The "Quality Agenda:" An Overview of Current Efforts to Examine Quality in Higher Education

A Discussion Paper Prepared for the American Council on Education (ACE)

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The U.S. has established ambitious goals for raising postsecondary attainment levels among its citizens. More specifically these goals aim for sixty percent of young adults with a postsecondary credential within the next ten to fifteen years—a goal which, if achieved, would restore the nation's place as the global leader in educational attainment levels. Deemed the "Completion Agenda" these goals, and associated policy initiatives to achieve them, are shared by the Obama administration, foundations like Lumina and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and a number of states. They are laudable and, with significant effort, achievable. But they are worrisome with respect to academic quality. If colleges and universities lower their academic standards, they stand a better chance of graduating the requisite numbers. And if this tempting route is taken, the Completion Agenda fails because substandard credentials not only shortchange students, but also render the nation and its workforce less competitive in the international marketplace.

There are disturbing signs that this is happening. Beginning with the report of the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (popularly known as the "Spellings Commission") growing evidence of shortfalls in the quality of student learning outcomes has emerged. Results of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), for example, show only 31% of the nation's citizens with baccalaureate degrees to be "proficient" in prose literacy—down almost ten percent from results of a decade ago.[1]

One response to these conditions has been the emergence of a parallel "Quality Agenda," which aims to ensure that academic quality is attended to, measured, and improved. Unlike the Completion Agenda, the Quality Agenda is diffuse, multi-faceted, and far less visible to policymakers and the public. It consists of more than a dozen different initiatives undertaken individually by a diverse array of actors that are loosely coupled and largely uncoordinated. These initiatives join a number of more established quality mechanisms like institutional accreditation, which are also in the process of being transformed. The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the major elements of the Quality Agenda to help ground a discussion about how to move forward. The paper has four sections. The first briefly describes the initiatives themselves, the vast majority of which emerged within the last few years. Because these initiatives all depend heavily on assessing student learning outcomes, the second section of the paper describes the principal alternatives for doing so. Because both the Completion and the Quality Agendas are being enacted on a worldwide stage, the paper's third section briefly describes some international developments. The paper's final section offers some cross-cutting observations about the condition and prospects for the Quality Agenda, together with implications for institutions.

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Major Quality Initiatives. Major quality initiatives in the U.S. fall roughly into three categories. The first consists of a range of independent programs undertaken by non-governmental organizations and largely supported by foundation funding. The second consists of a variety of actions being pursued to render institutional accreditation more effective and more sharply focused on student academic achievement. The third consists of government initiatives—both federal and state—intended to measure educational outcomes.

Non-Governmental Initiatives. Most of these are less than five years old and are sustained by a combination of organizational resources and philanthropy.

- AAC&U LEAP. The Liberal Education for America's Promise (LEAP) initiative was launched in 2005 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Its primary purpose is to advocate for and demonstrate the achievement of collegiate learning outcomes that are essential to professional success and effective participation in a democratic society. The LEAP outcomes include knowledge of human cultures and the natural and physical world, intellectual and practical skills ranging from written and oral communication to teamwork and problem solving, personal and social responsibility and, integrative and applied learning. Since its launch, the LEAP initiative has involved hundreds of campuses and eight states in activities designed to further its basic agenda. Two years ago, AAC&U developed a set of "VALUE" rubrics ("Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education") for fifteen of its learning outcomes. These are being piloted by teams of trained faculty members to enable them to generate authentic, but broadly comparable, bodies of evidence about the achievement of these outcomes.[2]

- Accountability Reporting Frameworks. Directly stimulated by the Spellings Commission and the perceived need for institutions to demonstrate greater transparency and accountability for results are a range of voluntary public reporting templates. All of them are produced in common formats and report such things as retention and completion rates, student learning outcomes, cost of attendance, and other relevant outcomes of the institution's choosing. The first and most prominent of these is the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), launched in 2007 by the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).[3] The VSA allows participating institutions a choice of three standardized tests for reporting learning outcomes—the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), or the Proficiency Profile (PP).[4] More than 320 four-year public universities are now a part of VSA, which was launched with philanthropic support but is now supported by institutional dues. A parallel voluntary reporting effort is the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) developed

