



A Board Member's Guide To Accreditation: The Basics, The Issues, The Challenges

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A national advocate and institutional voice for academic quality through accreditation, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations in the United States.

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A BOARD MEMBER'S GUIDE TO ACCREDITATION: THE BASICS, THE ISSUES, THE CHALLENGES

Judith S. Eaton

OVERVIEW

This paper presents an overview of accreditation, what it is, its values, its roles, how it operates and its relationship with government. It also addresses the impact of accreditation on a college or university and the role of governing boards in engaging accreditation. Finally, current challenges for accreditation are described. The paper is intended both as background and as a useful tool for governing boards and individual board members in carrying out their all-important fiduciary and academic roles.

Accreditation as we have known it is going through an extraordinary period of fundamental change, with expectations that its operation will shift, its role in relation to government will change and its service to society will change. The awareness and engagement of governing boards, as key leaders in colleges and universities, is especially vital as these changes take place.

Accreditation was invented by higher education in the 19th century, with professionals from colleges and universities seeking to clarify the boundaries and role of colleges and universities and concerned about student mobility through transfer of credit. "Accreditation" emerged as a review of higher education institutions and programs to assure and improve academic quality. "Assuring quality" is about affirming threshold effectiveness of colleges and universities; "improving quality" is about affirming that performance improves over time. To this day, accreditation remains owned, operated and funded by higher education. Accreditation is intended to be a collegial, formative, aspirational and trust-based activity among faculty, administrators, students, boards and the public, bringing out the best in higher education and part of moving colleges and universities forward.



THE BASICS

- [Types of Accrediting Organizations](#)
- [What all Accrediting Organizations Have in Common](#)
- [How Accreditation Review Takes Place](#)
- [Accreditation Review: An Institutional Perspective](#)
- [Accreditation and Governing Board Involvement](#)

Types of Accrediting Organizations

The process of accreditation is carried out through individual, non-governmental organizations created for this purpose. This paper focuses on 85 of these organizations that accredit either institutions or programs or both and are “recognized” or externally reviewed by either the federal government or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, a nongovernmental institutional membership organization created to provide national coordination of institutional and programmatic accreditation. It is the universe of recognized accreditors with which governing boards are typically engaged.

Institutional accreditation embraces entire schools of all types, including public or private colleges and universities, two- and four-year institutions and nonprofit and for-profit institutions. Accreditation includes institutions with all types of missions: community colleges, research universities, regional comprehensive institutions, vocational schools, historically black colleges and universities, minority-serving institutions, liberal arts colleges and special-purpose institutions such as computer or information technology schools.

At present, there are 18 recognized institutional accreditors that may be divided into three major types:

- “Regional” accreditors review colleges and universities located in a specific geographic area. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education accredits institutions in the six New England states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. There are six such regions, housing seven accrediting organizations. Most of the approximately 3,000 institutions that were regionally accredited in 2013 are degree-granting (associate degree or above) public or private non-profit, with a small percentage of for-profit institutions that are accredited as well.

Types and Numbers of Accrediting Organizations

Institutional accreditors (18)

- *Regional (7)*
- *National Career-related (7)*
- *National Faith-Related (4)*

Programmatic accreditors (67)

- National career-related accreditors reviewed approximately 4,400 colleges and universities throughout the country in 2013. These schools offer primarily career or professional education, many of which are non-degree and for-profit.
- National faith-related accreditors reviewed approximately 500 institutions in 2013. These schools have a religious affiliation or are spiritually oriented. Most of these institutions are degree-granting and non-profit.

Recognized programmatic accreditors review individual programs or schools within colleges or universities, typically in a professional field. There are 67 recognized programmatic accreditors that include such fields as law, engineering, business, medicine and many other health-related fields, journalism and teacher education. In many fields, accreditation is linked to requirements for professional licensure for individuals. States, for example, will require that individuals sitting for licensure examinations have graduated from accredited programs. At present, 24,000 programs are accredited by programmatic accreditors.

Most colleges and universities have multiple accreditations. They sustain an institutional accreditation and a number of programmatic accreditations. For an individual college or university, this may mean as few as 2-3 accreditors or as many as 35 accreditors engaged with the institution and thus a governing board. (Please see page 21 for examples.)

What All Accrediting Organizations Have in Common

While each of these accrediting bodies is independent with its own form of operation, standards and processes, the 85 share a number of characteristics.

All accreditors are private, non-profit membership organizations. All operate with small- to mid-size professional staffs, augmented by academic colleagues who serve as volunteers. All have developed specific quality standards, policies and processes to review colleges, universities and programs. All employ two forms of review: self-review whereby an institution or program examines its operation based on the standards of the accreditor and peer review, with external academic professionals and others examining the work of other academic professionals in a college or university. All award accredited status for a specific time period, typically 3-10 years, and require an institution or program to undertake another review at the end of the time for which accredited status has been awarded.

