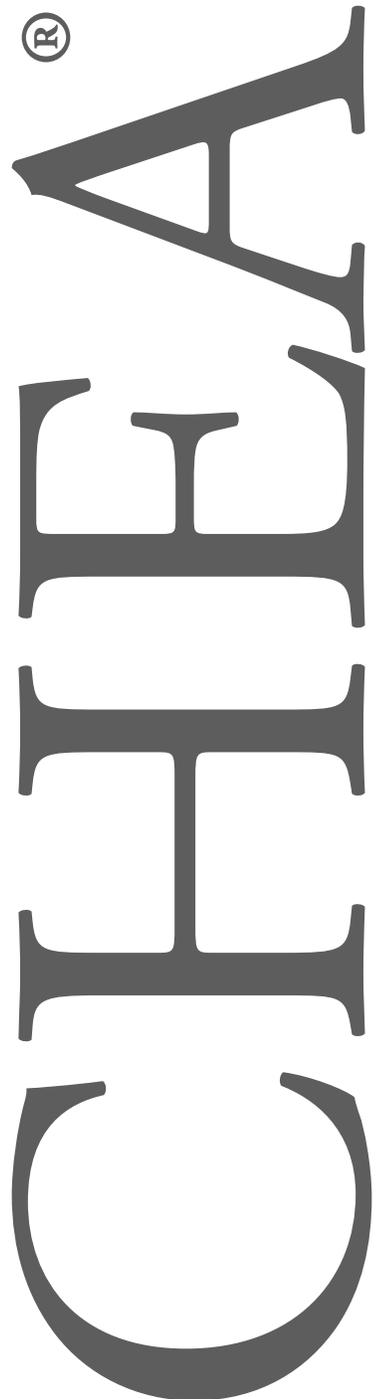


Accreditation and the Provision of Additional Information to the Public about Institution and Program Performance

Prepared by Peter T. Ewell
National Center for Higher Education
Management Systems (NCHEMS)

CHEA Occasional Paper
May 2004



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Council for Higher Education Accreditation

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Table of Contents

- Public Information About Quality: Some Basic Distinctions2
- What Kinds of Information About Quality are Accreditors
 - Uniquely Positioned to Provide to the Public?4
- Some Questions that Accreditors Might Ask Themselves6
- Implications for Accrediting Organizations of Expanding
 - Information to the Public7
- References11

Accreditation and the Provision of Additional Information to the Public about Institution and Program Performance

The purpose of this paper is to explore the many different and equally legitimate roles that accrediting organizations might play in providing a wider array of information about institutional and program performance to the public, and to spell out the basic questions that accrediting organizations can pose to themselves as they consider adopting such a role:

- *The paper's first section examines some quite different approaches to providing information about quality to the public that could be adopted by an external review organization.*
- *The second section builds on these approaches to propose some specific examples of what kinds of reporting accrediting organizations might most fruitfully pursue.*
- *The paper's third section examines the overall capacity of accrediting organizations to play a broader public information role and provides a set of basic policy choices and self-assessment questions that accreditors can use to help shape their particular approach.*

Accrediting organizations have been providing significant amounts of information to higher education's "publics" for many years. This is not accreditation's most prominent function, to be sure. Other purposes, including assuring the quality education associated with the credentials awarded within the academic community and program improvement, are far more visible. Accreditation focuses on institutional and programmatic issues particular to the academy. The topics about which information is collected and the ways in which this information is typically presented are not consciously configured with the primary goal of informing a broad public audience (Jones 2002).

Accreditors acknowledge the "providing information" role in a variety of ways. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) states on its Website that "accredited status cannot guarantee the quality of individual graduates...but can give reasonable assurance of the context and quality of the education offered." The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA), meanwhile, notes in the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of its *Overview of Accreditation* that the principal purpose of the process is assuring institutional quality "in particular, to prospective students," and goes on to say that the "selection of a college to attend is a decision that must be made individually" and that "the information available from the Commission is limited to that describing the institution's status with the Commission."