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[2] See http://www.aacu.org/leap/.
[3] See http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm.
[4] See the subsequent section of this paper for descriptions of these examinations. Note that subsequent editions of the VSA will allow more institutional latitude in selecting assessment instruments.

for public two-year institutions by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).[5] Like the VSA, the framework involves reporting on retention and graduation, learning outcomes, workforce contributions, and several other areas of performance, but the evidence of learning outcomes presented is based on local (and therefore non-comparable) campus practices. The VFA was piloted by 58 colleges in 2011, is currently in Beta testing, and is expected to be operational by 2013. Finally, Transparency by Design (TbD) is a similar initiative for largely on-line institutions serving a primarily adult student clientele, begun with foundation support by the Western Cooperative for Educational Technology (WCET) in 2008.[6] TbD has sixteen participating institutions (several of which are for-profit) and, unlike its counterparts, reports learning outcomes at the individual program level using a variety of methods, although many of them use the PP examination. A somewhat similar initiative produced by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) entitled U-CAN (University and College Accountability Network) uses a common reporting framework but does not contain information on student learning outcomes.[7]

- CIC/CLA Consortium. This initiative was launched in 2005 by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) with support from the Teagle Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York to enable member colleges to collectively experiment with the CLA assessment. The initiative initially involved 30 colleges and a new grant from Teagle has enabled the Consortium to expand to 47 institutions. Although CLA results are not reported publicly, members of the CIC/CLA Consortium share them internally on a voluntary basis to enable benchmarking and improvement efforts, and selected results are periodically disseminated by CIC through newsletters and other publications.[8]

- The New Leadership Alliance. The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (The Alliance) is an independent advocacy organization created in 2008 with support from the Teagle Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.[9] The Alliance was formed by higher education leaders in response to the Spellings Commission to undertake a series of advocacy and demonstration efforts around the assessment of student learning outcomes designed to better prepare the higher education community for the next Re-Authorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) and to create "shared professional norms" with respect to the responsibility of higher education institutions to gather and act upon evidence of student learning outcomes. The Alliance seeks to publicize and coordinate the various parts of what this paper terms the "Quality Agenda" (many of its Board members come from organizations sponsoring these initiatives) and has created a number of tools to help campuses develop effective assessment programs. A publication, *Committing To Quality*, presents a set of broad principles of practice around assessment, has been widely

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[5] See http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/VFAWeb/default.aspx.
[6] See http://wcet.wiche.edu/advance/transparency-by-design.
[7] See http://www.ucan-network.org/.
[8] See http://www.cic.edu/Programs-and-Services/Progams/Pages/Collegiate-Learning-Assessment-(CLA).aspx.
[9] See http://www.newleadershipalliance.org/.

distributed, and is endorsed by a growing list of higher education associations and organizations. The "Presidents' Alliance" consists of 106 institutions whose leaders have publicly committed their institutions to a variety of projects aimed at measuring and improving learning. Finally, a tool designed to evaluate the effectiveness of campus-based assessment practices has been designed and piloted.

- NILOA. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in 2008 with funding from The Teagle Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Lumina Foundation to discover and disseminate ways higher education institutions and programs can effectively gather and use evidence of student learning outcomes and to communicate the value of assessment to external stakeholders.[10] NILOA maintains a website containing a wide range of resources to support learning assessment that is probably the most comprehensive in the country. It has also underwritten preparation of thirteen "Occasional Papers" by nationally prominent authors that examine various aspects of assessment, has produced several other reports focused on transparency and the reporting of learning results, and has undertaken two national surveys of assessment activities and motivations—one focused on institutions and one focused on individual academic programs. Other tools developed by NILOA include a "Transparency Framework" to enable campuses to assess their own reporting and an ongoing series of "Assessment Briefs" designed to support assessment tailored for different internal and external constituencies.

