



OP-ED



THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20TH YEAR OPINION SERIES

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Accreditation: Transactional or Value-Added?

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In recognizing the 20th anniversary of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) it is timely to consider the role, status and future of accreditation in ensuring the quality of our colleges and universities.

In its most essential role, accreditation is the pillar of self-regulation of our colleges and universities. Over 50 years ago, this central role was merged with the responsibility to serve as the federal government's proxy in determining access to federal funding, which is critically important to the millions of students seeking access to higher education, and to institutions as well. However, the pairing of these two responsibilities – the original expectation of accreditation as a peer process for quality assurance and the latter as a logical and efficient means by which to ensure that federal education dollars are being spent wisely – has proven to be increasingly problematic. As institutions look to more creative and innovative ways to deliver educational programs, accreditors are pressed to become more demanding (a difficult task for peers). It's a tough mix of responsibilities and under the strain of external demands for greater educational and financial accountability, accreditation as we know it may well be undermining its own best opportunity to add value to the sector.



America's higher education system stands upon the inherent value of college and university autonomy from direct government control, or that of other founding organizations. It is this commitment to autonomy that has in many ways defined the nation's higher education system: Institutions set their own respective missions, shape their academic programs that enable those missions to be met and explore creative and new models of education that meet the expectations of a changing student body and a

demanding public. And it is institution autonomy, more than any other condition, that enables the diversity and quality of our colleges and universities. Ultimately it falls to the men and women who serve on the governing boards of our institutions and university systems to protect that autonomy while exerting their own independence as a policymaking body. It is higher education's governing boards that are accountable for the success of their institutions; and it is their independence as fiduciaries that is essential for effectively assuring institutional mission fulfillment.



The breadth and quality of academic programs across some 4,000 accredited colleges and universities in the country is compelling. It's that level of quality that has been reinforced and furthered by accreditation processes. But it is the nexus of academic quality and diversity where accreditation now runs the risk of embodying more of a regulatory burden than a value-added resource.

So, it's fair to ask: Are regional and program accreditors unintentionally limiting the strategic direction of the institutions they review? Could regional and program accreditors be more proactive in encouraging and supporting distinction over conformity, and by advocating on behalf of the essential value of institution autonomy?

Accreditors play an important role in assessing and assuring academic program quality and fiscal sustainability. And, current and prospective students and their families depend on the assurance that the process provides regarding the quality and overall strength of the college or university they are considering or currently attending (as well as the access to federal financial assistance ensured by accreditation's regulatory regime). However, accreditation can often seem merely a transactional process in which minimalist regulatory oversight is the final (and primary) outcome.

When higher education leaders discuss accreditation, disdain and annoyance seem more often the norm than a sense of the process serving a meaningful and strategic value. In a demanding period where "change" and "disruption" seem to define the foreseeable future, institution leaders are concerned that accreditation is too often a barrier to risk-taking and innovation. Accreditors face a quandary: Strict standards provide needed confidence and access to federal support; but such standards may be limiting creativity, making accreditors complicit in inhibiting progress that a more demanding public expects from our colleges and universities. Strict standards and openness to innovation should not be in conflict. Institution innovation should be encouraged rather than over-regulated.



And yet as a result of this false choice between rigorous review and healthy innovation, we run the risk of a diminution of that most central principle of institutional autonomy, which more than any other condition, enables institutional risk-taking and innovation. Protecting that autonomy is fundamental to our governing boards' responsibilities, in part, to ensure the overall strategic direction of the institutions they serve. Boards and institution leadership, however, are increasingly distracted by the need to develop counterweights against government (and even accreditor) oversight that comes dangerously close to infringing on their basic responsibilities.

Addressing the value of accreditation across higher education is particularly timely as we celebrate CHEA's substantial impact on and defense of effective accreditation. In a changing and increasingly uncertain higher education environment we need a vibrant accreditation structure and process that focuses on the right areas in the right way. However, at a time when higher education is figuring out how best to change, adapt and innovate while regaining the broader public trust, it is essential that accreditors be supportive, flexible partners and that they help ensure institutions' autonomy through effective quality assurance. It's not an either-or proposition, and it can't be long debated.

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