

**COUNCIL FOR  
HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION**

**HIGHER EDUCATION,  
ACCREDITATION  
AND REGULATION**

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**CHEA**



# Higher Education, Accreditation and Regulation

Milton Greenberg

Can we agree on some basic truths about higher education, accreditation and government regulation? Yes we can, provided that we dispense with the mythology of the separation of state and higher education, translated by the education community as “Give us money and leave us alone.” Public colleges and universities, which dominate higher education in enrollments and services, are clearly agents of government, established to provide a critical service and supported with taxes paid by the public. Private higher education is now so significantly dependent upon public funds provided through taxes for student aid, research grants and various other programs, so as to make them almost indistinguishable for purposes of public regulation.

The five-year-long embrace of Congress, the Department of Education, the higher education community and its accreditors in the renewal of the Higher Education Act in 2008 demonstrated the inevitability of continuing government regulation, the potential for higher education to mitigate regulatory impact by responding to calls for accountability and the likelihood that further accommodation to political realities must come from the academy. The conflicts generated by the renewal also suggest the desirability of reconsidering the very structure of accreditation to facilitate public understanding of higher education, preferably through *sector accreditation*.

Now to the basic truths: First, both accreditation and government regulation are here to stay, inextricably bound by higher education’s dependence upon state and federal taxpayer funds. Second, while current debate over a proper relationship is focused on the federal government, public and private higher education are already funded and regulated in each of the 50 states by state legislatures. Politically appointed or elected governing boards and statewide higher education agencies monitor and control colleges and universities, including accreditation. Third, the relationships are increasingly complicated by huge and costly enrollments and by the evolving and undefined nature of higher education here and abroad. Fourth, dependence upon tax dollars makes higher education part of the political process, protestations that education is not political to the contrary notwithstanding. Once so engaged, there is no escape from politics, which in essence is the partisan control and distribution of resources. Fifth, the natural history of government regulatory programs is to grow and rarely decline. Occasional deregulation of an enterprise almost always results in reregulation.

From an historical standpoint, the dramatic interface between the federal government and higher education accreditation is brief, dating back to the years following WWII and intensified with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Periodic updates of that legislation have led to intense political struggles among political parties and various higher education associations. For the most part, higher education and accreditation have lost to increasing regulation. Still, the academy resists any suggestion that it should be regulated like any business or public utility or like most government-sponsored enterprises. It seeks to mitigate any impact that might result from such designation by claims that what it does is so special and misunderstood that it best be left on its own and trusted to do right. These claims are summed up in the core beliefs expressed by higher education that its functions require institutional autonomy, self-regulation and academic freedom.

Accreditation started out as an almost innocent bystander to regulation, developing sporadically in geographic regions and nationally in various professions and programs, beginning in the 1880s. It gained significant

prominence in the 1950s and 1960s as postsecondary education multiplied and the government designated accreditors as gatekeepers to government largess. So the idea of accreditation as a voluntary engagement with no institution required to seek or acquire accreditation changed dramatically as an educational institution's very existence was dependent upon passing through the gateway of accreditation. This turned accreditation from its original purposes to a semi-regulatory partner of the government.

Early accrediting groups all appear to have their roots in geographically regional voluntary attempts to ascertain and define "What is a college?" This was done in the spirit of academic concern, some measure of elitism, self-protection and protection of the public interest. The answer to "What is a college?" changed over the years from the essentially elitist determinations tied to traditional liberal arts and the learned professions to a broad-based undefined "postsecondary education," including community colleges and specialized schools, eventually resulting in accreditation of almost any post-secondary institution according to its self-defined "mission." This is a far cry from accreditation's beginnings and a source of confusion to those trying to make sense of what it means to "go to college" or hold a "college degree."

In professional areas, the questions are somewhat clearer: What is a law school, a medical school, an engineering school, a business school or a seminary? In more specific programmatic areas, what is a nurse, a psychologist, a public administration major or even a trained person in one of the recognized trades such as beautician or x-ray technician? Such questions are logical if accreditation is to have any meaning with standards enunciated to ascertain whether the school or program offers requisite quality ingredients and evaluative tools suitable to its self-defined mission.

