



OP-ED



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Involving Students in Accreditation

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Higher education is transforming internally and externally. The demographics of learners continue to shift drastically to be more inclusive of people of color, first generation, part-time, returning and older students. Learners are more diverse than ever before. There is also an expansion of types of programs offered to students. Coding boot camps, microdegrees and MOOCs are providing exciting alternatives to learn and gain certain skills. Moreover, a shift in the character of accountability is occurring. Accreditation has been the traditional form of external evaluation of quality for the Academy, governed by the Academy and funded by the Academy. These changes call for an expansion of key stakeholders in the accreditation process – particularly employers and students. This article focuses on the need for accreditors to engage students in fundamentally different ways in all stages of its process.



Students are often involved at the institution level in meaningful ways. Inside institutions, students take on various roles to influence the quality of their education and environment. Student trustees, student government, student advisory groups and student-led protests influence decisions and policies in important ways. Yet they are barely included in external process of examining quality even though they have a direct stake in assuring the quality of their credential or degree. Student engagement in accreditation is a needed extension.

While there may be limited involvement of students in accreditation, such as institutional assessment committees or self-study steering committees, there remains much work to include students in meaningful ways. A comprehensive accreditation review team may speak with student government leaders or other students; however, this is not sufficient to authentically capture campus culture and attitudes. Too often these students are selected by the institution rather than by the team. Students are not just third-party beneficiaries of this accreditation system. Rather, they are key stakeholders within the dynamic new landscape of higher education, and they must be valued and engaged as such. There are many opportunities for students to participate: serving on review teams, having a responsible place in policy and decision making, being invited to provide input in preparing and writing standards, having accreditation ambassadors inform other students about the process and so on. All of these levels of involvement have been, for years, required as part of quality assurance processes in Europe and have proven to be effective. It is time for the U.S. to adopt a similar model.

The European Higher Education Area sets the gold standard of training and engaging with students in the process. A study found student involvement on teams improved the quality assurance process.¹ In some

1 "A Twenty-Year Contribution To Institutional Change" by the European University Association: http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/20_years_of_IEP.pdf?sfvrsn=2

nations, such as Chile, Spain or India, student activism has taken a more political and populist approach to creating a role for the student voice, often with mixed impact, when an invitation to be engaged in quality processes might have had better results for all parties.

There are two primary reasons why students should be involved in the accreditation process. First, changing demographics is a salient reason that students should have a seat at the table. Students' voices are pushing many important issues, such as Black Lives Matter, sexual assault awareness, student debt, immigrant education and equitable, affordable access to growing options for postsecondary education. Yet issues that matter most to students, and perhaps to the public, are barely recognized by accreditors. With students involved in accreditation, there is ripe opportunity for students to familiarize regional, national and programmatic accreditors with these realities and their perspectives. Attending college in the 21st Century is not the same as when most administrators went; in 1978, a student could pay for college with a summer job.² In 2016, too many students graduate with thousands of dollars of debt, many without a degree or meaningful credential. Students have the potential to push conversations that accreditors and institutions should engage in, even when they are uncomfortable or do not correspond to the usual standards and criteria that typically shape discussions.

Another reason to include students is significant: Accreditation organizations are missing critical feedback to provide a holistic review of institutions. If peer review is the crux of what makes the current system of quality assurance, it's breathtaking to realize that the key consumer – the student – is not able to question and analyze standards and how they are being met. The feedback provided by students – learners of all ages and backgrounds – can strengthen accreditation teams by teaching others what questions to ask and what should be included in the report. Engaged learners also strengthen the institution by providing feedback to faculty members and administrators at levels students know best. How students experience safety and financial aid at institutions is part of the quality conversation. Students may tell accreditors and institutions information that would not be disclosed to traditional team members and might be different from the institutional perception of student issues. But this is how we continue to build the world's best higher education system – by reviewing and offering constructive, sometimes difficult feedback to help our institutions and students succeed.

Our future lies squarely in the hands of our students. Accreditation is no different. It is time for accreditation to shape its future by ensuring that students are there every step of the way. In this regard, we could realize all the benefits of being truly student-centered.

2 “When a Summer Job Could Pay the Tuition” by Timothy Taylor: <http://conversableeconomist.blogspot.com/2015/03/when-summer-job-could-pay-tuition.html>

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