



OP-ED



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On the Need for Leadership in the World of Accreditation

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Few Americans outside of higher education, unless journalists or members of Congress, pay much attention to “accreditation” except to be aware that a college possessing it has passed muster on certain qualitative scorecards. For a professional program, it signifies a “good housekeeping seal of approval” from an accreditor probably recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) with both the program and the accreditor performing at a certain standard. Having accreditation from your professional association has clear meaning with regard to the standards of the profession and in relation to the availability of federal funds for students studying in these fields.

If you plan to attend, or your child plans to attend, an undergraduate college, however, accreditation means validation by one of seven regional accreditors, or a national accreditor usually for Bible colleges or certain business schools. These accreditors also go through a process of “recognition” perhaps by both the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and CHEA. The federal government’s role derives from the growth of billions of dollars in Pell Grants and other financial aid and the corresponding need for taxpayer accountability. They bring somewhat different expectations to the recognition process; an accreditor wants to lose neither the tie to financial-aid-eligibility for its process nor peer-review approval of quality.

While attention is often paid to the tension between these two forms of recognition, less has been paid to the kind of leadership peer-review higher education accreditation will need in the next generation to maintain credibility and influence as the gatekeeper for quality standards. Addressing that challenge is also the key, however CHEA and DOE work out their “partnership,” to maintaining strong support within higher education itself for peer review as the coin of the realm to measure not simply “quality,” a rather general term begging the question “quality of what and for what,” but also integrity, fulfillment of mission, and sustainability. Peer-review accreditation also holds dear the importance of continuous improvement based on what is learned from an institution’s own self-assessments.

Accreditation of programs for the professions depends on standards for and proven success in preparing new professionals to be strong practitioners in such professions as engineering, physical therapy, nursing or business. There are leadership issues at stake—openness to new modes of education, awareness of changes in the profession and in the political and economic contexts for the profession and wisdom in managing quality oversight amid those changes. The issues in institutional accreditation, however, are more complex and may require a different kind of leadership.

For the regionals, it is intriguing that the same kind of credential (accreditation) is granted to every successful institution whether Eastern Illinois University, Yale, Whitman College, Charter Oak, or Cuyahoga Community College. The fundamental standards of all regionals are similar even if phrased differently, and within a region the standards are always the same. And yet everyone knows the analyses must differ. Evaluating quality of teaching at



a large public research university, using hundreds of Teaching Assistants with varied English skills, and at a liberal arts college like Grinnell or Millsaps or Washington and Jefferson can scarcely be the same process.

Second, peer-review defines its role not in terms of identical compliance but in terms of a college's articulated mission. While the education mission is always most important, colleges may also have a certain religious mission or military mission or public-service mission. Evaluation must account for how fulfilling a dual mission may justifiably be part of the accreditation process.

Third, many other factors have been suggested as legitimate parts of evaluation. Should the average debt burden of graduates be a factor, or is that unrelated to quality? Should safety factors and responsiveness to student concerns be a factor? Should a record of political partisanship be a negative factor? Should the level of community involvement be considered? How important should diversity and low-income access be? How do you consider graduation rates when those are affected by many factors but especially the economic level of entrants?

Fourth, many universities have significant research agendas that affect everything else, including undergraduate teaching; and that research is likely part of the institutional mission and the institution's role in the state, regional or national economy. Yet normal accreditation processes do not attend much to the research dimension and perhaps they should not, though it is hard to do a comprehensive analysis without accounting for that elephant in the room.

So given the complexity of accreditation today, what kind of leadership is needed going forward? One goal must be deep buy-in from the most highly regarded universities and colleges, so the management and commissioners of accreditors are able to enlist regular involvement and support from those institutions. This involvement was very present when CHEA was founded, and it continues to be essential to commanding respect from not only higher education, but also business and government leaders. Accreditation leadership must be able to help lead higher education through this age of great changes—technology in many ways, globalization, new delivery modes and kinds of providers both for-profit and not-for-profit, demographics, an increasing role of government, and more. It must help to make good decisions about what is and is not part of the formal accreditation process and how the industry accommodates quality evaluation of what is not. Leadership must continue to insist upon the special value of the diversity of the very kinds of colleges and universities in America, but also recognize that much post-secondary education will take place outside of colleges in the future.

Leadership will provide a vehicle for recognizing that colleges must attend to safety, debt load, community involvement, intellectual openness, and diversity of several kinds, but that the bottom lines for accreditation will be the demonstrated quality of the student learning experience and student outcomes however measured, the sustainability of the institution, and the integrity of its operation. To articulate these values in an academic world of constant change, anathema for many colleges, will require accreditation leaders able to manage change, to articulate effectively the value of peer-review to diverse audiences, and to develop partnerships with government. It will also require the courage to say NO, whether to a college failing to serve its students and community or to a government that might insist on a model for accreditation that violates the fundamental values of peer review and continuous improvement.

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