All accreditors have a major decision-making body, a board, commission or council, composed of academic professionals and members of the public. These bodies have three major areas of responsibility: (1) the establishment, in consultation with members, of the accreditor's standards, policies and practices, (2) the conduct of accreditation reviews and determination of accredited status of institutions and programs and (3) the management and governance of the accrediting organization itself.

All accrediting organizations have standards or expectations of performance and practice that an institution or program must demonstrate it meets in order to achieve accreditation. While these vary from accreditor to accreditor, the standards generally address the basic operation of an institution or program: faculty, curriculum, academic standards, student support services, governance, finances and facilities. All accreditors also have policies with which institutions and programs must comply. Some of these policies address basic operation and others address additional areas, e.g., distance learning, international activity or expectations of transparency.

All accreditors are funded by the programs, colleges and universities that each organization accredits. The accreditor charges fees for an accreditation review and related activities and requires that an accredited program or institution pay an annual membership fee as a condition of maintaining accredited status. In 2012-2013, the most recent year for which data are available, accrediting organizations sustained budgets that totaled \$137 million for the year.

How Accreditation Review Takes Place

KEY STEPS: HOW ACCREDITATION PROCEEDS AT AN INSTITUTION



Accreditation review starts with a program or institution preparing a self-report or a self-study. This is a review that a program or institution itself undertakes based on the standards of the accrediting organization. Typically, this takes place when a college or university seeks initial accreditation or is informed by its accreditor that its current period of accredited status is ending and it is time for another review in order to continue to be accredited. If an institution is seeking accreditation for the first time, it may have to go through a candidacy phase where the commission decides whether the college or university is prepared (becomes a “candidate”) for a full accreditation review. The accreditor works with the institution or program to provide advice about the self-study as requested, including preliminary discussions about when the review will take place and how it will proceed.

The self-study process can take as few as six-nine months or as many as 18-24 months. The product of the self-study is an extensive document that provides evidence that the institution or program meets the accreditor’s standards. Once it is completed, the self-study is sent to the accrediting organization.

The next stage in the review process is a site visit from the accreditor to the program, college or university. A team

composed of academics and representatives of the public is deployed. Board members from other institutions have served on visiting teams as well. The team may be as small as two-to-three people or as large as 12-16 people, depending on the size and complexity of the program, college or university. The teams may include students and, especially in the case of programmatic accreditation, practitioners in a given field.

Once at the institution, the team's primary responsibility is to validate the self-study that has been prepared. Team members meet with students, faculty, administrators, governing board members, community leaders and others as needed. The team observes various programs and services offered by the institution. At the conclusion of the visit, the team prepares a report that is sent to the accreditor, indicating the strengths of the institution and any areas of concern. Some accreditors also ask the team to provide recommendations or suggestions. The team report is sent to the institution, once in draft form for any comments or corrections, and then in final form.

With the completion of the self-study and team review, the accrediting commission meets to determine the future accredited status of an institution or program. Sometimes this involves a discussion with an institutional president or dean of a program, accompanied by a member of the institution's governing board, often the board chair. The commission also reviews all material relevant to the institution or program.

The accrediting commission may take one of a number of actions with regard to an institution or program, e.g., (1) grant initial or continuing accredited status, (2) accredit with specific conditions (e.g., a special report in two years), (3) issue some kind of warning or other notice that the institution is in danger of not meeting standards or (4) deny or remove accreditation. The institution is informed about the decision of the accreditor through a formal action letter. In the case of a final negative action (e.g., denial) by the commission, the institution or program has specific rights of appeal and due process by which to challenge the decision that the commission has made.

The decision of the accrediting commission, if not appealed, is the culminating action of the accreditation review. However, once accreditation is granted or continued, the institution or program has ongoing responsibilities to the accreditor such as annual reporting of institutional data or demonstrating compliance with any new standards or policies that may be developed during the period for which the institution is accredited.

Accreditation Review: An Institutional Perspective

Accreditation is complex and at times controversial – both academically and politically. It is both welcomed and not welcomed on college campuses. It is welcomed when the visiting team is viewed as a group of valued academic colleagues and when primary attention is given to providing advice leading to quality improvement of a program or service. Accreditation is then treated as a form of external consulting from respected members of the academic community, as peer review that results in sound judgment that helps to move an institution forward. It is welcome when the core values of accreditation

come to the fore: respect for institutional autonomy, mission and academic freedom. Accreditation is appreciated when the team report reflects thoughtful consideration of the academic needs of the institution and understanding of its commitment to intellectual development.

Accreditation may not be as welcome if it is perceived as a compliance or checklist activity that is less focused on enhancing the academic efforts of an institution. Accreditation is not appreciated by some when, rightly or wrongly, it is viewed as a means of forcing an institution to comply with law or regulation that is not seen as connected in any meaningful way to educational development, or when accreditation is viewed as a set of bureaucratic standards and policies having little to do with furthering quality teaching, learning or research. Accreditation is a cause for concern if an institution believes that it is investing significant money and time in addressing accreditation standards and policies, but also believes that the standards and policies are not central to building the academic future of the college or university.

