IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND EFFICIENCY
William Massy, Project Area Director

This project seeks to apply quality process concepts to postsecondary education, to determine the potential of information technology as an enabler of change, and to explore other approaches to achieving quality assurance and accountability within the context of cost containment. Two broad categories of questions serve as a springboard for research activities:

How can the environment within academic departments and similar organizational units be transformed to enable and drive the kinds of change that will be required to improve undergraduate educational quality, redress the teaching-research balance, utilize information technology in effective ways, and improve cost efficiency?

How should postsecondary education institutions and systems transform themselves to provide the departmental environment needed to produce the aforementioned changes and re-engineer academic support services to improve quality and productivity?

The overall objective of this project area is to test tentative answers to these questions and to elaborate these conceptual advancements into operationally meaningful programs that can be used by higher education institutions and faculty.

Researchers are also examining international quality assurance efforts in Europe and Asia to identify the concepts and ideas that underpin these various systems. The team also is exploring recent developments in New Zealand and Australia, both of which have recently launched large, national quality assurance systems.

Researchers are also involved in efforts to transform U.S. accreditation to resemble more of a quality audit-like system. This work represents groundbreaking work on the use of quality and quality concepts in U.S. higher education.

Findings

The Danish and Swedish ministries of education have focused attention on quality work and have launched its diffusion into institutional routines. By soft pedaling the accountability agenda, they opened the way for serious discourse, which if pursued is likely to produce major dividends in the years ahead. By carefully designing the processes and implementing them with a spirit of openness, the two quality agencies earned the trust of the institutions while simultaneously challenging them to improve their quality. While it is difficult to demonstrate whether or not this approach has improved the delivered quality of teaching and learning, researchers believe that there are strong prima facie reasons for believing that quality will improve if it has not done so already.

The Scandinavian experience also demonstrates the efficacy of academic audit—that is, the systematic review of institutional and departmental quality work. Both Sweden and Denmark have advanced the state of the art in audit, as well as in quality work itself. They have shown that audits need not be overly expensive or intrusive, and that they can successfully stress improvement as well as accountability. At the same time, researchers have found that audit—as it has been practiced thus far—suffers from a lack of sufficiently detailed definitions about what is meant by "quality work." Absent clear definitions covering the totality of quality work, evaluation teams tend to fall back on its administrative and organizational aspects. The lack of clear quality work definitions also makes it harder for the evaluation reports to offer operationally meaningful action recommendations.

Publications

Massy, William F. 1999. "Energizing Quality Work: Higher Education Quality Evaluation in Sweden and Denmark."

Massy, William F., and Nigel J. French. 1999. "Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review: What Has the Programme Achieved in Hong Kong?" Paper presented at the 5th Bi-Annual Conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in Santiago, Chile, May 3-6, 1999.

Massy, William F. 2001. *Honoring the Trust*. Forthcoming.