Looking at specialized accrediting organizations, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET) Website, for instance, notes that "accreditation serves to notify... parents and prospective students that a program has met minimum standards," while the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Program (CAAHEP) Website states that "graduation from a CAAHEP-accredited program can improve your chances of success in your chosen field."

Public information is an important feature in the relationships of accrediting organizations and their members with each other. As "customers" of one another, colleges and universities rely, at least in part, on whether an institution is accredited as they judge the basic acceptability of transfer credits. Indeed, this is one of accreditation's oldest purposes. And federal recognition criteria require those accreditors designated as "gatekeepers" to play a modest but direct consumer protection role by ensuring the presence of accessible and effective student complaint and refund systems and recruitment processes that are truthful and fair.

These points remind us that providing information to the public is embedded in many of the things that accrediting organizations already do. While such claims about information to the public are assuredly modest, making accreditation's public information role more prominent—especially with respect to choosing an institution or program to enroll in—is worth considering for an organization dedicated principally to the tasks of quality assurance and quality improvement.

Indeed, some organizations of this kind in other countries have already moved in this direction. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom, for example, sees one of its major obligations as providing “credible...information to students and the public,” and states explicitly that “this information allows prospective students to make comparisons and informed choices about the programmes they wish to study.” The new institutional audit process currently being rolled out by the QAA concentrates on examining the credibility of the information that higher education institutions give their publics and it affords students themselves opportunities to provide good or bad testimony about the institutions that they attend (Quality Assurance Agency 2002).

Some accrediting organizations in the United States do this as well. For instance, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) makes information from the self study reports and the team reports public by request and meetings of its accreditation decision making body are also open to the public.

Moreover, in recent years in the United States, growing public interest in gauging the quality of higher education has resulted in the emergence of new sources of information such as *Peterson's*, *Barrons*, and *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*. Growing alongside the accreditation enterprise, this has become a significant industry, with the college ratings issues of *U.S. News and World Report* and *Money Magazine* eagerly awaited each year by prospective college students and their parents.

Exactly *how* an individual accreditor discharges the role of informing the public is worthy of additional systematic reflection. Some ideas are offered here to explore whether and how to do so more extensively. Attention is also paid to the many kinds of information accreditors are able to consider when making a judgment about accredited status and what kinds of specific conclusions they can draw about institutional or program quality as a result.

Public Information About Quality: Some Basic Distinctions

In the course of a review, an accrediting team collects or generates a vast amount of information. The accrediting commission that sent the team then has the task of interpreting this information in order to make a judgment about accredited status. And it must simultaneously decide just how much of the information that informed the team's judgment to make public. All accreditors, of course, are under an obligation to disclose the basic result of the process—the accredited status of an institution or program. And this, in itself, constitutes the most basic form of public information. Indeed, as aggrieved institutions and programs are quick to point out, loss of accredited status (or even its threat) can have a significant effect on their chances for survival.

Accreditors can then decide whether or not to go any further with regard to information to the public. Should accreditors decide to play a more active role in this arena, however, they will need to make some additional choices. A first choice is about basic audiences and purpose: Who will use information about institutional and program quality provided by accrediting organizations to additionally inform what kinds of actions? A second choice is essentially topical: What particular domains or subjects should be addressed?

Approaches to Providing Additional Information

To illustrate the interplay between basic audience and purpose, a number of quite different approaches to providing information to the public about quality can be drawn from everyday experience, each of which has a potential accreditation counterpart. Four common examples are:

- *Certifications of “Product Safety.”* The central focus of the information provided in this case is to warn the public that it may be at risk when using a particular product or service. A familiar example is Underwriters' Laboratory which, after examining a particular household product or appliance, pronounces it “safe” for public use. Similarly, lack of acknowledgment by a reputable accreditor may signal that a particular institution or program is sufficiently deficient with respect to resources or performance that students are in danger of wasting their time and money. Judgments here are binary (e.g., “pass/fail”) and involve a fairly low minimum threshold of performance. Although institutional accreditors are sometimes criticized for the fact that few institutions “fail” to be accredited, their ratios of negative to positive judgment are by this standard appropriate. Just as most toasters are safe to operate if the instructions provided are followed, most institutions and programs should be able to pass the test of not doing grievous harm to the students who attend them.

