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# Positioning Accreditation for the Future: Change or Status Quo?

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# Will address the following...

- What is the Status Quo?
  - The Challenge of Reauthorization
  - Suggestions for Change/Improvement
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# The Status of Higher Education Accreditation in the U.S.

- Best in the World! ... at least in terms of affording flexibility to institutions
    - voluntary, peer-review system
    - no federal ministry of education
  - BUT, because there is no federal ministry, accreditation is the sole instrument for monitoring and assuring quality and integrity for purposes of federal participation in higher education – student financial assistance, research support, etc.
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And because it is *the* instrument for measuring quality and integrity...

- Accreditation is therefore a lightning rod when there is any displeasure or concern in the U.S. Congress with such issues as transfer of credits, access, or fiscal integrity.
  - And, accreditation is seen by those outside the system...whether in the Congress or anywhere else in our society...as the instrument through which change in higher education can be effected.
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# How does it work?

- Our process of accreditation is somewhat mysterious to most people, made more so by the fact that...
    - ❑ There are somewhat different attitudes and procedures among the six regions;
    - ❑ There are different purposes and procedures among the eleven “national” accreditors; and
    - ❑ There are widely varying attitudes and procedures among the 60+ specialized and professional accreditors.
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# Considering all this...

- In discussing any reform or even modest modifications, we must remember that...
    - ❑ *We are* in the public eye (particularly every five+ years when reauthorization comes around).
    - ❑ Public scrutiny of accrediting operations is often based on myth, not fact.
    - ❑ The lack of clear understanding about the enterprise among the public and public officials poses a special challenge in itself.
    - ❑ Internal tensions do not help!
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# Tensions

- Let's recognize that tensions are natural and in many cases unavoidable.
    - Any engagement in the assessment of quality will elicit differing responses from the various players in the process.
    - When performance is measured, particularly when judgments are as subjective as in the educational process, there will be differing perceptions, disappointments and disagreements.
    - An accrediting process that is devoid of tension is most likely ineffective!
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## Some internal tensions:

- Between professional/specialized accreditors and institutions
    - Or perhaps more specifically, between accreditors and the presidents and provosts of institutions
  - Between regional and specialized accreditors
  - Among regional accreditors themselves
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**And more importantly, tensions among various constituencies about...**

- **Quality assurance vs. quality improvement**
  - **Attention to professional schools/disciplines vs. institutions as a whole**
  - **Consideration regarding input vs. outcomes measures**
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# Challenges Presented by 2003-04 Reauthorization

- Question: *Is accreditation accountable?*
- Distrust/lack of confidence in accreditation on the part of the Congress
- Concern among higher education community about federal control

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# The Options

1. Do nothing because “This too shall pass”
  2. Reaffirm the effectiveness and value of accreditation as it currently operates
  3. End the partnership between accreditation and the federal government
  4. Bridge the divide between accreditation and the federal government
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# Bridging the Divide

## ■ CHEA Suggestions

1. Additional attention to evidence of institution and program performance
  2. Additional attention to evidence of student learning outcomes
  3. More and better accreditation information to the public
  4. Government recognition that institutions must decide expectations and evidence of performance and outcomes
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# In considering change...

- DO work to reduce tensions that result from lack of communication or misunderstanding
  - DO recognize and preserve the strengths of the present system
  - DO focus on change that will make a difference, not just in perception but in reality
  - DON'T waste energy trying to...
    - change factors outside our control
    - reduce tensions that are natural and unavoidable
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# Strengths to remember:

- Accreditation is ***voluntary***, at least theoretically, and it is carried out by ***volunteers***.
  - Standards are established in a ***democratic process*** involving educators, and for the professions, by professional practitioners as well.
  - It is a ***peer review*** process, peers being either or both educators and professional practitioners.
  - It is ***cost-effective***, compared with any alternative.
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## Areas of concern, where improvement is possible and desirable:

- Consistency
  - Rigor
  - Comprehensiveness
  - Communication of Results
  - Balance between input and outcomes measures
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# Consistency

- Among site visit teams
    - Training
    - Experienced leadership
  - Among decision-making commissions
    - Executive leadership
    - Established, well-defined procedures
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# Rigor

