

Accounting 101: How Disciplines Can Answer the "So What?" Question
about Their Work and Their Contributions to Higher Education

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We are all familiar with the problems, critiques, and concerns that bedevil higher education in the early twenty-first century. Public funding of public education has plummeted. The cost of attending an institution of higher learning has skyrocketed and steadily outpaces rates of inflation. Part-time and contract instructors fill most positions, leaving only one-third of college faculty tenured or tenure-track. Graduates leave academic institutions with limited job prospects. Student loan debt now exceeds credit card debt. The U.S. has dropped from first to twelfth place among industrialized nations in college and university attainment. *Academically Adrift* critics, looking at Collegiate Learning Assessment results, conclude that students appear to learn very little during their college careers. The Thiel Foundation, grounded on the argument that higher education is a "bubble," provides fellowships to young people who aim to develop their entrepreneurial skills by not attending a university. A state senator in Utah charges that institutions of higher learning often provide their students with "degrees to nowhere." In the eyes of many, it would appear, colleges and universities have become the equivalents of America's long-ailing auto industry: an overpriced, underproductive, inefficient, and defective enterprise.

Public scrutiny has risen and, as we might expect, a day of reckoning is likely coming for higher education. In many states, it has already arrived. Are we on campus actively engaged in responses to these critiques, carefully defining our work and

constructing thoughtful ways of demonstrating our contributions? Or do we sit back and wait for others to act for us? We need to be as pro-active as possible, responding to our administrators, accreditors, legislators, business leaders, alumni, and above all our students on the practical difference that higher education makes for individuals and for the nation.

Many initiatives are in place to study the state and functions of higher education. One of the most thoughtful set of proposals has come from an organization based in Indianapolis, the Lumina Foundation for Education. Lumina's "Tuning USA" project, launched in 2009 (and, since 2010, co-supported by the William and Flora Hewitt Foundation) is a program of academic reform that scholars and administrators around the nation ought to consider for its practical and perceptive approach to the evaluation of higher education.

Lumina's interest in expanding access to higher education (and success in academic attainment) has led the foundation to outline its "big goal": to "increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025."ⁱ Lumina's ambitious program does not merely set its sights on the *quantity* of degrees but also on their *quality*; and the foundation focuses its attention not merely on the courses that students may take but on the *skills and competencies* students derive from their education. The result is the Tuning USA program, an approach to higher education that borrows from the European Bologna Project of academic reform.ⁱⁱ

Tuning USA is best understood by contrasting its approaches to those of standard evaluation programs. In the past, most of us have confronted these questions when we are told by central administration to participate in institution-wide evaluations. Their calls are

commonly sparked by a pending accreditation review on campus. At other times, we have to systematically evaluate academic work when our departments come due for an external review. Although some disciplines operate within a framework of certification standards (that monitor curriculum, instruction, and faculty), many others fields of scholarship without established external standards may look to their professional organizations for guidance.ⁱⁱⁱ Generally speaking, evaluation efforts have been top-down, starting with marching orders that central administration delivers to academic units. The evaluations are often one-size-fits-all, outlining similar questions and expectations for all departments. The work goes on mainly within the confines of the individual institution. The key players are administrators and faculty. The documentation produced is often dense and jargon-laden. And once the evaluation is done, the paperwork is shelved and forgotten. No wonder so many faculty members remain skeptical of the whole project.

The Lumina Foundation's Tuning project stands apart from conventional evaluations of higher education in *TEN* major ways:

First, Tuning's approach is *bottom-up* rather than top-down. The work starts with the people on the ground, the faculty who do the teaching and research at an institution, not with the people at the top in the administration of academe.

Second, Tuning focuses on *discipline-specific* evaluations rather than a single model of analysis. The program recognizes, for example, the profound differences in the work and contributions of sociology, engineering, and chemistry and avoids any attempt to analyze the disciplines by one, generic model of evaluation.

Third, Tuning does not ask faculty within a discipline simply to describe courses and credits within their program. Instead of concentrating on numbers and individual

classes, faculty specialists are asked to explain the fundamental questions that inform all of the work in their field: what must students in their discipline *know, understand, and be able to do* in order to receive a degree? In other words, the Tuning program revolves around learning outcomes, skills, and competencies ó rather than focusing attention primarily on course descriptions and credit totals.

Fourth, the language of the discipline descriptions must be clear and transparent, understandable not just to the graduate *leaving* a program but, most importantly, to the student *entering* a program. The ðaudienceö for the discipline’s statement is the broader public, not the academic specialist.

Fifth, faculty need to apply the same level of clarity and accessibility to a related question: within a discipline, what distinguishes the learning outcomes for an associates degree from those of a bachelors degree ó and from masters and doctoral degrees? In other words, how does a discipline ðratchet upö its expectations and standards as students move from one degree level to another?