- *Awards for “Excellence.”* The principal objective of the information provided to the public is in this case exactly the opposite of consumer protection, to visibly identify and celebrate “unusual value” or “best practice.” Familiar examples here are Vintner’s Gold Medals or the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, which recognize particular products or organizations of special distinction. Judgments here are equally binary, but involve an extremely *high* threshold of performance. Indeed, these standards must be set at exemplary levels, if only to ensure that relatively few “winners” are picked or the designation will lose its value. Although accrediting organizations do occasionally identify “best practices” in the course of their reviews, this is rarely done systematically enough to provide widespread public information about the nation’s enormous array of academic institutions and programs. Nor do most accreditors see this as their main business. But examples of such third-party designations at the high end of performance in higher education certainly do exist in the guise of various forms of special recognition—most recently, for example, institutions named as high performers in the first public report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE 2000).
- *Performance Ratings and Rankings.* These approaches go beyond binary judgments to provide a range of information about the overall performance of a product or service. Familiar examples include bond ratings (for example, *Moody’s*) and product or service “report cards” like restaurant ratings that establish multiple levels along which to array performance (Gormley and Weimer 1999). Typically, such ratings are based on a number of quite different underlying indicators, which are statistically combined to create a common index. Products or services are then grouped into quality tiers—or are simply ranked in order—to create a display that is presumed to be informative to the public. The fact that accreditation generally celebrates institutional and program diversity renders it, for the most part, philosophically incompatible with one-dimensional “quality indices” of this kind. But parallels for product ratings in higher education are again not hard to find, although they generate significant criticism from academics. Prominent examples include the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings and *Money Magazine’s* similar rankings of “Best Values” for college attendance. Until it was revised three years ago, moreover, the Carnegie Classification of institutions was seen by many observers as similar because it distinguished institutions along a single presumed dimension of overall merit.
- *Detailed Reviews of Value and Performance on Multiple Dimensions.* While the above cases clearly provide the public with useful information, they are extremely limited in this regard. Simply knowing which products or services are unsafe and which are “best in class”—or even how they stack up on a single dimension of performance—does not provide the public with much to go on when assessing products or services that have quite different advantages and disadvantages.

To be really useful in informing public perceptions about quality, any information provided must possess two additional properties. First, it should have something to say about multiple dimensions of performance. At least as important, it should reflect different public perceptions of what “quality” means in the eyes of different viewers. Familiar examples here in the realm of product guides are *Consumer Reports* and *J.D. Powers*, both of which allow their readers to look at performance on several dimensions and to evaluate product performance against their own particular tastes and circumstances. What distinguishes *Peterson’s* and other college guides from the *U.S. News* rankings is that the latter aggregates many aspects of institutional performance into a single uni-dimensional ranking while the former breaks them out visibly for inspection. Accreditors, to date, have not reported information on different aspects of “quality” with respect to institutional or program performance in this fashion. But, given the richness and complexity of the information they collect through reviews, they certainly could do so if they chose.

All four of these potential public information roles are topic-neutral. Concepts of minimally-adequate performance, recognized excellence, comparative “quality,” and detailed attributes of strength and weakness apply equally to automobiles, restaurants, and institutions of higher education. The choice of which particular domains are selected for evaluation via such schemes depends largely on two things: a) the specific aspects of a product or service that the public thinks are important and, b) the kinds of information that can actually be collected in a valid and reliable fashion.

What Kinds of Information About Quality are Accreditors Uniquely Positioned to Provide to the Public?