With governing boards, accreditation is highly valued when it provides advice or guidance with regard to, e.g., strategic direction of an institution. It is valued when it can help boards, working with chief executive officers, to make needed decisions about the academic and financial future of a college or university. It is less valued when it tells an institution, e.g., which specific strategic direction a university should take or what the qualifications should be for a new president or chancellor. Accreditation can also be a cause for concern when it is perceived to directly challenge the authority of governing boards or drives decisions that the institution views as the province of these boards.

Accreditation and Governing Board Involvement

BOARD INVOLVEMENT

- ***Working with presidents and chancellors, engage accreditation reviews***
- ***Stay informed about the policy context and political environment for accreditation***
- ***Play a leadership role in change and innovation in accreditation***

There are three ways in which governing boards benefit themselves and contribute to their institutions through engagement with accreditation. *First, board involvement in a review for initial or continuing accreditation is vital, working with presidents and chancellors.* Boards gain from awareness or participation at each stage, including the self-study process, meeting with accreditor's review team on campus, reviewing the team's subsequent report, meeting as requested with the accrediting commission and monitoring the ultimate accreditation decision and any required follow-up. All require close consultation with the institution's CEO. Institutions and programs gain from board involvement: It demonstrates the independence of a college or university while, at the same time, it affirms the board's leadership and commitment to building a sound academic future for an institution.

Boards need to assure that they stay informed about the accredited status of the institution and programs following a review, typically through regular reporting at board meetings. Accreditation obligations do not end when a visit is over. Most institutions, as indicated above, have multiple accreditations and any of these accreditors may require regular annual reporting, special reports or other monitoring. Staying through, e.g., information chief academic officers. is ongoing, not an isolated

“Boards need to be part of building the future of accreditation.”

informed can be accomplished provided by presidents or Sustaining accredited status event that occurs periodically.

Second, boards need to be context and politics in which as this relates to federal legislation that includes requirements for accreditation and the relationship between accrediting organizations and the Department of Education, charged with carrying out federal law as it applies to accreditation. Members need to be kept informed of bills that are introduced in Congress and regulations that are published that affect accreditation. This can be done through a president or chancellor or through Washington-based associations with which the institution is affiliated or both. If proposed legislation or regulation is likely to prove harmful to accreditation, board members can assist their institutions and accreditors by engaging politically with members of Congress or the executive branch.

aware of and engage the policy accreditation is operating, especially

Third, boards need to be part of leadership for change and innovation in accreditation. The many challenges that accreditation faces have the potential to significantly alter its operation and impact on colleges and universities. Accreditors and academics need to be working together to provide leadership as accreditation seeks to meet its many challenges in the future and this needs to include governing board members. How will accreditation take responsibility for quality as the landscape of higher education is changing? How do we establish greater rigor in accreditation? How do we improve accreditation review to improve the performance of institutions? These are decisions for, first and foremost, presidents, accreditors and board members working together. Boards need to be part of building the future of accreditation and not on the sidelines, allowing this future to emerge without their influence.



GOVERNING BOARD MEMBERS...HAVE YOU

- **Participated in self-studies?**
- **Reviewed final self-study report?**
- **Met with visiting team?**
- **Reviewed draft and final team report?**
- **Attended an accrediting commission meeting with CEO?**
- **Received and reviewed action letter?**
- **Required ongoing follow-up reports from staff?**



THE ISSUES

- [Accreditation's Role in Society](#)
- [Accreditation and the Core Values of Higher Education](#)
- [Accreditation and Government](#)

Accreditation's Roles in Society

Accreditation has been the primary means by which colleges and universities assure quality and the primary public symbol of legitimate higher education, the core and essential indicator of the reliability of an institution. It plays four major roles in the society:

- *Assures threshold quality and encourages confidence* in the value of higher education to the public, students, government.
- *Assists with student mobility* through providing reliable information about the institutions from which students want to transfer credits or from which students want to enter graduate school.
- *Is a primary basis for public and private sector funding* of higher education institutions, with the availability of federal funds to colleges and universities and decisions by foundations and corporations to provide gifts and grants to institutions both requiring that a college or university be accredited
- *Essential to international mobility* by providing information to assist students in international exchange, judgment about qualifications and degrees and entry to U.S. institutions from other countries.

Accreditation plays a vital part in the effective functioning of the higher education community, in assuring public and government confidence in higher education and in providing students with resources and opportunity for mobility within higher education. Accredited status is fundamental to trust and acceptance of the value of colleges and universities. Accreditation is part of maintaining an academic community – colleges and universities with shared values and experiences.

