



OP-ED



THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20TH YEAR OPINION SERIES

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Students First: Reimagining Accreditation

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To most folks outside of the higher education space, the word “accreditation” probably doesn’t mean much. “Accreditation” isn’t exactly a staple in the vernacular. In fact, many students, who benefit directly from accreditation, likely don’t understand its significance. I work directly with our nation’s top student leaders, specifically student body presidents, at National Campus Leadership Council. While these student leaders represent a wide range of institutions and engage with presidents, provosts, trustees, faculty leaders and alumni, many remain unaware of the role of accreditation. In order to further accreditation’s role, we must reevaluate how accreditation is marketed towards those outside of the policy space and reimagine its reach on young people. If accreditors are serious about serving students, they must engage students.



The CHEA 2017 Annual Conference featured a panel on “Accreditation From the Perspective of Students,” featuring students from the University of Houston, Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Iowa and moderated by Jamiene Studley, former U.S. Department of Education deputy under secretary.

Accreditation provides a peace of mind to the consumer (families, students, etc.), so it is critical that these stakeholders are better informed of the process. When the primary constituency of any institution is the students themselves, students should be the primary voice in measuring the success of that institution. This year, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) made an impactful decision to feature a panel discussion of student leaders on the role of accreditation during their 2017 Annual Conference. Such opportunities create necessary dialogue between young people and professionals in order to improve accreditation. While organizations like mine can work to strengthen student leadership and educate students about accreditation broadly, when accreditors arrive on campus during the accreditation process, it is ultimately on them to engage those students to initiate conversation.

Secondly, we must consider colleges and universities’ willingness to respect the student voice as a measure of its reliability. Issues such as sexual assault and inclusion affect student retention and postgraduate success. It is difficult to ameliorate such problems when the perspectives of those most affected are not sought after. Many universities and colleges exclude students from crucial decision-making processes. In 2010, the Association of Governing Boards found that only one in five institutions had a student representative on their board of trustees (or equivalent), but few grant those student trustees voting rights.

Only 42 percent of private institutions' student trustees are allowed to vote. Schools such as the University of Southern California limit access to the Board of Trustees and college administrators with significant power and influence. Student voice matters beyond board-level governance, too. At The Ohio State University, for example, students hold 30 percent of the votes on the University Senate. Such strong shared governance should be valued in the accreditation process.

As higher education continues to diversify in the students it serves and the ways it provides education, the inclusion of a strong student voice is critical to the future of accreditation, both in the accreditation process and institutional governance. Accreditation is more than a stamp of approval — it is a marker of what we value in higher education and our progress toward realizing those values. Students are the ultimate experts on whether a campus environment in and out of the classroom reflect those values, and we must elevate their perspectives through accreditation.



Rini Sampath is Policy Director at the National Campus Leadership Council, a non-profit organization launched in 2012 to better empower student body leaders at colleges around the country to develop the tools, networks, and skills necessary to confront exigent issues facing students today.

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- [Burdensome Accreditation System Needs Overhaul](#)
By Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges
- [Quis custodiet Ipsos custodes? \(“Who Will Guard the Guards Themselves?”\)](#)
By Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president emeritus and university professor at The George Washington University



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