



Views

Accreditation's Accidental Transformation

July 20, 2010

By [Judith S. Eaton](#)

An accrediting organization, in the past year, grants accreditation to a university despite concerns regarding the institution's assignment of credit hours for certain courses. What happens next? The U.S. Department of Education's inspector general [recommends a review](#) that could lead to suspension or termination of the accreditor's recognition and the U.S. House of Representatives [holds a hearing](#) on how accrediting organizations review institutions' credit hour policies. At the same time, a legal definition of a credit hour is included in USDE's recently proposed regulations.

An accrediting organization [denies a request](#) by a nonprofit college to continue its accreditation, as part of a planned purchase by a for-profit corporation, only weeks after a U.S. Senate hearing on for-profit education drew widespread media coverage. Subsequently, the 125-year old college [announces that it will close](#). What happens next? The accreditation decision is questioned not only by the college and the for-profit corporation, but also by lawmakers and by the media.

Why the national attention? Why the second-guessing of the accreditation decisions? It is part of the accidental transformation of accreditation.

Academic quality assurance and collegiality -- the defining features of traditional accreditation -- are, at least for now, taking a backseat to consumer protection and compliance with law and regulation. Government and the public expect accreditation to essentially provide a guarantee that students are getting what they pay for in terms of the education they seek.

Blame the enormous amount of taxpayer money involved (some \$150 billion every year at the federal level alone), which puts more and more pressure on accreditors to give more and more attention to assuring that taxpayers' money is well-spent. "Well-spent" is not about abstract notions of quality.

Blame the powerful demand that, above all, colleges and universities provide credentials that lead directly to employment or advancement of employment. Driven by public concerns about the difficult job market and the persistent rise in the price of tuition, accrediting organizations are now expected to assure that the colleges, universities and programs they accredit will produce these pragmatic results.

The worth of higher education is determined less and less through the professional judgments made by the academic community. The deference at one time accorded accrediting organizations to decide the worth of colleges and universities is diminished and perhaps disappearing.

Accreditation decisions about individual institutions are now scrutinized by additional actors -- whether U.S. Department of Education or Congress or the press -- who make their own judgments here. Simply put, this is "co-accreditation." For these additional actors, "quality" is about compliance with federal law and regulation and about the practical gains of students -- judgments that government and the public can readily make.

Why does this matter?

- Because of the transformation of what counts as quality. The worth of higher education, once judged by the quality of faculty, curriculum, research and academic standards, is more and more judged in solely pragmatic terms – earning a credential or getting a job or promotion. What happens to the essential role of colleges and universities in assuring intellectual development and vitality in our society?
- Because of the transformation of who decides quality. For more than 100 years, the accreditation process has been a key factor in creating an outstanding national higher education enterprise. Will we still enjoy outstanding colleges and universities as government, the press and the public become more prominent deciders here?
- Because of the transformation of the role of money in judging quality. Over and over again, government and the public point to the ever-growing taxpayer investment in higher education and demand more and more accountability from accreditation. While money is a vital factor in all aspects of society, do we want it to be the centerpiece of quality judgments?

Do we know the consequences of this accidental transformation? Are we prepared to accept them? These changes may be unintended, but they are dramatic and far-reaching. Is this how we want to proceed?

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