This approach rendered the production of hard copies of any aspect of the review unnecessary. Extensive documentation of every aspect of the programme was generated and data were collected using a variety of mechanisms. Once the self-study was completed, an internal review team consisting of student affairs academic staff, practitioners, current students and alumni of the programme critiqued the online documents and generated qualitative evaluations and numerical ratings for each item in the SAGs for each of the Standards.

Once the institutional phase of the CAS review process was completed, two external reviewers (one practitioner and one academic member of staff from two different institutions who were very familiar with the CAS Standards) were invited to campus to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme. Prior to their 2-day visit, these individuals were given advance access to the Blackboard site that had been set up to facilitate the review process. While on campus, they examined the programme in considerable detail and interviewed departmental and programme academic staff, student affairs administrators and staff, current students in the programme, graduates of the programme, and the department head, dean and provost. Their final report was submitted to the programme coordinator about a month after the site visit. The external reviewers also provided a very complimentary letter which highlighted their conclusion that the Western Kentucky University programme was, in fact, 'CAS compliant', although several areas were identified for future enhancement.

A problem became apparent soon after the good news was received. While those within the student services profession have some sense of what it means to be 'CAS compliant', many upper level administrators did not seem to share an understanding of what this designation actually says about the quality of a graduate preparation programme. On the other hand, these individuals do seem to understand and value 'accreditation' and the accreditation process: they even appear knowledgeable about what 'certification' means. What they do not seem to be able to grasp is what it means to be 'compliant'. This becomes particularly relevant with the realization that it is these same administrators who are primarily responsible for the allocation of critical resources within institutions of higher education.

Certification: an alternative to 'voluntary compliance'

It should be noted that self-regulation does have its place and should be employed as the primary quality control mechanism wherever possible (Phillips, 2009; Hoyle, 2007). Although the creation of an accreditation process for graduate preparation programmes that emulates what was formerly administered by CACREP is not necessary, the truth is that a more formal system for recognizing programmes that comply with the CAS Standards is desirable for both philosophical and pragmatic reasons (Ruben, 2007). This would not be difficult to accomplish for a number of reasons. First, the CAS Standards are already articulated and revised/updated on a regular basis. Second, the SAGs provide the necessary framework and guidelines for conducting a self-study and preparing a comprehensive report. Third, an appropriate internal review team can be easily identified and recruited at the institution. Fourth, the logistics of bringing an external review team consisting of at least two qualified professionals to campus are relatively straightforward – the only real challenge being the expense associated with the visit. There could even be a mechanism whereby individuals could be deemed eligible to conduct external reviews by submitting an application to a coordinator and, once selected, added to a list of acceptable reviewers.

None of this has to be unduly cumbersome; in fact, the entire process could be facilitated within the scope of a body such as the American College Personnel Association's Commission for Professional Preparation or a similar professional association with a more global scope. The financial commitment related to the process would not have to be particularly onerous as programmes that chose to pursue this voluntary 'certification' would simply pay a modest fee to the coordinating organization; all other expenses (preparation of the self-study, travel/fees for the external reviewers, etc) could be handled through the normal institutional budget for accreditation and certification. In any event, the return on investment for demonstrating that a programme meets established standards of quality and consistency would more than justify the expense of engaging in the process (Cianfrani, 2009; Middaugh, 2009).

In sum, what is being proposed is the creation and maintenance of a coordinating body (and record-keeping system) that would be responsible for certifying graduate preparation programmes that have successfully demonstrated that they are following and meeting the CAS Standards. This certification would carry more weight, and be much more of a distinction, than the largely self-asserted claim that a programme is simply

'compliant' with the standards. Further, it would serve to enhance both the real and perceived values of the degree among prospective students, alumni of the programme, the profession at large and, especially, employers. Finally, it would help programmes acquire much needed additional resources as upper level administrators, governing boards and legislative bodies are much more likely to provide funding as well as other forms of support to programmes that are perceived as being in alignment with established standards.

Conclusions

The challenges for both business and industry and academia are formidable. As has been previously noted, higher education is considered by many to be one of the principal drivers of global economic prosperity (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2009). Just like their counterparts in the private sector, a formal process for recognizing and rewarding graduate preparation programmes for their efforts to adhere to established standards is desperately needed. Such certification would convey credibility and help to bridge the gap between 'those who do, and those who teach'. The general public deserves some reliable measure by which to gauge the efficacy of these programmes. It is the right thing to do and this is the right time to do it.

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