The absence of accredited status raises many concerns for an institution. If a college or university does not have accreditation nor is actively seeking accredited status, many questions are asked about its performance and status. Institutions that are not accredited by an accreditor that is recognized as reliable by the federal government are not eligible for federal funds such as student grants and loans. At present, this amounts to \$170 billion annually in support for college attendees and other federal funds for programs or research. Corporations providing tuition assistance or foundations providing grants to colleges and universities will provide resources only to accredited institutions.

Students seeking to transfer credits from one institution to another have enormous difficulty unless the credits are from an accredited institution. Finally, as international activity continues to expand, colleagues from outside the United States want to assure that they are working with accredited institutions when pursuing, e.g., student exchange, faculty exchanges and joint research projects.

Accreditation and the Core Values of Higher Education

Accreditation both reflects and reinforces four core values of higher education: peer review as the foundation for academic judgment about quality, institutional autonomy, commitment to mission and academic freedom. These values have shaped the development of higher education over the years. They are central to today's higher education landscape, with thousands of institutions serving millions of students.

Peer review has long been the foundation for the determination of academic quality in higher education. What is valued here is academics reviewing academics or professionals judging professionals – on the assumption that those trained in various academic areas are best suited to judge each other. This assumption is the foundation for the composition of accrediting commissions as well as accreditation review teams. While, over the years, accreditation has come to include significant participation by the public, engagement by peers remains at the core of accreditation judgment.

Institutional autonomy, or the self-determination of a college or university in making academic judgments, is essential to the academic leadership of higher education – leadership in ideas, in reflection on society and its direction, in articulating the future of education. This independence is central to carrying out the core responsibility of academe: the intellectual development of students. Colleges and universities must earn this autonomy; this independence must be accompanied by appropriate accountability to the public. While institutions benefit society most when they provide academic leadership, they fail to live up to their obligation absent a commitment to meeting public needs. Accreditors hold colleges and universities accountable for academic leadership and thus examine whether institutions are adequately autonomous to meet this vital responsibility.

The commitment to mission is the single most important factor driving the diversity of today's higher education landscape. The United States sustains an enormous and unparalleled variation of types of higher education institutions that has contributed to extraordinary access to colleges and universities. All accreditation is mission-based: Accreditors base their reviews and the determination of whether standards are met first and foremost on the mission of the institution or program. Meeting standards at an institution that has a mission to be highly selective and upper-division will be judged differently from an open-admission, lower-division college. Mission drives judgment about accredited status.

Academic freedom is fundamental to higher education teaching, learning and scholarship. It is the scaffolding on which the independence of faculty in exploring ideas and undertaking research is built. Academic freedom helps to protect scholarship and freedom of inquiry from inappropriate

external influence and provides opportunity for intellectual creativity. It is pivotal to the academy's open acceptance of a broad and varied set of ideas and thinking. Commitment to academic freedom is longstanding in higher education. Accreditation plays a central role through its expectations that institutions demonstrate their commitment to academic freedom and its acknowledgment of the importance of academic freedom to the future effectiveness of higher education.

CORE VALUES OF ACCREDITATION

- ***That HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS have primary responsibility for academic quality: They are the leaders and the primary sources of authority in academic matters.***
- ***That INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY is essential to sustaining and enhancing academic quality.***
- ***That INSTITUTIONAL MISSION is central to all judgments of academic quality.***
- ***That ACADEMIC FREEDOM flourishes only in an environment of academic leadership of institutions.***

Accreditation and Government

Although accreditation is nongovernmental, it nonetheless has a complex and important relationship with government, especially at the federal level. For most of its history, until the mid-twentieth century, accreditation operated on its own. However, as demand for higher education expanded and began to diversify to meet student needs following the second World War, accreditation entered into and has sustained a consequential relationship with government that continues to this day.

Accreditation and the Federal Government

The federal government turns to accreditation as a reliable authority as to the quality of education and training offered throughout higher education. The framework for the relationship is the federal Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 that is reauthorized periodically. This federal law contains the standards that accreditors must meet and the operating procedures they must follow. The federal government, through the Department of Education, periodically reviews accrediting organizations based on these standards and procedures, the process known as “recognition” mentioned above. As also mentioned, the federal government is one of two sources of external review of accrediting organizations. At present, 52 non-governmental institutional and programmatic accreditors are federally recognized.

Accreditors that are federally recognized must follow not only the standards and operating procedures in the law, but also meet all of the regulations that the Department of Education has established by which to judge accrediting organizations. The organizations must submit comprehensive evidence

that they meet all federal standards and regulations on a five-year cycle. The review is carried out by the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, a body of educators, policy leaders and the public that advises the Secretary of Education.

Although colleges and universities receive their authority to operate from one of the fifty states, these institutions may also want to receive considerable funding that is made available from the federal government for student grants and loans as well as research and programs. To be eligible for these funds, the institutions must be accredited by an accrediting organization that has won federal approval, one of the roles of accreditation described above. While accreditation is voluntary in the sense that an institution is free to operate without having accredited status, accreditation is essential if an institution wants to attract federal funding.