Who accredits the accreditors? In the past, when "postsecondary" education was relatively modest in size and numbers and survival was not dependent upon federal government largess, the answer was essentially left to consensus among colleges and universities. The academy has carried out its own review of increasing numbers of accreditors in part through establishment of a national organization with this responsibility. At present, this task falls to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

But now the answer to who accredits the accreditors is also found in the reality of regulation of the academy, which includes federal government accreditation of accreditors through the Department of Education. Accountability is sought through reliance upon accreditation to do the evaluation of individual institutions and programs in an almost limitless sea of "mission." Accountability is sought largely through evaluation of literally hundreds of transactions (costs, assessment of learning, graduation rates, jobs for graduates) which legislation and regulations call for to qualify as an accrediting body worthy of opening gates to government funds.

So where does this leave us in terms of the basic political truths?

The federal government is not going to withdraw from regulation of higher education and even more rigorous regulation and reporting requirements have been imposed by the 2008 version of the Higher Education Act and more may be anticipated. Accreditors could, with the cooperation of the colleges and universities, reject the gatekeeping role, leaving it to the government to find alternatives or establish a bureaucracy for vetting the legitimacy and quality of individual schools. This is so unlikely as to be hardly worth mentioning but it puts the issue in bold relief.

Higher education and accreditation cannot and should not rely upon any change in the regulation equation to come from government. Any change must come from higher education and accreditation by finding ways to satisfy the demands for accountability while maintaining, to the largest degree possible, the ingredients that it deems essential, namely, institutional autonomy, self-regulation and academic freedom. This has already occurred with "voluntary" action on the part of individual colleges and universities, consortia and professional associations to develop assessment of learning programs or adoption of common assessment tools such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the National Survey of Student Engagement. More transparency in provision of

information to the public by individual colleges and universities is also underway as a result of regulatory requirements and “voluntary” activity. Reliance upon voluntary behavior is not likely to satisfy regulatory demands though it is a useful euphemism, as in “accreditation is voluntary” (if you do not want government funds).

The best route for accrediting bodies is to go back to the basic question – “What is a college?”

If institutions and programs are to be evaluated on self-defined mission, then each should be free to choose the accrediting body best suited to evaluate their performance. Such a choice is not likely to be based on geography. Even in the case of specialized missions, such as schools of business and colleges of education, more than one accrediting body has been established because of dissatisfaction on the part of some institutions with the standards of the existing accrediting body. By and large, mission and accountability work best in specialized accreditation because of the greater ease of identifying the purposes and measuring the intended results in the achievement of professional licenses or technical proficiency.

Much of the confusion in accreditation by mission revolves around the six major regional accrediting associations – Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern and Western – which accredit most of the traditional colleges and universities, varying from community colleges and small liberal arts institutions to vast public and private institutions with different emphases in enrollment patterns, programs and research activity. Collectively the “regionals” accredit about 3,000 institutions with varying missions enrolling about 17 million students. Such an arrangement is patently too complex to manage the tools of mission-oriented accountability.

The organization of higher education accreditation by regions has historical explanations but is hardly relevant in contemporary America where one would be hard pressed to see any significant regional differences in the types or quality of education available throughout the country. Differences among institutions are rooted in mission, not location and, in fact, students readily attend more than one institution without regard to location. A more realistic framework for accreditation would seem to be one based on the types and levels of education provided by similar postsecondary institutions, which may be labeled as *sector accreditation*.

With sector accreditation, requirements and standards would be established by those within a given sector of education defined mainly by mission that would more clearly establish accountability and comparative data. Thus, community colleges would have their own accreditors and so would doctoral-degree-granting research universities.

There are various, albeit politically difficult, pathways to achieving sector accreditation, but two are readily available for illustration on how such a system would work: through the format of (1) the existing major college and university associations or (2) the extensive classification of colleges and universities by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The higher education associations represent specific types of institutions and are more academically and politically attuned to their special needs than are the regional accreditation agencies. They include the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (representing regional state universities), the Association of American Universities (representing heavily research-oriented universities), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Some institutions fit into more than one organization but should such an accreditation system be devised, each institution would join the one that best reflects its mission for accreditation purposes. Large associations could be divided to accommodate various accreditation interests.