- The Lumina DQP and Tuning USA. After an extensive study of quality efforts associated with the Bologna Process in Europe, the Lumina Foundation funded two related initiatives. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), issued in 2010 and modeled on similar competency frameworks in many countries, presents competency statements in five areas—specialized knowledge, broad integrative knowledge, intellectual skills, applied learning, and civic learning—at three degree levels—associate's, bachelor's, and master's.[11] The statements consist of successively inclusive hierarchies of competencies, expressed in terms of "action verb" ladders from less to more complex abilities, frequently illustrated by the kinds of demonstrations that should be expected of students to show mastery. The DQP was deliberately issued as a "Beta version" and is currently being tested by over a hundred institutions funded by Lumina through a growing list of demonstration projects. Tuning USA, actually begun earlier, is less well known and is modeled on the similar voluntary discipline-level Tuning efforts in Europe and applied at the state level.[12] The objective in each discipline is to convene teams of faculty from institutions across the state (both public and independent) to develop common competency statements describing expected discipline-level competencies that can be used to align curriculum and pedagogy. Tuning USA initially involved three states and six disciplines and has since been extended to several additional states and disciplines, as well as a national disciplinary association.

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[10] See http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/index.html.
[11] See http://www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/news_releases/2011-01-25.html.
[12] See http://tuningusa.org/.

- ACE College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT). For sixty years, the ACE College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) has provided reliable information to colleges and universities on the course equivalency of student learning obtained through experience or the workplace. Participating organizations include corporations, professional and volunteer associations, schools, training suppliers, labor unions, the military, and government agencies. CREDIT issues hundreds of thousands of transcripts each year that are passed on to institutions offering degree or certificate programs. The ratings rely on teams of faculty who review the creditworthiness of various experiences and credit equivalencies and are reviewed every three years. The Service is used primarily to aid adult students and has been recognized by many advocacy organizations for non-traditional students such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Accreditation-Related Initiatives. Many elements of the "Quality Agenda" fall under the umbrella of institutional accreditation. Accreditation, of course, is the principal mechanism currently in use in the U.S. for assuring academic quality. It has been in place for over 125 years and for some sixty years in its current form. Accreditation is a nominally voluntary process that usually involves three stages—preparation of a self-study by an institution, one or more site visits by a team of peer reviewers drawn from similar institutions, and an accreditation decision rendered by an accrediting commission based on the evidence generated by the prior two stages. Since the middle of the last century, the federal government has relied on accreditation to provide evidence that institutions are of sufficient quality to receive federal funds, so accreditors serve as "gatekeepers" for such funding. This also means that the federal government must periodically "recognize" accreditors as worthy to fulfill this function. Accreditation was heavily criticized by the Spellings Commission and a subsequent attempt to bring their operations more directly under federal control and standardize their role in collecting evidence of student academic achievement was highly publicized, but ultimately unsuccessful. Nevertheless, this episode triggered several activities and initiatives over the past five years designed to improve accreditation.

- Changing Standards and Review Processes. All of the seven regional accrediting commissions have significantly revised their standards and review processes in the last five or six years. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe these changes in detail, but many common themes are apparent. First, a new prominence is being accorded to standards requiring institutions to provide evidence of student academic achievement. Contrary to the impression left by the Spellings Commission, accreditors have had such standards in place for twenty years. But the charges were correct that few accreditors actually sanctioned institutions for not meeting them. Similarly, accreditation standards have historically required institutions to have a *process* for assessing student learning outcomes and have been less concerned about the actual levels of learning achieved and the extent to which these levels are acceptable. Today, both of these conditions are changing. To varying degrees, regional accreditors are more pointed in their inquiries about the extent to which institutions are achieving appropriate outcomes standards through benchmarking and are more frequently willing to sanction institutions that, after many

years, claim that they need more time to meet these requirements. Pushback under these circumstances has been inevitable, especially among the nation's most prestigious institutions. But there is as yet no sign that the tide of accreditation toward greater emphasis on evidence of student academic achievement is receding.

- The CHEA Initiative. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was established in 1995 in the wake of the aggressive 1992 Amendments to the HEA in order to provide a unified national voice on accreditation and to assure institutions that they would be subject to appropriate examination by accrediting organizations through a rigorous non-governmental recognition process. In the fall of 2008, CHEA announced a multi-year "national conversation on accreditation" entitled the CHEA Initiative. The goals of the CHEA Initiative are to enhance accountability in accreditation and to balance the growing federal role (and its perceived intrusiveness) with an equally strong academic voice guided by institution-centered academic values. In its first two years, activities of the CHEA Initiative centered on hearing from the academy and surfacing a range of policy issues to pursue. These now include the relationship between accreditors and federal and state governments, the role of accreditation in accountability, the relationships among accreditors, international developments, and the rise of the for-profit sector. In its fourth year, the focus of the CHEA Initiative is moving from issue identification to action, advancing concrete action items under each of the issues previously identified.[13] The entire effort is focused on preparing potential lines of action for the upcoming Re-Authorization of the HEOA.