Federal Recognition Standards

- **Student achievement**
- **Curricula**
- **Faculty**
- **Facilities**
- **Fiscal capacity**
- **Student support**
- **Recruitment and admissions**
- **Program length**
- **Student complaints**
- **Title IV compliance**

“Board members can be helpful in influencing lawmakers and other federal officials about the treatment of accreditation and the role that it is to play.”

Key Actors in Federal Oversight of Accreditation

- **U.S. Congress and the Higher Education Act**
- **U.S. Department of Education – The Accreditation Group**
- **National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity**

Accreditation, over the years, has also been a means whereby the federal government influences and, at times, directs colleges and universities. Government charges accrediting organizations with oversight of extensive areas of institutional operation. It requires that accrediting organizations, for example, monitor what institutions do with regard to the growth of distance learning enrollments and the definition of “credit hour” used by a college or university. Any major change in a college or university such as establishing a new campus or major new program or new degree level must be reviewed by an accreditor. Accreditors review governing board operation, faculty credentials and student learning outcomes. They examine institutional budgets and audits.

In short, although the United States has not developed a federal ministry of education, it nonetheless has a powerful federal influence on how the colleges and universities that receive federal funds operate. Accreditation is a primary means by which this influence is felt. As discussed above, it is essential that governing boards are familiar with these developments and, where needed, can work with presidents, chancellors and accreditors to assure the leadership and independence of governing boards even as these changes at the federal level are taking place.

Accreditation and State Government

The relationship between accreditation and the states varies greatly. There is no single model for the state-accreditor relationship as states charter or establish new public colleges and universities or license or approve the operation of new private nonprofit and for-profit institutions. Each state decides if and how it will use accreditation to carry out its obligations to establish and maintain higher education institutions.

A small number of generalizations can be applied. A newly established institution may be authorized to operate by a state without being accredited, but with an expectation that the college or university will eventually become accredited. This expectation may vary by institutional type, e.g., it may apply to degree-granting institutions but not certificate-granting institutions. For already-established institutions moving into a state, many require that these operations are already accredited.

When states provide funds to colleges and universities either for operating or student aid, these institutions must be accredited or, if new, seeking accreditation. With regard to transfer of credit within a state, some states require that the institutions participating in statewide transfer agreement be accredited; others do not. However, accreditation is typically required among sending and receiving institutions, independent of state policy. With regard to accreditation of programs, many states require that individuals graduate from an accredited program in order to sit for state licensure examinations or to be licensed to practice. Whether accreditation is required is usually determined by the professional field, e.g., health care or other regulated professions.

It is essential that governing boards are familiar with law and regulation of the state in which their institutions are operating. As institutions find themselves operating across a number of states,

especially through distance learning programs, this has required that governing boards expand their understanding of law and regulation in additional states as well.

When it comes to federal or state government, it is vital that board members, institutions and accreditation acknowledge what they have in common: It is in the interest of all that accreditation remain a strong, independent yet accountable force for the value and effectiveness of colleges and universities. Absent confidence in the strength, independence and accountability of accreditation, government confidence in higher education is weakened, college and university self-determination is diminished and the leadership role of governing boards is reduced.



THE CHALLENGES

Accreditation and Its Current Challenges

- [The Expanding Role of Government](#)
- [Public Accountability](#)
- [Accreditation and Innovation](#)
- [New Judges of Academic Quality](#)
- [Internationalization and Accreditation](#)
- [Boards and These Major Challenges](#)

Accreditation, although sustaining a long and respected history in higher education and in relationship to government, is now confronting a number of major challenges, all of which have the potential to significantly alter its operation and role in society. These major challenges are the expanding role of government, the call for greater public accountability, the interest in innovation in higher education, the emergence of competing sources of judgment about academic quality and the expanding internationalization of higher education.

• **The Expanding Role of Government: From Partnership to Oversight**

• **Public Accountability: Calls for Evidence of Student Achievement and Transparency**

• **Accreditation and Innovation: Expectation of Fresh Approaches to Education and Training**

• **New Judges of Academic Quality: Multiple Sources to Answer “Is it Quality?”**

• **Internationalization and Accreditation: How to Assure Quality as Institutions Increasingly Internationalize**

The Expanding Role of Government

The relationship between accreditation and government discussed above was, for many years, a partnership: Government reached out to nongovernmental, independent accreditors to work together

to address academic quality. Over time, however, this partnership has shifted to a relationship in which the federal government is more directive of the work of accreditation. Partnership has given way to a variant of an oversight relationship, with accreditation serving more as an arm of the government or a government agency.

This shift away from partner to government playing more and more of an oversight role has been achieved primarily through expansion of federal regulation of accreditation that dates back to the 2005-06 Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the Bush Administration and has been vigorously enforced and further expanded in the Obama Administration.