- Thorough reviews that observe the teaching-learning process
  - Consideration of all factors that influence learning
  - Application of standards appropriate for the stated mission of the institution or program
  - Increase expectations and attend to results in general education
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# Comprehensiveness

- Thorough review of all programs in an institution, according to the stated mission
  - Consideration of an institution's total mission
  - Attention to liberal studies (general education) as well as professional studies
  - Suggestion that regional accreditors become the “specialized” accreditor for general education
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# Collegiate Learning Assessment Project (CLA)

- RAND Corporation Council for Aid to Education project
  - Ref Roger Benjamin & Marc Chun article in AAC&U's Summer 2003 *peerReview*
  - Assessment of general education skills – measures students' demonstrated ability to use information
  - Two sets of performance measures
  - Combination of measures can be used for institutional assessment
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# Communication of Results

- Make the process as transparent as practicable through communication of results from...
    - Accreditor to institution or program
    - Institution to faculty and staff
    - Accreditor and/or institution to the consuming public
  - In all cases, distinguish clearly between quality assurance factors and quality improvement recommendations
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# Balance between Input and Outcomes Measures

- Much improvement in recent years, both on the part of institutions and accreditors, in measuring and reporting student learning outcomes.
  - BUT, serious concern about **over**-reliance on learning outcomes (because of the limitations in measuring some of the most important outcomes).
  - Continuing concern also about over-reliance on input measures.
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# Inputs versus Outcomes

- Input measures traditionally thought of as facilities, faculty resources, library and computer resources, etc.
  - Outcomes usually thought of as specific skills and knowledge acquired, measured by such as licensing exams or job performance.
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# Inputs versus Outcomes

- We know that because of the vast difference among disciplines...
    - The more specific the training, the easier to observe and measure outcomes.
    - The more abstract the education, the more challenging to measure and report outcomes.
  - Outcomes measurement must necessarily be on a discipline-by-discipline basis.
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## Inputs vs. Outcomes

- Balance? Because there is so much variance among disciplines, and because we know that neither inputs alone nor outcomes alone will suffice, there *must* be something in between that will help.
  - Achieve in part by observations of experiences and student engagement that fall somewhere between traditional input measures and learning outcomes.
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# Student learning experiences, student engagement

- Even if results cannot be measured precisely...
    - We know by our own experience that certain activities lead to valuable learning; and
    - Learning experiences and student engagement can be observed.
  - A major challenge for any institution of higher education is to entice students to be scholars!
    - *Engagement* is critical with most of today's students.
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# What *kind* of learning experiences or student engagement?

- National Survey of Student Engagement
    - Level of Academic Challenge
    - Active and Collaborative Learning
    - Student Interactions with Faculty Members
    - Enriching Educational Experiences
    - Supportive Campus Environment
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# Level of Academic Challenge

- Preparing for class – amount and type of effort
  - Number of assigned readings
  - Number of written papers
  - Coursework emphasizes...
    - Analyzing basic elements of an idea, experience or theory
    - Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences
    - Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods
    - Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
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# Active and Collaborative Learning

- Making class presentations
  - Working with other students on projects
  - Tutoring or teaching other students
  - Participating in community-based projects as part of a regular course
  - Discussing ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)
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# Student Interactions with Faculty Members

- Talking about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
  - Discussing ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
  - Working with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.)
  - Working with a faculty member on a research project
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# Enriching Educational Experiences

- Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions, or values; or with students of a different race or ethnicity
  - Institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
  - Participation in internships or field experiences
  - Culminating senior experience (comprehensive exam, capstone course, thesis, etc.)
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# Campus Environment

- helps students succeed academically
  - helps students cope with non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
  - helps students thrive socially
  - promotes supportive relations between students and their peers, faculty members, and administrative personnel and offices
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# Summary and Suggestions

- Preserve and advocate the strengths of the present system of higher education accreditation
  - Strengthen the process:
    - Intensify the review of general education programs by expanding this function of regional accreditation
    - Continue to strive for better approaches to the assessment of learning outcomes, including in general education
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## Summary and Suggestions (continued)

- Add observation of student engagement and learning experiences to the mix of inputs and outcomes
  - Improve communication
    - About accrediting results
    - About the accrediting process in general
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**But never forget...**

**...that accreditation's influence  
is pervasive!**

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

MISCHA RICHTER AND HARALD BAKKEN

**This team is here from *what* accrediting agency?**