- The NACIQI Report. The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) was created by the Department of Education to provide advice on the process that the federal government uses to recognize accrediting organizations as gatekeepers for the receipt of federal funds. Comprising representatives chosen by both houses of Congress on party lines and the Department itself, the Committee makes recommendations on whether or not (and under what conditions) individual accreditors are recognized. Two years ago, as a special assignment, NACIQI was charged by the Secretary of Education to examine the so-called "Triad" governing quality assurance for higher education that consists of the federal government, the states, and recognized accrediting organizations, and to propose changes. After an initial report issued in the fall of 2011 proposing a range of "alternatives" ranging from severing the link between accreditation and access to federal dollars to restructuring the basis of accreditation from regional commissions to organizations based on type of institution, NACIQI issued its final recommendations in early 2012.[14] These are much less radical than initially anticipated. Prominent among them are a) retain the current gatekeeping role of recognized accreditors, b) clarify the respective responsibilities of members of the Triad, c) continue to explore alternatives to the current regional structure, d) find ways to protect accreditors in the current litigious environment, e) tailor the intensity of accreditation review to an institution's track

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[13] See http://www.chea.org/pdf/2011_CHEA_Initiative.pdf.
[14] See http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/naciqi-dir/naciqi_draft_final_report.pdf.

record of successful accreditation history and, f) develop common minimum data requirements aimed at consumer protection for use by all accreditors that include student success and cost.

- ACE Task Force on Accreditation. In a parallel set of developments, but also following up on concerns about accreditation arising from both the Spellings Commission and about aggressive actions by accreditors that might infringe on institutional missions, the American Council on Education (ACE) chartered a national Task Force to examine accreditation reform. Comprised almost entirely of members of the academic community (including representatives from accreditors), the Task Force met four times in 2010-2012. Its final report was issued in May 2012 and included the following recommendations: a) increase the transparency of accreditation through various forms of public reporting, b) increase the centrality of evidence of student success and academic quality, c) promptly sanction substandard institutions, d) tailor accreditation reviews to institutional circumstances to render them less burdensome, e) promote cooperation and the development of common terminology among accreditors and, f) increase the cost effectiveness of accreditation. ACE plans to track progress in implementing recommendations of the Task Force over the next two years.

Initiatives by Federal and State Governments. In addition to its indirect influence on the Quality Agenda through accreditation, the federal government has several initiatives in play that bear directly on the question of academic quality. Over the past two decades, moreover, individual states have both undertaken and withdrawn from quality oversight activities.

- Teacher Education Accountability. Teacher Education has always held a special place in the fabric of educational accountability because it is simultaneously located in the elementary/secondary and the postsecondary policy spaces. For example, Title II of the HEOA requires teacher education programs to publicly report on such things as licensure examination pass rates. In the past two years, policy discussions of accountability for Teacher Education have escalated because of federal proposals to evaluate program effectiveness on the basis of the "value-added" performance of pupils (based on standardized test scores mandated by No Child Left Behind) taught by the program's graduates. These measures would be supplemented by employer and parent surveys of teacher effectiveness. Results could be used to limit or remove financial aid from institutions training the teachers whose students underperform. The outcome of these discussions is far from settled but their implications for the rest of higher education are suggestive.

- Gainful Employment. Current federal accountability rules for occupational and vocational programs that receive federal funds (either directly through workforce programs or through financial aid) require institutions to regularly report occupational placement rates and earnings for program graduates, in addition to retention and degree completion rates. More recently, proposals to extend these reporting requirements to all institutions regardless of degree level or occupational/vocational status have emerged. For example, the Department of Education is developing enhanced reporting requirements for reporting graduation rates through the

Graduation Rate Survey to embrace a wider starting population than the current requirement to track first-time full-time students. The guidance language for this revised reporting requirement simultaneously urges institutions to track and report the employment and earnings of graduates.