The number of regulations has increased significantly and the areas of higher education and regulated have expanded accreditation activity that are of regulatory involvement as well, particularly the extent of regulatory involvement in academic areas heretofore the province of higher education. This includes, e.g., distance learning, the definition of a credit hour, general education and student achievement.

“It is essential [that boards] ... approach challenge and change with a sense of adventure...”

The net result is a major expansion of the authority of the government in managing and directing accreditation as well as judging quality. This affects not only accrediting organizations, but institutions and governing boards as well. The challenge is to find means to both reduce regulation and to streamline the federal recognition of accreditation in a way that is acceptable to the Congress and Department of Education, yet discourages extensiveness and granularity of federal oversight. There is little disagreement that responsiveness to government is central; it matters how it is undertaken.

Public Accountability

Public accountability has been a major challenge for accreditation, especially for the past ten years. Until recently, society has been satisfied with accreditation and its decisions about academic quality primarily in the hands of the higher education community. Accreditation as the concern of academics was acceptable and few questions were asked about how accreditation carried out its work and made its judgments.

Today, society wants to know more about how accreditation is carried out and is now questioning whether it is working, leading to calls for greater public accountability. The reasons are familiar. At least some higher education has become essential to more and more people for economic and social wellbeing. At the same time, higher education has become increasingly expensive, with ever-increasing numbers of students leaving a college or university with significant amounts of debt, not all of whom graduate or complete their educational goals. As more and more data about higher education performance are available to the public, more and more questions are raised about the effectiveness of colleges and universities. Why don't more students graduate? Why do at least some employers continue to be dissatisfied with the skills of college graduates? Why do some studies continue to confirm that the skill and competency levels of students are below what is expected of graduates?

All of this has led to enormous pressure on accreditation to move away from its traditional primary emphasis on quality improvement with its formative, trust-based, aspirational and collegial approach. Accreditation is now called upon to place primary emphasis on public accountability. Much of this is based on a belief that if accreditation were more effective, graduation rates would be higher, students would demonstrate higher skill levels and student debt levels accompanied by failure to complete educational goals would be reduced.

When government and the public call for greater public accountability in accreditation, they are seeking greater rigor in accreditation reviews and more transparency. They call for accreditation standards to be more explicit about what counts as effective performance with regard to student success. They want action to improve substandard institutions or at least to stop providing public funds for their operation. They want the students and the public to have more and better information about institutional performance and about how accrediting organization make their decisions and why. They question how institutions can be performing poorly yet remain accredited.

The heart of the challenge of public accountability is for accreditors and academics to do a stronger job of meeting outcomes and transparency expectations, but not at the price of the valuable quality-improvement approach to accreditation that has proved so important to the past effectiveness of higher education.

Accreditation and Innovation

“Innovation” is now a major topic of discussion at the federal level when considering the future of higher education. The concerns mentioned above about rising tuition, lower-than-desired graduation rates and student debt are accompanied by worry about meaningful employment and economic and international competitiveness. All of this is resulting in lawmakers looking for ways to train and educate more students at lower cost and at an academic level that meets the needs of the future.

To address the concerns, lawmakers have started to look beyond traditional higher education and accreditation. They are looking to alternative providers of education – private companies offering courses such as StraighterLine or Pearson, massive open online course providers such as Coursera and training that is competency-based. The alternative providers are attractive because they are typically free or low-cost, meeting concerns about sustaining affordability. The providers are online and open to the public, addressing the interest in expanding access. Their emphasis on competency-based education addresses the call for assuring student achievement. The interest in Congress was great enough that, throughout 2013-2015, members introduced bills that provided eligibility for federal support for such providers. To date, no bill has become law.

This growing interest in innovation as a solution to access, affordability and performance in higher education has challenged accreditation. Lawmakers, when turning to innovation, claim that it is in part because accreditation is not working to make sure that traditional institutions meet the country’s needs and, at the same time, not embracing the promise of solutions of innovative providers. While

many in higher education and accreditation challenge these claims, lawmakers hold accreditation at least partially responsible for the extent of student debt and the struggles that students are having with managing this debt. Lawmakers point to accreditation as not adequately effective in assuring student achievement in the traditional sector, thereby necessitating innovation. And, lawmakers want accreditors to show leadership in innovation in quality review as well.

New Judges of Academic Quality

Throughout much of its history, accreditation has been viewed as the primary, if not exclusive, source of reliable information about academic quality. This has been not only because students and the public could rely on accreditation, but also because there were few if any competing sources to judge academic quality. All this is changing.

Today, a number of new, alternative means of judging quality are available. These alternative means started with ranking systems for colleges and universities in the 1980s. Rankings are a hierarchical ordering of colleges and universities based on criteria established by the authors of the rankings. Perhaps the best-known ranking in the United States is *U.S. News & World Report*, operating since 1983. *U.S. News* has since been joined by ten major global rankings and 150 country-based or specialist rankings. While many in higher education question whether rankings can be used to judge quality and question the various methodologies that are used, rankings are challenging accreditation as the public nonetheless relies on these lists to make quality judgments.