The Carnegie Classification lends itself quite handily to selection for accreditation purposes because it is purposefully designed to take into account the true differences among institutions and to facilitate comparisons. So, for example, it lists three different sets of doctorate-granting universities based on the extent of research

activity, three groups of masters degree level colleges and universities based largely on size, three sets of baccalaureate colleges based on program emphasis (liberal arts, diverse), and several listings of associate degree institutions, mainly community colleges, based on type and geographic setting (rural, urban). The classification also includes special focused institutions (law, medicine) and other narrowly identified institutions by programs, size and settings, but for the purposes of addressing the regional accreditation issue, the major categories shown here show how readily an accreditation system of like schools could be devised.

Sector accreditation under a system suggested by these examples will permit all colleges and universities to approach the characteristics of focused and specialized schools where objectives are clearer and can be measured for comparability and accountability. The general public and students will be better served by clarifying suitable pathways to education and careers. It would clarify accountability and responsibility by facilitating the formulation and publication of standards closely tailored to particular types of institutions. And, most important, would be likely to pacify government regulators impatient with higher education's perceived tendency to resist change and accountability measures.

A major reorganization such as the one recommended here raises political, legal, financial and organizational issues, none insurmountable or even unusual when undertaking any major institutional change. Change always requires acceptance of the inevitable (regulation), adjustments that preserve essential beliefs (self-regulated accountability), and frequently, reorganization (sector for regional accreditation). The options offered here take advantage of familiar organizations and concepts commonly understood in the academic world.

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## **A Fresh Look at Accreditation**

*By Milton Greenberg*

The turmoil in higher education over accreditation presents us with the chance to consider new options for how we carry it out and for what the process should guarantee. The historic independence of higher education from intrusive governmental control may be at stake.

Public concern about student-loan defaults and about the quality of education being provided by colleges and universities led Congress, in the Higher Education Amendments of 1992, to empower State Postsecondary Review Entities to investigate colleges with default problems. It also authorized the Department of Education to impose standards for academic progress and accreditation that are likely to increase federal involvement in the academy. These include rules concerning the length of educational programs, tuition, student achievement, and graduation rates.

What is mainly under fire is the present system of regional accreditation for entire colleges and universities, not the accreditation framework for specialized educational programs.

Although the proliferation of specialized accrediting bodies for particular degree programs is troublesome and costly to higher education, on balance the specialized accrediting groups do appear to raise and maintain standards of quality and give meaning to a professional license or degree.

Congressional critics were not convinced that regional accrediting bodies were providing similar guarantees of quality for the many kinds of institutions that they accredit -- community colleges, liberal-arts colleges, church-related institutions, and universities granting doctorates. The refusal of the regional accreditation agencies to assume any responsibility for student-loan defaults confused members of Congress as they were writing the new higher-education legislation, leading them to examine more carefully just what accreditation means.

The six major regional accrediting associations -- known commonly as the Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, and Western associations -- ascertain whether an institution meets certain basic criteria, meets the goals that it has set for itself, and has the personnel and financial resources to accomplish its objectives now and in the foreseeable future.

Colleges and accrediting agencies are resisting government threats to their independence. But their heavy reliance upon state and federal aid, as well as citizens' expectation of broad access to higher education, guarantees that public demands will continue for standards to insure that colleges handle government funds carefully and provide quality education.

The key players in higher-education accreditation right now are the heads of the major associations to which colleges belong and the leaders of the regional accrediting agencies. The two groups have formed the National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation, to examine how accreditation is conducted and to see whether they can find a better way to do it. No responsible party has suggested that institutions should not be accredited.

Three points of view appear to be emerging from the board's deliberations: What we are doing is O.K. (that is, some form of quality control is necessary); how we are doing it needs some attention (more emphasis on outcomes, perhaps, or more-uniform standards for regional accreditors); we cannot find a better way (don't disturb our turf). I believe, however, that we need to take a fresh and much broader look at accreditation. What practical alternative is there to the existing system of regional accreditation?

One of the first things we should focus on is, in fact, geography. The regional associations' geographic boundaries are largely historical and accidental. The North Central Association covers 19 states, including Arizona and Arkansas, while the Western Association includes just two states (California and Hawaii) and three territories (Guam, Samoa, and the Northern Marianas). At one time a Southern college may have differed significantly from one in New England, but an observer today would be hard pressed to see any regional differences in the types or quality of education available throughout the country.