- Credit Hour Definition. Although currently being looked at by Congress, the effort by the Department of Education to impose a standard definition of a credit hour represents an unprecedented attempt on the part of government authority to intervene in academic matters that have traditionally been left to higher education institutions and their faculties. The proposed rule was promulgated without identifying a specific presenting problem that the definition would remedy and in response to an isolated case of accreditation action— immediately rectified—in connection with a for-profit institution. Equally unprecedented was the fact that the Department enacted the credit hour rule on its own through the regulatory process, rather than implementing Congressional action established previously through legislation.

- State Assessment Efforts. The states have been involved in mandates for the assessment of student learning outcomes for public colleges and universities since the mid-1980s, but these requirements have been uneven across states and have waxed and waned depending on policy fashion and available funding. The latest inventory of state activity in this arena reports that five states currently use standardized cognitive tests of various kinds to assess the effectiveness of public colleges and universities.[15] In addition, twenty-one states require institutions to develop assessment programs in general education and for each academic program using learning goals and assessment methods of their own choosing, and to report results publicly. Several of these states require institutions to assess against common statewide learning outcomes, and several require institutions to include at least one nationally normed standardized instrument in their assessment programs.

Commonly-Used Instruments and Approaches. A wide range of assessment instruments and approaches have been used by American colleges and universities over the past three decades and this section highlights only a few of the best known and most widely used.[16]

Standardized Examinations. Each of the major testing companies offers standardized examinations for use at the college and university level. Most of these were developed in the 1980s, based on existing placement or admissions tests, in response to the first assessment requirements established by states and accreditors. Standardized examinations have the virtue of allowing comparisons among institutions or to national norms—a useful property for accountability purposes.[17]

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[15] See http://www.nchems.org/c2sp/documents/C2SPStateAssessment_Final_6.21.2010.pdf.

[16] The NILOA website (http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/index.html) provides the most comprehensive inventory of assessment methods currently available.

[17] An important caveat here is that these are "user norms" based on the pool of institutions actually using the test, not true national norms based on a representative national sample.

- Generic Skills Assessments. These examine cross cutting skills such as writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning, and are most commonly used by institutions to evaluate general education. Most of them are offered in a short form (usually 40 minutes), which allows reliable scores to be estimated for a population of test-takers, and a long form (usually two hours), which generates a reliable score for each individual taking the test. The Educational Testing Services (ETS) and ACT first produced their versions in the mid-1980s based on re-worked admissions examinations normed at the sophomore year of college. The ETS Proficiency Profile (PP) examines skills in reading, writing, critical thinking, and mathematics. Similarly, the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) examines skills in reading, writing, critical thinking, mathematics and science reasoning; its long form also includes an essay. A prominent and popular latecomer is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), developed by the RAND Corporation in the late 1990s. CLA is distinctive because it is based entirely on constructed "tasks" or writing prompts and contains no multiple choice items. It is also administered in a "value added" format that estimates the amount of gain students have accomplished between their freshman and senior years. Less widely used alternatives are the Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT) and College-Base (C-Base). The CAT was developed by Tennessee Technological University with an NSF grant, and is also an "authentic" (not multiple-choice) assessment. The C-Base was developed by the University of Missouri for assessing teacher candidates and is part of the accountability programs in several states.

- Discipline Assessments. Licensed professions like nursing, teacher education, counseling, and other health professions have licensing examinations governing entry into the profession; these are frequently used as program assessments at institutions offering such programs. In parallel, ETS offers Major Field Tests (MFT) in twelve fields; these were originally developed in the late 1980s based on ETS Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) but are continually updated.

Student Surveys. Student Surveys are not direct assessments of student abilities but are frequently administered as part of an institutional assessment approach. Many institutions use "home-grown" surveys, but most use one or more of a small set of national surveys that can provide comparative data. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been in the field for more than ten years and provides data on institutional practices and student behaviors that empirical research has demonstrated are related to learning gain. Its counterpart for two-year institutions, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) has been available almost as long. The entering freshman survey administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA has been available for over 40 years and is the basis of annual stories in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about what this year's freshman class is like. A follow-up version, much less widely used, is also available for students enrolled in later years. Finally, both ACT and ETS have standardized student surveys for various populations including entering students, continuing students, exiting seniors, and alumni.