If the role of accrediting organizations in informing the public about quality is to be expanded, accreditation's particular strengths with respect to information resources suggest that accrediting organizations concentrate on two broad topics about which they already collect a good deal of information:

- *Academic Quality of Institutions and Programs.* Accreditors are uniquely positioned to provide information about academic quality. But, as has been reported elsewhere (e.g., Jones 2002), they view this topic in a special way. Because judgments are made by academic peers, the particular aspects of "quality" that tend to be emphasized are those that are especially valued by members of the academic community. These include such things as the academic background and training of faculty, academic freedom, and resources to support scholarly activity.

These topics of value to the academic community may be of less immediate interest to the public at large. Indeed, interview studies of constituent perceptions demonstrate strikingly that "academic quality" looks quite different from the point of view of students and policymakers than it does for members of the academy (ECS 1995). For both students and policymakers, for example, the foremost ingredient of "quality" is favorable outcomes for students and, more particularly, the employment and post-graduate opportunities that the graduates of a given institution or program experience. Both institutional and specialized accrediting organizations have paid increasing attention to outcomes in recent years, especially with respect to that critical subset of outcomes represented by student learning (Ewell 2001, CHEA, 2003). Once such information is collected through accreditation, presenting it in a form that can better inform external stakeholders is certainly conceivable.

A second dimension of interest to outside constituencies is instructional "good practice." While they do care about the academic preparation and competence of faculty, potential students typically care even more about whether they will have meaningful access to and contact with their instructors and whether they will be exposed to high-quality teaching and learning situations. Indeed, one of the reasons behind the growing popularity of instruments like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is the fact that potential students (and others) are increasingly asking institutions questions about instructional environments and practices.

A third dimension of interest to potential external stakeholders in the realm of academic quality is instructional resources, especially with respect to technology. Once again, however, the question of *access* to these resources, not just the fact that the institution or program possesses them, is the object of interest.

- *Responsiveness and Service to Students.* The provision of appropriate "student services" constitutes another recognizable area of concern for accreditors. As in the case of academic quality, moreover, adopting a stakeholder perspective with respect to student support services yields a somewhat different set of concerns than those that typically dominate the attention of peer reviewers drawn from the academy. Of at least as much importance as academic quality for members of the public is how students and clients are treated by an institution or program, together with the particular kinds of support that the institution will provide to help students succeed.

Here again, studies show that at least three dimensions of responsiveness and service can be identified (ECS 1995). One is academic support, embracing such things as advising, tutoring, and study-skills development that may be needed to help students successfully negotiate academic difficulties. And in addition to the availability and quality of such services, both potential students and policy-makers will value the extent to which these are individually tailored to meet client needs. A second dimension of responsiveness embraces attributes of an instructional program that simply make it easier for students to participate. These include such things as parking, day care, class schedules, and financial aid services—and perceptions of how important each of these is will again vary across different constituencies. For potential students, for example, the topics about which an 18-year old traditional male may want information may be significantly different from those of interest to a working commuter female student with young children.

For both kinds of support services, moreover, the key point from a public-interest perspective is not just their presence but how *responsive* they are. Partly this is a matter of promptness: a responsive service is provided quickly and without bureaucratic hassles. Partly it is a matter of tailoring: a responsive service is delivered dif-

ferently depending upon the needs of individual clients. Finally, external stakeholders who deal regularly with particular institutions or programs want to know whether others (preferably, as much “like them” as possible) have been satisfied with their past experiences. So while satisfaction surveys are of relatively little utility as evidence of academic effectiveness, their results may be quite salient in providing credible information about responsiveness and service.

These particular areas of strength suggest that it is feasible to consider an expanded role for accrediting organizations in supplying more extensive and detailed information about quality for higher education’s stakeholders—as long as this is not a role that fundamentally changes what accreditors do. Rather than changing accreditation to fit a “customer” mold, accreditation can develop additional ways to explain its *own* results and processes in ways that can usefully inform external constituents. Given this conclusion, what might some of these new vehicles look like?

Promising Vehicles for Expanding Information to the Public

Some promising vehicles for expanding information are suggested below. A number of accrediting organizations are already engaged in some of these activities.