A more realistic framework for accreditation would seem to be one based on the types and levels of education provided by postsecondary institutions. Fortunately, we have a framework at hand that already aligns colleges that way -- the general higher-education associations to which most colleges and universities belong. These groups, whose headquarters are in Washington, D.C., are governed by boards composed of the presidents of member institutions. They represent higher education in dealings with Congress and the Executive Branch, while also providing various services to their member institutions.

These organizations represent specific types of institutions and may be more attuned to their special needs than are the regional accreditation agencies today. They are the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (representing regional state universities), the Association of American Universities (representing heavily research-oriented universities), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

The function of accrediting institutions should be taken over by these associations. For example, community colleges now are accredited by the same regional organizations that accredit major state universities and private liberal-arts colleges (except in the Western Association, which has a separate commission for community colleges). Under my plan, they would be accredited by the community-college association under standards and criteria developed by their national peers.

The Association of American Universities would accredit institutions that meet the standards for large research-oriented universities. The state-college group would set standards for regional state institutions, which would differ from those established by the land-grant association for flagship state universities and land-grant colleges. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities would bear major responsibility for accrediting private colleges and universities.

It is true, as I'm sure critics will quickly note, that the criteria for membership in these associations are not as clearly defined as my brief description suggests. The memberships of the A.A.C.C. and A.A.U. are more clearly distinguishable than are those of some of the other groups. Many institutions belong to more than one organization -- for example, the land-grant association and the A.A.U. And N.A.I.C.U. represents both small liberal-arts colleges and large doctorate-granting universities.

For accreditation purposes, however, an institution would be free to seek accreditation from whichever group sets the standards and policies most relevant to its particular circumstances, just as a college or university does now when it seeks accreditation for specialized professional programs. Thus a large private research university could remain a part of N.A.I.C.U. but choose to be accredited by A.A.U. Groups with overlapping memberships could decide to focus on accreditation of particular groups of institutions, for example according to curricular emphasis or size.

Each of the major associations would establish an accreditation commission, similar to those now existing within the regional associations, to develop standards and procedures. The existing regional accreditation commissions would cease to exist, but their professional staffs would be important resources for the new accrediting bodies. Under this plan, accreditation would follow institutions' structures rather than their geographic locations and would clearly tell consumers, taxpayers, and employers that similar institutions were being evaluated according to similar, national standards.

Presently, all accredited institutions in a given region carry the same imprimatur, although in practice different standards are applied to different types of institutions. The system I'm proposing would -- as the associations made their standards and accreditation criteria public -- clearly distinguish what accreditation means for a community college stressing vocational programs from what it means for a doctorate-granting research university or for a state college emphasizing undergraduate education.

The American Council on Education would be the logical group to provide overall coordination of institutional accreditation, a function now being handled by the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation. A.C.E. is the recognized umbrella organization for higher education and an important locus of policy making. Most major colleges and universities and most educational associations, including those I have mentioned, are members of A.C.E.

A specially appointed lay board of distinguished citizens would guide the council in carrying out the responsibilities of approving the standards of each association's accreditation commission, monitoring their accreditation activities, and acting as liaison with appropriate state and federal agencies. This role for A.C.E. and the lay board would put the responsibility for accreditation where it belongs -- in the major organization that speaks for higher education, guided by representatives of the public.

The activities of the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association are germane, since those organizations play a role in accreditation of medical and legal education. Both the A.M.A. and A.B.A. also carry out major political, educational, and service functions for their members. These activities do not appear to compromise the integrity of their accreditation activities.

A major reorganization such as the one I'm recommending of course raises political, legal, financial, and organizational issues, none insurmountable or even unusual. Changes may be required in state or federal rules and association bylaws. Any potential conflicts of interest (stemming from an organization's members' deciding each other's status) are inherent in all voluntary, self-regulating entities. After all, the present accrediting bodies operate through commissions composed of the top administrators of institutions in the regions.

Adding accreditation to an association's activities may raise other questions, such as whether the group's existing governing board should be given ultimate responsibility for accreditation decisions or whether a separate board for accreditation should be established. Such details are troublesome, but they are a part of any major institutional change.

The plan for accreditation outlined here would provide a logical construct for accrediting agencies. It would clarify responsibility and lead to the formulation and publication of standards closely tailored to particular types of institutions. The public would be better served by clearer identification of the various sectors of higher education as they actually exist. And the plan would place the responsibility for strengthening the credibility of voluntary accreditation in the hands of the associations most experienced in governmental relations and best able to define their members' interests.

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