Non-Standardized Approaches. The vast majority of student learning outcomes assessment at American colleges and universities is not standardized and methods are designed and implemented locally by their own faculties. While the results of such assessments cannot be compared across institutions or settings, they have the immense virtue of being tailored to the topics faculty want to learn about, so have considerable legitimacy as a result. Some of the most common approaches are:

- Capstones. These are culminating courses in a major taken by seniors who are just about to graduate. The content of these courses is typically comprehensive, requiring students to demonstrate the full range of disciplinary or professional skills before they enter the workforce or graduate study. Assignments in capstones are frequently used as settings for assessments.

- Portfolios. These are collections of student work ("exhibits") that are put together to demonstrate mastery of a range of collegiate skills. They are typically structured around the institution's general education learning goals and entries are rated by faculty readers to determine level of mastery. Most allow students to choose their best work but some are longitudinal, with exhibits chosen from each year of study to show growth.

- Performance Assessments. These are culminating demonstrations of mastery judged by experts in an actual performance setting. The most straightforward example is a senior recital in music but many other examples are drawn from practice disciplines like teaching, engineering, or the health professions.

- Embedded Assessments. Embedded assessment designs involve more rigorous scoring of selected assignments that are already part of college coursework. They are typically used to assess general education outcomes but are present in major programs as well. Four or five assignments located at different levels of study (freshman through senior) are generally chosen for each of the learning goals to be evaluated and student answers to these selected assignments are "re-graded" on a more rigorous and reliable basis.

All of these approaches rely on "rubrics," which are specially crafted scoring guides developed by faculty to rate the chosen abilities.

International Developments. Finally, the Quality Agenda in the U.S. is increasingly being influenced by practices in other countries and U.S. accreditors are borrowing from quality assurance agencies elsewhere. Meanwhile, American colleges and universities are being encouraged to benchmark their expectations with respect to learning against international standards.

- National Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs). Higher education in most other western countries is provided almost exclusively by public institutions. When concerns about quality and cost-effectiveness first emerged in the 1990s, most of these countries created government agencies

or government funded organizations to provide a quality assurance function.[18] U.S. accreditors have increasingly looked at the review practices of these organizations to get ideas about how to improve institutional reviews. One common approach is "academic audit," first developed by the QAA in the United Kingdom and widely imitated across the English-speaking world. Like financial audits, academic audits involve choosing a small sample of entities or incidents (students, courses, results of program review, etc.) and following their complete trail of development or adoption. The use of national qualifications frameworks specifying learning expectations by award level like the Lumina DQP is also common among QAAs. Finally, external examiner systems under which samples of student work are audited by teams of government appointed readers to determine equivalency in marking and equity across awards is a common practice in most English speaking countries and helps ensure the consistency of academic standards.

- The Bologna Process. The "Bologna Process" is the term colloquially applied to a related set of practices and reforms begun in Europe more than a decade ago with the objective of creating common degree structures and fully transferable credentials. Because one objective of Bologna is to align academic standards across the whole of Europe, several practices designed to do this have come to the attention of foundations and policy organizations in the U.S. One, already described, is the use of Qualifications Frameworks. Another is the alignment of disciplinary standards through "Tuning"—the inspiration for the Lumina-funded Tuning USA initiative described above. A third is the "Diploma Supplement," which as the name suggests, is a document attached to a given student's credential that describes in detail the kinds of assessments and demonstrations that the student has completed and his or her performance on them, together with descriptive material about the organization of curriculum and courses.

- AHELO. Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is a multi-national higher education assessment initiative being developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).[19] The intent is to build and administer a range of higher education assessments in various disciplines in multiple national contexts for benchmarking purposes in a somewhat similar fashion to the subject assessments currently administered to fifteen-year-olds on a rotating basis through OECD's widely respected Program of International Student Assessment (PISA). AHELO is currently in the midst of a feasibility study involving three fields (Economics, Engineering, and Generic Skills) administered in seventeen participating countries. Three U.S. states are participating—Connecticut, Missouri, and Pennsylvania. The Feasibility Study will conclude in March, 2013 and a decision will be made about whether to proceed with full-scale implementation.