- *Public Narrative Reports.* A major strength of the information generated by the accreditation process is its richness and depth. Review teams delve deeply into the operations, standards, and academic processes of the institutions and programs they examine. Furthermore, they have the virtue of having actually inspected these on the spot instead of having to rely on secondary sources. But the team report narratives typically generated by such processes have some drawbacks as public information. First, they are deliberately crafted as confidential documents, intended principally to provide feedback to institutions and programs about their strengths and weaknesses, and what should be improved. Revealing these messages publicly would not only send market-damaging signals but could also create incentives for institutions and programs to hide perceived weaknesses from accreditors in the first place.

Second, team reports and action letters tend to be written in a language that is intended for insiders. In particular, the identification of areas for improvement tends to be couched in language that is clear to members of the academy, but may be less clear to outsiders.

So the answer here may not be to simply make the contents of team reports public (though, in fact, they are for many public institutions). Instead, the right course might be to develop a relatively brief, abstracted form in which to present key accreditation findings, crafted in a language that is understandable to the public. And a specific intent of such a report should be not only to present in brief the topical findings of a review, but in addition to help the public understand more fully what “accredited status” really means. Such a report would fall somewhere between the current situation—a simple announcement of accredited status—and disclosure of the full text of a team report or action letter. It might, for instance, consist of a single page of text noting not only the decision about accredited status, but also describing major areas of strength, areas that the review found in need of greater attention, and descriptions of the actions being undertaken by the institution or program to address the latter. A standard format for such public reports might be evolved to make them more readable and they could be posted on the accrediting organization’s Website. The development of such reports, while perhaps controversial, is certainly feasible. As noted, the UK’s QAA routinely posts narrative reports like this for both institutions and programs. And they are currently under consideration by several accrediting organizations in the United States.

- *Statistical Profiles.* Many accrediting organizations already collect statistics from member institutions and programs on an annual basis or in the course of a review. Some of them publish this information in the form of descriptive profiles of their regions or members. These statistics are usually presented in the aggregate to provide a descriptive portrait of the accrediting organization’s membership. There are a few that display results for each institution or program individually. And again, such profiles tend to address topics of primary interest and concern to academics rather than focusing on matters of concern to the wider public.

If so desired, many of the basic statistics that accreditors possess could be reformatted or disaggregated to yield further information that does address the public's concerns. For example, most accrediting organizations are interested in the proportion of full-time faculty deployed by an institution or program. Many are also concerned about faculty/student ratios. Potential students and their parents (not to mention elected officials) are interested in these matters too. But they want them calculated in terms of, say, the likelihood that a typical entering freshman will encounter only part-time faculty or will predominantly attend classes of a hundred or more.

More important, accreditation often provides an occasion for institutions and programs themselves to generate and share statistics that are directly related to academic quality and the student experience. Examples include survey-based information on student learning and other outcomes, or information about important academic activities. Such information could be displayed in a publicly accessible format using common headings like "instructional experiences," "post-graduate outcomes," or "learning support resources."

- *Best Practices.* Accrediting organizations also routinely uncover innovative or unusually effective features of the institutions and programs that they review. These practices are frequently noted in team reports and, occasionally, are showcased through such mechanisms as annual conference presentations. Some accreditors are beginning to document best practices more publicly through their publications and Websites. The primary audience for disseminating best practices remains other institutions and programs, under the *aegis* of program improvement. Sometimes these practices are published more extensively to help external constituents learn what "good practices" to look for or to shape their perceptions of "quality."

Although institutions and programs already try to highlight such features in their recruitment efforts, annual reports, and grant applications, accreditation might play a particularly important role for external constituents by providing information on best practices grouped by area in the form of brief, free standing descriptions issued periodically by accrediting organizations or posted on their Websites. Alternatively, they could be embedded in such presentations as statistical profiles or narrative reports, as noted above.

These roles represent extensions of things that accrediting organizations already do, rather than brand new activities. They tap information that is gathered in the natural course of the accreditation process, but make this information available in reconfigured forms that address a broader public-information function.