Sixth, the evaluative work that faculty carry out cannot be isolated. Tuning insists that faculty engage in discussions with a wide range of “*stakeholders*” who have an interest in the work of higher education. That means faculty should consult with alumni, administrators, policy makers, and employers as they fashion the learning outcomes for their field. The purpose is not to have others define a discipline for us but to understand more clearly what those outside the academy expect and value in higher education.

Seventh, faculty within one department outline the outcomes for their discipline in collaboration with *colleagues at other institutions*. Tuning works best when it involves a conversation that cuts across different types of campuses with different types of

educational missions, where faculty from two-year, four-year, and research institutions try to clarify their work, their audiences, and their expectations.

Eighth, while Tuning tries to assist the work of faculty, administrators, and accreditors, the main purpose of the program is to help *students* (and their parents) understand the expectations, standards, and prospects of higher education. Tuning aims to provide students with greater *clarity* -- in the way they should prepare for college, in what they should anticipate once they arrive on a campus, and in what they can expect to gain in terms of personal development, knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Recognizing the various *õ*points of entryö for students, Tuning also aims to provide smoother *transferability* (as students move from one institution to another) and greater *alignment of courses* as students proceed from two-year programs to bachelors and masters degrees.

Ninth, while Tuning helps create a clearer framework for understanding ó and comparing ó different scholarly disciplines, the program does not seek to standardize academic instruction and research. The work is designed to preserve two of the most important components of American higher education: *diversity and autonomy*. As Clifford Adelman, a key analyst of the Bologna Process and the Tuning project has noted, participants in the work õwind up singing in the same keyö though not the same tune.ö^{iv}

Tenth, Tuning is not a finished product but an *on-going process*. European colleagues have engaged in the work in over 40 different countries. Tuning projects are also underway in Latin America, Australia, and Africa. Academics in Indiana, Minnesota, and Utah engaged in the first round of Tuning USA. Now, colleagues in Kentucky, Texas, the American Historical Association, and the Midwest Higher Education Compact

have joined the project. One of the most important and exciting features of Tuning is what may be termed the "lifelong evaluation learning" that teams of scholars have engaged in across national boundaries as we compare notes on the progress of our work, the obstacles we have encountered, and the promise that Tuning holds out for higher education. Some of the most important work in the coming year will focus on the road we have traveled so far and the proposals that colleagues create for measuring the effects of Tuned disciplines.

Details of the U.S. program over the past two years ⁱ and overviews of the European project over the past decade -- may be found on the TuningUSA website (www.tuningusa.org/About/History.aspx). In the mass of information these reports contain, participants (and our foundation supporters) have recognized one overarching trend: Tuning contributes to a profound shift in the informing culture of higher education. Our attention focuses more on learning, on a student-centered academic environment, on the "outcomes" of higher education (more than academic "inputs"), and on continuous and reform-minded evaluations of our work (rather than sporadic and ineffective self-studies). Tuning reflects on what we do ⁱⁱ and *projects* new paths for higher education to follow.

ⁱ Lumina Foundation, "The Big Goal," http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025.html

ⁱⁱ The key website for Tuning USA is: <http://www.tuningusa.org/> Several other websites provide succinct overviews of the Tuning project:

-From the Lumina Foundation:

<http://www.luminafoundation.org/?s=tuning+usa&x=0&y=0>.

-From the American Council on Education:

http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/OnlineResources/Accountability/Tuning_USA.htm

-From Global Higher Ed: <http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2009/04/28/tuning-usa-reforming-higher-education-in-the-us-europe-style/>

-From the Institute for Higher Education Policy: http://www.ihep.org/press-room/news_release-detail.cfm?id=164

ⁱⁱⁱ In my own discipline, the American Historical Association has long provided tools that encourage its members to reflect on the larger meaning and significance of their field. The AHA has published guides on "Assessment in History," reports on "The History Major and Undergraduate Liberal Education," and suggestions on "Retrieving the Master's Degree from the Dustbin of History." Its organizational leaders, such as past president, Gabreille M. Spiegel, have given members frank, "heads-up" warnings about the ways a discipline may be soon be "measured." See: Gabreille M. Spiegel, "A Triple Threat: Accountability, Assessment, Accreditation," *Perspectives on History* 46:3 (March 2008), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0803/0803pre1.cfm>. The AHA's many publications focused on "Teaching Concerns" may be found online at: <https://www.historians.org/members/services/cgi-bin/msascart.dll/productlist>.

^{iv} Clifford Adelman, "Accountability -Light: Our Version Is Going the Way of the Dollar vs. the Euro," *Liberal Education*, 94:4 (Fall 2008), 8-9.