Another new source for judging quality is interactive data sets developed by governments or the private sector. These data sets are online, free and allow any user to examine a college or university based on a variety of key features such as the availability of federal student aid, admission requirements, graduation rates or transfer rates. These include College Navigator from the federal government, state data sets such as Student Success from California and U-Multirank in Europe. Prospective students may examine specific colleges and universities based on the features in which the students have an interest. Crucially, these users define quality for themselves, using the available data and capacity for comparison, no longer relying on accreditation. These data sets are challenging accreditation as yet another source of judgment about academic quality.

“...leadership is strengthened and enhanced through the engagement of governing boards in the vital issues of accreditation and academic quality.”

In 2015, the federal government determined to develop its own new quality assurance capacity, both in Congress and in the Department of Education – unprecedented in their relationship with the accrediting community. A Senate bill was introduced in 2015 that called for creating new quality assurance organizations and, independently in 2015, the Department began exploring the creation of

new quality assurance organizations to review alternative providers such as those mentioned above. These federal quality assurance bodies would provide for eligibility for federal student aid.

Accreditation, then, for the first time, is challenged by an array of alternative sources to judge quality. The accrediting community will need to think through its future relationship with these approaches. Does accreditation continue as it has been operating, not addressing these new sources? Is the public interest in these alternatives an indication that accreditation needs to go about the task of judging quality in a different way? Will new quality assurance bodies have staying power and what will be their influence? Is there a need or interest in engaging these alternative approaches to combine resources to examine quality? Will these alternative sources, over time, be viewed as the equivalent of accreditation?

Internationalization and Accreditation

U.S. colleges and universities are expanding their international activity in a number of ways. Institutions have increased student exchanges, faculty exchanges and shared research. They are establishing presence in countries outside the United States through branch campuses, graduate training programs and cooperative research centers. They are enrolling more students from outside the United States and sending more of their students abroad. All of this is taking place in an environment in which institutions are investing in internationalizing the curriculum and seeking to sustain an internationalized campus environment.

“Boards are central to the questions being asked and answered...”

This activity is challenging accreditation in three ways. First, U.S. colleges and universities that pursue more and more partnerships with institutions abroad need reliable information about the quality of these institutions and turn to accreditors for this and for information about the quality assurance practices in other countries. When these colleges and universities expand their international operations, accreditors must review these changes. Second, there are increasing calls on U.S. accreditation to operate internationally, reviewing institutions and programs in other countries. Third, there are a number of international efforts to address quality across countries and it is vital that the United States be a colleague in these deliberations.

As of 2013, 51 U.S. accrediting organizations are operating internationally, either through accrediting the international operations of U.S. institutions or accrediting non-U.S. institutions and programs. These accreditors are in 128 countries, with engineering and business accreditation the most active around the world. Accreditors now need expertise not only about their own operation, but also about international quality assurance and its impact on individual institutions and U.S. accreditation generally.

How do accreditors effectively review the international operations of U.S. colleges and universities? How should distance learning, automatically international, be addressed and is quality assurance

or accreditation from a single country adequate? A number of multi-national organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are exploring the feasibility and desirability of international quality standards. How will this affect U.S. accreditation and its service to member institutions?

Boards and These Major Challenges

What do these major challenges – the role of government, public accountability, innovation, new judges of quality and internationalization – mean for the role of accreditation and its relationship with governing boards? What is essential here is how a governing board approaches these issues. Not only do governing boards need to think through the issues, advantages and opportunities associated with each specific challenge, it is essential to approach challenge and change with a sense of adventure, seeking to make the most of each opportunity in the service of a college or university. Yes, the specific responses and solutions are important, but the attitude, the openness and the spirit to take on the future are vital as well. And, this includes working with accrediting organizations.

When an institution is adapting to the current requirements of accreditation review emerging from the more directive role of government or responding to additional calls for data and information to address accountability for student achievement and institutional performance, these adaptations may call for changes in institutional operation of which boards need to be aware. As presidents and chief academic officers bring plans for greater innovation in curricula and programs, it is essential that boards are responsive and constructive in building the future. New judges of quality mean that an institution will be viewed from a greater variety of perspectives and thus can anticipate both greater praise and criticism – all in the public domain. It is vital that boards understand this heightened scrutiny and support the efforts of CEOs in this environment. Internationalization brings with it important and often exciting proposals for change in academic offerings and the expansion of college or university operation into new and often not-well-known environments. Boards are central to the right questions being asked and answered as such efforts go forward.

“Given the centrality of accreditation to the life of a college or university, it is essential that boards are effectively engaged.”