Some Questions that Accreditors Might Ask Themselves

If an accrediting organization decides to deliberately engage the task of providing a broader array of information to higher education's external constituents, it will help to consider a series of concrete decisions about what stance to take. Looked at conceptually, these decisions center on four major dimensions:

- *How Many Topics Related to Quality Need to be Addressed?* This dimension addresses the number of distinct domains about which information is to be provided. At one extreme of the continuum, an accreditor might choose to provide information about only one aspect of an institution or program—for example, academic quality or student satisfaction. At the other end of the continuum, information about multiple aspects of the institution or program would be provided. (Choices about *which* particular topics are addressed, moreover, will condition choices about each of the other three dimensions.)
- *What are the Levels of Judgment that Need to be Addressed?* This dimension addresses the number of distinctions that are made among particular levels of institutional or program performance, whichever topics are chosen. At one extreme of the continuum are binary judgments, where performance is reported simply as above or below a particular criterion. In the middle range, institutions or programs might be assigned to one of several levels of performance—for example in the familiar grading schemes adopted by the "report card" format. At the other extreme, institutions or programs can be ranged from top to bottom, each with its own unique place in the resulting hierarchy.
- *What Performance Standards Are to be Used?* This dimension concerns the actual levels of performance assessed, again regardless of the topical focus chosen. At one end of the continuum is minimally-acceptable performance,

where a relatively low standard is chosen as a threshold. At the other is “best practice,” where institutions and programs are recognized only if they achieve the highest levels of achievement on the topic in question. (With a full ranking or multiple levels of judgment chosen on the previous dimension, of course, it is possible to embrace both ends of this continuum simultaneously.)

- *How Rich Might the Information Provided Be?* This dimension addresses how much information is provided, in what form, and at what level of detail. At one extreme, only simple statistical indicators or judgments are made public. At the other, a broad array of information about institutional or program performance is provided, either in the form of detailed statistical analyses that address multiple aspects of provision or in the form of narrative or descriptive summaries.

Choices made simultaneously on all four of these dimensions can yield strikingly different approaches to providing information. One example is the typical situation for institutional and programmatic accreditation to provide publicly available results of the process that address a single topic, accredited status, conveyed in the form of a minimum standard binary judgment with limited detailed backup information.

The institutional audit procedure conducted under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom provides a contrasting “middle ground” example. Judgments about quality are made on several topics independently including academic standards, student experiences, and the credibility of the information the institution provides potential students. Furthermore, each of these topics is assigned to one of three levels of performance (full confidence, limited confidence, and no confidence). There is also considerable informational richness in the QAA process because the full reports of visiting teams are made public.

A deliberately designed consumer information provider like *Peterson’s Guide* illustrates a third contrasting set of choices. Information about many aspects of an institution is displayed in considerable detail, with many gradations of performance displayed. And the information is arrayed in a format that actively allows stakeholders with different preferences to make independent judgments about “quality” based on these dimensions.

These examples illustrate how the four dimensions of choice outlined above can vary together to yield some strikingly different approaches to providing information about quality for external publics. But they can also vary independently on a single dimension. If institutional accrediting organizations, for example, were to adopt a different stance with respect to the dimension of Informational Richness—changing nothing about the judgments they make about accredited status beyond making an abstract of their team reports available to the public (as above)—the result might be a significant enhancement of public information. Altering current practice on another single dimension, Levels of Judgment, they might do nothing more than create a three-tiered scheme of recognition like that established by the QAA. A label like “accreditation with distinction,” if it came from a recognized accreditor, would certainly be taken seriously by institutions and programs.

These examples illustrate some relatively straightforward changes that accrediting organizations might make to render their current practices better suited to providing useful public information about institutional and program quality. Making such changes would admittedly be controversial, and many accreditors might have a hard time accomplishing them. But they emphasize the fact that few significant procedural obstacles are in the way should accreditors decide to more fully engage the public-information role.

