



# OP-ED



## THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OPINION SERIES

*2016-2017 is the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the operation of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA is using this opportunity to look to the future of accreditation: what we do, how we serve students and our role in society. Op-eds from leading thinkers in accreditation and higher education will be published during the next six months on the CHEA website and a compilation will be available at the end of the academic year.*

*We thank the many colleagues, institutions and organizations that have worked with CHEA over the years. The relationships we have built are the most valuable feature of our work and have been essential to our moving forward.*

*Judith Eaton  
President*

### *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* ("Who will guard the guards themselves?")

*Stephen Joel Trachtenberg*



**A**ll of us are accountable. Religions hold us accountable to God. Santa Claus makes a list of who has been naughty and who has been nice. Freud tells us about the super ego. Everyone has a watchdog.

Universities have been indulged as a special sort of institution for a long time, responsible mostly to themselves and it worked so long as the institutions were elitist and everyone understood the rules. But as schools of higher learning became more democratic, as an increasing percentage of the populace enrolled and as a growing portion of the budget came from the public purse rather than from personal pockets, questions about value have increasingly arisen.

**S**o long as students found satisfactory employment and compensation upon graduation, universities got a pass on accountability. Now the conversation has gone from education for its own sake to return on investment and short-term financial rewards. Education has become a fee-for-service business.

Higher education was once in the domain of lofty aspirations – the enrichment of the mind - and today it is more often in the province of employment agencies. Four years of studying philosophy, art history and literature is a luxury few can afford. The bumper sticker, "Stay in School You'll Earn More," has turned out to be a puffery.

**E**nter accreditation. These organizations are the overseers of the public yet at the same time they are often "family" – faculty and staff from one school looking into the affairs of another school, and vice-versa. It is this closeness that has drawn the attention of the public and the government. As tuition rises and the ease of employment diminishes, the public wonders what return is gained from the enormous expenditures and high debt. And entrepreneur Peter Thiel is paying young people \$100,000 not to matriculate.

Accreditation is now supposed to guarantee a basic level of service be delivered to the consumer. It is about reliability, transparency and standards. It's about measurement. A student coming to a university should learn which services – academic and support – are available at her school, for what price, how to go about making sound use of those services and what results to expect upon completion of her studies.

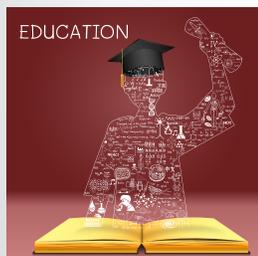
**A**n early encounter with accreditation was home-based: “The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.” In 1885, when *Good Housekeeping* magazine was founded its mission talked about “equal portions of public duty and private enterprise.” And from that day forward, the gold star of approval graced packaging across the country. Customers looked for it on products and producers of goods and services maintained standards in order to achieve recognition by *Good Housekeeping* and later by *Consumer Reports* and earn the buyer’s trust. Consider them the *U.S. News & World Report* rankers of their day. Today just about every e-commerce site has a review section.

What the public is continually looking for is consistency: reliability of size, weight, material, energy consumption, teaching skills, research resources, etc., in clothing, food, machinery or higher education. Washing machine X uses one amount of energy and washing machine Y uses another amount. Life is a series of “compare and contrast,” a constant encounter between the purchaser/user and their corresponding service providers.



**T**he consumer wants to know whether she is getting her money’s worth. But price doesn’t tell the entire story. A product label says a sweater is 90 percent wool and 10 percent nylon. Whether that sweater is better or worse than another one that is 50 percent wool and 50 percent silk is almost impossible to judge. Subjectivity collides with objectivity when making a purchase in a department store or enrolling on a college campus. Does a small liberal arts school deliver a better education than does a large land-grant university? It all depends on what you are looking for.

College catalogues contain declarations almost as flamboyant as the U.S. Navy’s advertisement that promises if one enlists “...you will be able to see the world.” Today’s accrediting teams asks if a school delivers on its promises. Accreditors must take into account the diversity of the campuses they are monitoring and understand that one size does not fit all. Nuance is important. Julliard and Cal Tech do not fit the same mold nor should their evaluators look for and grade the same markers.



**E**fforts by universities to continue doing things the way they have always been done will be futile. That does not mean that accreditation need necessarily become anti-intellectual or excessively utilitarian, but a middle ground needs to be negotiated between a classic model in which academics scratched each other’s backs and gathering statistics such as measuring how quickly graduates find a job or what they earn. Public trust and accountability are worthy goals. However, let’s not become over zealous in a twilight zone of compliance with the non-relevant factoids. In the age of electronic higher education, are we still counting seats and laboratory stations, books and periodicals?

Remember the mission of higher education: to transfer information from generation to generation; develop critical thinking; reinforce the joy of learning; provide skills necessary for employment and a life well-lived. Measuring such concepts is an elusive assignment, even though necessary. The amount of debt a student carries is not the most pertinent inquiry, but rather how quickly she can pay it down. Key is how to make college affordable. By flipping the questions the matrix goes from irrelevant to relevant. While that does not make accreditation easier to define, it does make it more useful. Ultimately we are left with the question put by the Roman poet Juvenal, “Who will guard the guards themselves?” - surely not another government agency.

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