



## Accreditation 2.0

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January 18, 2010

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After years of dialogue, debate and deliberation, we are at the beginning of the next generation of accreditation. An “Accreditation 2.0” is emerging, one that reflects attention to calls for change while sustaining and even enhancing some of the central features of current accreditation operation.

The emerging consensus stems from three major national conversations, all focused on accreditation and accountability, all with roots in much older discussions and intensified in the face of the heightened national emphasis on access and attainment of quality higher education. Taken together, these conversations, despite their differences, provide the foundation for the future and a next iteration: Accreditation 2.0.

### Three Conversations

The first major conversation is led by the academic and accreditation communities themselves. It focuses on how accreditation is addressing accountability, with particular emphasis on the relationship (some would say tension, or even conflict) between accountability and institutional improvement. The discussion frequently includes consideration of common expectations of general education across all institutions as well as the need to more fully address transparency. This conversation takes place at meetings of higher education associations and accrediting organizations and has been underway since the 1980s, when the assessment movement began.

The second conversation is led by critics of accreditation who question its effectiveness in addressing accountability, with some who even want to jettison the public policy role of accreditation as a gatekeeper or provider of access to federal funds. These critics often argue that conflicts of interest are inherent in accreditation as a result of peer review and the current funding and governance of the enterprise. The most recent version of this conversation was triggered by the 2005-6 Spellings Commission and continues today in various associations and think tanks.

The third conversation is led by federal officials who also focus on the gatekeeping role of accreditation. In contrast to the call in the second conversation to eliminate this function, attention here is on expanding use of the gatekeeping role of accreditation – to enforce expanding accountability expectations at the federal level.

## Convergence

As different as the three conversations are, they reflect some shared assumptions or beliefs about quality in higher education and the role of accreditation. All acknowledge that accreditation provides value in assuring and improving quality, though views differ about how much value and in what way. All are based on a belief that accreditation needs to change, though in what way and at what pace is seen differently. All accept that accountability must be addressed in a more comprehensive and robust way – though they disagree about how to go about this.

The elements common to these conversations provide a foundation, an opportunity, for thinking about a next generation of accreditation or an “Accreditation 2.0.” They provide a basis to fashion the future of accreditation by strengthening accountability and enhancing service to the public while maintaining the benefits of quality improvement and peer review.

## Some Thoughts About an Accreditation 2.0

The emerging Accreditation 2.0 is likely to be characterized by six key elements. Some are familiar features of accreditation; some are modifications of existing practice, some are new:

- Community-driven, shared general education outcomes.
- Common practices to address transparency.
- Robust peer review.
- Enhanced efficiency of quality improvement efforts.
- Diversification of the ownership of accreditation.
- Alternative financing models for accreditation.

**Community-driven, shared general education outcomes** are emerging from the work of institutions and faculty, whether through informal consortiums, higher education associations or other means of joining forces. The Essential Learning Outcomes of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the Voluntary System of Accountability of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities all provide for agreement across institutions about expected outcomes. This work is vital as we continue to address the crucial question of “What is a college education?” Accreditors, working in partnership with institutions, assure that these community-driven outcomes are in place and that evidence of student achievement is publicly available as well as used for improvement.

**Common practices to address transparency** in Accreditation 2.0 require that accredited institutions and programs routinely provide readily understandable information to the public about performance. This includes, for example, completion of educational goals, including graduation, success with transfer, and entry to graduate school. Second, accrediting organizations would provide information to the public about the reasons for the accredited status they award in the same readily understandable style, perhaps using an audit-like instrument such as a management letter. A number of institutions and accreditors already offer this transparency. Accreditation 2.0 would mean that it becomes standard practice.

**Robust peer review** -- colleagues reviewing colleagues -- is a major strength of current accreditation, not a weakness as some critics maintain. It is the difference between genuine quality review and bureaucratic scrutiny for compliance. Peer review serves as our most reliable source of independent and informed judgment about the intellectual development experience

we call higher education. In the current environment, peer review can be further enhanced through, for example, encouraging greater diversity of teams, including more faculty and expanding public participation. As such, peer review has a prominent place in Accreditation 2.0, just as it plays a major role in government and other nongovernmental organizations in research, medicine and the sciences, among other fields.

**Enhanced efficiency of quality improvement efforts** builds on the enormous value of the “improvement” function in current accreditation. Improvement is about what an institution learns from its own internal review and the peer review team that prompts it to make changes to build on strengths or address perceived weaknesses. This is the dimension of accreditation to which institutions and programs most often point when speaking to the value of the enterprise.

However, for the limited number of institutions that are experiencing severe difficulties in meeting accreditation standards but remain “accredited” for a considerable number of years, there can be a downside for students and the public. Students enroll, but may have trouble graduating or meeting other educational goals because of weaknesses of the institution that were identified in the accreditation review, even as the institution is trying to improve and remedy these difficulties. Accreditation 2.0 can include means to assure more immediate institutional action to address the weaknesses and prevent their being sustained over long periods of time.

**Diversification of the ownership of accreditation** can provide for additional approaches to the process and even additional constructive competition, as well as provide a response to allegations of conflict of interest. At present, most accrediting organizations are either owned and operated by the institutions or programs they accredit or function as extensions of professional bodies. However, there is nothing to stop other parties interested in quality review of higher education from establishing accrediting organizations and obtaining the legal authority to operate. Accreditation 2.0 can encourage exploration of this diversification that can be a source of fresh thinking about sustaining and enhancing quality in higher education. Private foundations or nonprofit citizen groups, for example, can make excellent owners of accrediting organizations.

**Alternative financing models for accreditation** call for separating the reviews of individual institutions and programs from the financing of an accrediting organization. In Accreditation 1.0, most accreditors are funded through the fees they charge individual institutions and programs for their periodic accreditation review and for the annual operating costs of the accrediting organization – with the latter a condition of keeping accredited status. This mode of financing is viewed by some as an inappropriate enticement to expand the organization’s numbers of accredited institutions and programs and by others as a conflict of interest or disincentive to impose harsh penalties on institutions that might diminish membership numbers. It can create problems for some accreditors, especially smaller operations.

In Accreditation 2.0, an “accreditation bank” might be established by a third party, neither the accrediting organization nor the party seeking accreditation. Institutions and programs interested in investing in the accreditation enterprise would pay into the bank annually, independent of individual reviews. Alternative sources of financing include third parties such as private foundations and endowments.

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Accreditation 2.0 builds on the emerging consensus across the major national conversations about accreditation and accountability. It is one means to strengthen accreditation, but not at the price of some of Accreditation 1.0's most valuable features. It keeps key academic decisions in the hands of institutions and faculty. It strengthens accountability, but through community-based decisions about common outcomes and transparency. It maintains the benefits of peer review, yet opens the door to alternative thinking about the organization, management and governance of accreditation.

## **Bio**

*Judith Eaton is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, which is a national advocate for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation. CHEA has 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities as members and recognizes 59 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.*

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