Implications for Accrediting Organizations of Expanding Information to the Public

There are a number of reasons why adopting a more visible stance with respect to providing additional information about quality to higher education’s publics may be useful for accrediting organizations. First, it is in some sense publicly expected. While talking about “quality” among members of the academy continues to be quite valuable, further engaging public stakeholders can additionally enhance the relevance of accreditation.

Second, accreditation remains legitimate and authoritative as an institution. Magazines—and even college guides—all have particular motives associated with what they do in the name of “providing public information.” Therefore, despite their utility to individual members of the public, they are viewed with a certain amount of skepticism as a result. Accreditation has no such baggage. If accrediting organizations were to disclose more information about the perform-

ance of institutions and programs, they would no doubt command an audience.

Third, accreditation processes do in fact generate a great deal of credible information about institutions and programs. Magazines and college guides must rely largely on secondary sources to assemble the information that they give their readers. Accrediting teams actually *visit* campuses and are in a position to verify claims directly. And institutions and programs invest what seems to outsiders a surprising amount of energy in self-study and in preparing for such visits. Admittedly, much of the information gathered may be of little immediate interest to most external audiences. But the problem is less about the kinds of information that accrediting organizations possess than about how much or how little is generally available.

Potential Drawbacks

But there are potential drawbacks for accreditors if they assume this role. First, deliberately taking on the role of expanding information to the public ought not to divert accrediting organizations from their original and primary mission—assuring other members of the academic community that particular institutions and programs in fact belong to that community. The most important “customers” of the information currently produced by accreditation remain other academic institutions and programs. Review processes are optimized to produce information that is useful for this constituency and its members will continue to need it in order to assess the worthiness of credits and degrees, regardless of the informational demands of others. Changing accreditation processes fundamentally to seek and disseminate the kinds of information useful to others at the expense of this core function would be counterproductive.

Second, accreditation plays more roles within the academic community than just quality assurance. One of the most prominent is quality enhancement through open, peer-based, self-examination. The success of this function depends heavily on the maintenance of trust between accrediting organizations and the institutions and programs that they review. Too much public disclosure undermines trust and may substantially compromise this important function.

Finally, despite the fact that accreditation does enjoy public respect, accrediting organizations remain membership organizations and will thus always be seen by external observers, at least in part, as having a vested interest in protecting the interests of the institutions and programs they accredit. So there is ultimately a public credibility issue associated with any information provided by accreditors, when compared to that reported by an independent “third party” source.

Weighing Costs and Benefits

As a result, accreditors can systematically consider the costs and benefits associated with adopting a broader role with respect to providing information about institutional or program “quality” to the public. And whether or not an accrediting organization chooses to take on these additional roles, of course, is entirely a matter of its own discretion. Some will wish to pursue this course while others will not. But whichever path is chosen, accrediting organizations may find it helpful to pose and answer some specific diagnostic questions to help them reach an appropriate decision. These include:

- *Who is Asking for What Kinds of Information about Quality?* A first consideration is simply who will use the resulting information for what. The most common demand for “consumer information” in higher education, for example, will be from potential students and their parents who are looking for specific attributes that will help them discriminate among a variety of institutions or programs that they are considering. The kinds of information relevant here will be directly comparative in nature—for example, data on academic quality or outcomes that clearly indicate areas of competitive strength or weakness. Another common demand is for information about distinctive features of an institution or program—for example, whether it has a public service component or whether it approaches instruction from a particular ethical or values perspective. The ability to directly compare alternatives may be less important in this case, and providing such information may therefore constitute a more comfortable information niche for accreditors. But if an accrediting organization cannot succinctly answer basic questions about who will use the information presented to inform what kinds of decisions, it is probably best for it not to proceed farther.
- *What Particular Stance Should the Organization Adopt?* As described in a previous section, the decision of exactly how an accrediting organization should proceed with respect to providing more public information can be enlightened by considering a number of dimensions simultaneously. Should the stance selected be primarily one of “consumer protection,” which concentrates strictly on providing only the information needed to help students avoid programs or institutions where they are likely to waste their time and money? Which topical domains should be embraced—academic quality, student responsiveness, or both? Should multiple levels of

judgment be considered, and at what levels of performance should these levels be set? Posing and answering such questions systematically ought to be at the heart of any accreditor's decision in this matter.