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[18] A good example is the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom; see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/default.aspx.

[19] See http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3746,en_2649_39263238_40624662_1_1_1_1,00.html.

Implications and Conclusions. As this review of its many components reveals, the Quality Agenda is simultaneously broad and complex. Each of the many initiatives that comprise it has its own nuances, reflecting the motivations of its sponsors. Among its many implications for college and university leaders are the following.

- *Interest in the Quality Agenda is growing and will only continue to grow*. At the same time, even collectively, it has yet to achieve the public prominence or broad legitimacy within the policy community enjoyed by the Completion Agenda, which now visibly grounds current federal, state, and philanthropic action. This is unfortunate, because the risk is very real that the U.S. will achieve apparent "parity" in the international marketplace of postsecondary credentials only by generating degrees and certificates that lack substance. College and university leaders, as well as actors in the policy community, need to voice concerns about quality far more visibly than they have in the past and collectively raise the Quality Agenda to a position of parity with the Completion Agenda.

- *The Quality Agenda currently consists of a large number of uncoordinated initiatives that compete for funding and air time*. Unlike the Completion Agenda, which has mapped out a compelling and coherent argument and an action strategy that has captured significant foundation and media attention, the many components of the Quality Agenda are less visible and, with a few exceptions, are not tied to a national action agenda. The main exception to date is the DQP, which Lumina Foundation is advancing aggressively with a series of well-funded demonstration projects. As a result, there is a real need for key policy actors in higher education to map, coordinate, and publicize this set of initiatives. Doing so was the original goal of the New Leadership Alliance but may be a worth task for the Educational Attainment Panel. Meanwhile, the recent *New York Times* opinion piece by David Brooks on the need for academic quality as well as more degrees may provide a readily available way to raise the topic.[20]

- *Assessment methods suitable for gathering evidence about the quality of learning are becoming more numerous and sophisticated*. For many years, progress in the Quality Agenda was hampered by a lack of suitable instruments. Most of the available standardized tools were multiple-choice examinations perceived by faculty to be illegitimate or one-off institution-grown methods like portfolios or capstones whose results were not comparable across settings. Now there is a growing variety of methods that go beyond multiple-choice methods whose results can be benchmarked, ranging from task or problem based standardized assessments like the CLA or the CAT to methods that can be applied to systematic samples of student work across institutions like the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics. With most of the technical challenges of collecting evidence of learning being addressed, there are fewer obstacles to moving the Quality Agenda forward. The voluntary reporting frameworks like VSA now provide good vehicles for institutions to demonstrate proactively that they are doing so.

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[20] "Testing the Teachers," *The New York Times Opinion Page*, April 19 2012.

- ***Because of such technical progress, calls for benchmarking or performance comparisons across institutions and jurisdictions will continue to grow.*** Institutions must be prepared for this and the pressure for comparison—both advised and ill-advised—must be met in a coordinated fashion. This makes it all the more important for higher education policy organizations to actively shape the Quality Agenda lest it be captured by actors likely to convert it to a meaningless set of rankings. Observers outside higher education welcome calls to assess higher education learning outcomes, but are much more familiar with K-12 assessment practices and policy responses like No Child Left Behind. These are dangerous to institutional diversity and autonomy in higher education, and should be actively resisted.

- ***The most compelling current threat to the Quality Agenda is capture by government.*** The events following the Spellings Commission, and particularly the attempts to change the role of accreditation through negotiated rulemaking that were blocked by Congressional action led by Senator Lamar Alexander, should not be forgotten. Senator Alexander's subsequent warning to the higher education community to proactively address the learning outcomes issue is as real today as it was five years ago: "do it yourselves or the federal government will have to do it for you." In the run-up to the Re-Authorization of the HEOA, higher education's leadership will need to advocate for the Quality Agenda, embrace and improve it, and ensure that their faculties know what these issues are about and are prepared to play a constructive role.

In short, the Quality Agenda has many dimensions and remains relatively uncoordinated when compared to the Completion Agenda. Institutional leaders should be aware of its various components and be prepared to meet the manifold challenges that it continues to present.