SUMMARY

Accreditation plays a major role in the life of colleges, universities and programs. Although the tendency on the part of some in higher education is to see accreditation as a generally useful, sometimes-annoying experience in the life of an institution involving a comparatively brief investment that includes a report and a visit, accreditation is much more.

Accreditation is typically part of setting an academic quality and accountability agenda for an institution. It is part of setting expectations that institutions must meet to develop new programs and services and how these offerings will be delivered. If an institution seeks to expand its degree programs, establish a new campus, engage internationally or develop partnerships with other institutions – all require the attention of an accreditor. As a requirement for eligibility for federal funds such as student grants and loans, accreditation can play a life-or-death role for an institution.

Accreditation is part of shaping the relationship between higher education and the federal government and, at times, state government. Accreditation is a primary means by which the federal government exercises oversight of colleges and universities. Lawmakers turn to accreditation to enforce requirements in the federal Higher Education Act and regulations from the Department of Education, beyond accreditation standards to, e.g., compliance with student aid and other requirements.

Given the centrality of accreditation to the life of a college or university, it is essential that governing boards are effectively engaged. Boards need to be regularly informed about institutional accreditation and all programmatic accreditations: upcoming visits, steps to assure compliance with accreditation standards, new requirements from accreditors and any concerns that may endanger accredited status. Boards need to be actively engaged in accreditation review, working with a president or chancellor. This may take the form of participation in self-studies, meeting with an accreditation site team, joining a president or chancellor in visiting an accrediting commission, careful board review of team reports and action letters from accrediting organizations and follow-up as needed with, e.g., special accreditation visits or required reports.

Boards also need to engage accreditation at the policy level, keeping informed about how accreditation is addressed in federal law and regulation and about government expectations of the role of accreditation. Board members can also be helpful in influencing lawmakers and other federal officials about their treatment of accreditation and the role that it is to play.

The challenges to accreditation and its core values are many. The leadership of higher education is essential as accreditation meets its challenges and effectively responds to changes in higher education and society. The leadership is strengthened and enhanced through the engagement of governing boards in the vital issues of accreditation and academic quality.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES / ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[2013 Almanac of External Quality Review](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, August 2015.

[Accreditation and Academic Freedom](#). Washington DC; American Association of University Professors and Council for Higher Education Accreditation, October 2012.

[AGB-CHEA Joint Advisory Statement on Accreditation and Governing Boards](#). Washington DC: Association of Governing Boards and Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2009.

Eaton, J., [Accreditation and Recognition in the United States](#). Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2016.

Eaton, J. [An Overview of U.S. Accreditation](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation. November 2015.

Ewell, P., [U.S. Accreditation and the Future of Quality Assurance](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2008.

Ewell, P. and M. Boeke and S. Zis. [State Uses of Institutional Accreditation: Results of a Fifty-State Inventory](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, September 2010.

Hazelkorn, E. “[Rankings and Quality Assurance: Do Rankings Measure Quality?](#)” [Policy Brief](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group, January 2015.

[The Value of Accreditation](#). Washington DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, June 2010.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [CHEA Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized United States Accrediting Organizations](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education – Accreditation: Universities and Higher Education](#)
- [National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity](#)
- [Higher Education Opportunity Act – 2008](#)

MULTIPLE ACCREDITATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Most colleges and universities have multiple accreditations, with at least one institutional accreditor and a number of programmatic accreditors. Below is a list of randomly selected institutions and the number of accreditations for each. This information is from the 2016 Higher Education Directory (HED).

Institution*	Accreditations
Columbia University in the City of New York	19
Harvard University	13
New York University	24
The Ohio State University Main Campus	47
Stanford University	9
University at Albany, SUNY	13
University of Arizona	30
University of California-Berkeley	17
University of California-Los Angeles	23
University of Chicago	7
University of Florida (Gainesville)	38
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	28
University of Phoenix	4
University of Texas at Austin	29
University of Virginia (Charlottesville)	22
University of Washington	35
University of Wisconsin-Madison	35
Yale University	13

**As name appears in HED.*



CHEA ALMANAC ONLINE

Accreditation Actions Accredited Institutions Students in Accredited Institutions Accredited Programs International Accreditation Activity Recognition Appendix

**Your Source for
Information on
Higher Education
Accreditation!**

Use the *CHEA Almanac Online*, found on the CHEA Website to:

- See recent accrediting actions, updated quarterly, by accrediting organizations, including actions to grant, reaffirm, defer, deny or withdraw accreditation
- Find the recognition status of accrediting organizations reviewed by CHEA, the U.S. Department of Education or both
- Get information about the number of institutions and programs accredited by recognized accrediting organizations and the number of students enrolled, sorted by the type of accretor
- Learn which institutions and programs operating outside the United States are accredited by recognized U.S. accrediting organizations

Turn to the *CHEA Almanac Online* whenever you need information on higher education accreditation!

To connect directly to the *CHEA Almanac Online*, go to:
<http://www.chea.org/AlmanacOnline/index.asp>

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