- *Who Else is Doing This?* Should they decide to adopt a more aggressive public information role, accrediting organizations are relative latecomers to the business. Depending upon field or type of institution, there may already be dozens of competing information providers advanced through the regular media, state higher education organizations, or sponsored by special purpose advocacy organizations. And the coverage of these information providers may also vary widely. For example, there are already multiple, detailed, and competing sources of “quality” information about selective colleges, but there is usually little information available about the institutions that most students actually attend. *U.S. News* would probably sell few issues of an annual rating of “America’s Best Open Admission Institutions.” Yet there is a major demand for such information from both regional audiences and public policymakers. Similarly, the general public is typically far more informed about the relative merits of private not-for-profit institutions than about for-profit proprietary institutions. An analogous situation applies to academic programs. Programs in some fields—especially those with high professional standing and perceived earning power—are rated by some of the same agencies that rate high end institutions. Other programs areas are comparatively ill served with respect to public information about quality. In contemplating a decision to become more deeply committed in this area, therefore, accreditors would be well advised to address areas that are not already covered reasonably well by other organizations.
- *What Distinctive Informational Contributions Can the Organization Make?* A review of who else is in the public information business with respect to higher education quality will also reveal the particular areas about which others are already providing information. The key question, then, is whether an accrediting organization has additional or unique kinds of information that might make a useful contribution to public understanding. As noted, the accreditation process already generates a great deal of qualitative information through the onsite mechanism of peer review—information that most government or commercial providers of information cannot match. And a lot of this information will address the topics of academic experiences and service responsiveness that external stakeholders are especially interested in. Other accreditors may have unique bodies of information about best practices or special aspects of instructional provision. The point here is to carefully consider the distinctive contribution that a particular accrediting organization can make in what is probably already a crowded field.
- *How Will Adopting This Posture Affect the Organization’s Relationship with its Primary Constituencies?* However construed, providing information to those outside the higher education enterprise will remain an auxiliary enterprise for any accrediting organization. Its primary historic mission of assuring academic quality within the academic community will always take precedence. At the same time, becoming more aggressive in the public-information role may actively damage an accrediting organization’s capacity to continue serving its primary constituents in its traditional role. Disclosing information about institutional or program performance, however limited, may imperil needed trust between an accrediting organization and its members, with a potentially severe impact on its program improvement function. It may also lead to less openness on the part of members in providing accurate information in the course of review. As a result, accreditors need to carefully assess the negative consequences for its basic constituent relationships of moving too far in this direction.
- *How Will Adopting This Posture Affect the Organization’s Internal Workload and Capacities?* A parallel question is the impact that adopting a broader public information role may have on the ways an accrediting organization spends its time and resources. Most accreditors have extremely limited resources with respect to personnel, communications, and information processing capacity. Re-directing these resources to address a new line of work—especially if it is not a core function and may have little potential for cost-recovery—is not a decision to undertake lightly. Accreditors that contemplate a more visible role in providing public information should therefore also carefully assess the impact that adopting such a role may have on an already busy staff, and must equally examine in the kinds of investment in information processing and communications infrastructure that may be involved. And the results of such a review will likely underscore the conclusion that any move in the direction of an enhanced public-information role should be built upon information that is already generated naturally through an accrediting organization’s existing operations.

Accreditation will never be the only source of information about quality for higher education's external constituents. Particular accrediting organizations though, may decide that they have a role to play in this arena because of the specific areas of expertise that they command or some other factor. What seems clear from this discussion is that any public information role played by accreditors should build upon the functions that accreditation *already* performs extensively and well. Certainly, for a variety of reasons, the accreditation community should look beyond its current constituencies to seek new ways it might connect with the wider public. Finding a useful niche in disclosing accessible information about institutional or program quality may well be a way to do this. But the decision to pursue this course must be made carefully by each organization, bearing foremost in mind its principal values and purposes.

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