



OP-ED



THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20TH YEAR OPINION SERIES

Issue 8 • June 2017

The Future of Specialized and Professional Accreditation

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Specialized and professional accreditation has a proud history of sustaining good accreditation practice and enforcing standards so that academic programs produce effective and safe practitioners who serve the public good. These programs range from architecture to veterinary medicine, engineering to respiratory care and counseling to project management. Recently publicized misperceptions that demonize peer review and limit the definition of good outcomes to graduation and retention rates, debt, repayment and default rates and earnings and job placement rates are woefully short-sighted. Is it more important to the public what the graduation rates of architects and engineers are, or that they build safe buildings and bridges? Is it more important how much dental school costs or that the dentists are skilled and competent in performing dental work? While those indicators are important to monitor in conjunction with others, they do not measure the kinds of outcomes the public expects of its physicians, nurses, engineers and educators. Determination of whether graduates of professional programs are competent to practice is the focus of specialized and professional accreditors – and the future of accreditation depends on this concept.



The foundation of professional and specialized accreditation (also called programmatic accreditation) is the inclusive process wherein subject matter experts set national accreditation standards and determine competencies. For any given profession, these content experts (peers) include practitioners, employers and industry, educators, professional associations and other communities of interest. Competencies are the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for safe and effective practice in a profession. Competencies encompass critical thinking and the ability to adapt and to create knowledge that is essential for the evolution of professional practice in response to a changing environment. Programmatic accreditors focus on assessment methods that enable faculty and other stakeholders to determine that the student has reached a level of performance for competent practice in the profession. Peer review is an essential element in judging such outcomes.

Peer review is negatively perceived by lawmakers and others who characterize accreditors as membership organizations whose accreditation reviews are performed by sympathetic friends and colleagues. The peer review process in programmatic accreditation contains rigorous systems of checks and balances to ensure objectivity and avoid conflicts of interest or any type of collusion between accreditors and the programs under review. While some institutional accreditors may call their accredited institutions “members,” the vast majority of specialized and professional accreditors do not. The term “member” erroneously implies to the public that an institution can simply pay or sign up to join the group. In programmatic accreditation, accredited programs are considered just that – accredited programs – not members.





Peer review in specialized and professional accreditation guarantees that those who have actual and practical knowledge of the profession contribute across all aspects of the accreditation process, from development of profession-specific competencies and accreditation standards and policies through the review and decision making about accreditation status. Most would agree that the standards for the education of our physicians should be

developed by other physicians, not bureaucrats. The determination of quality practice and quality education, and contributions to the advancement of a profession are appropriately accomplished by subject matter or content experts.

Although the current discussion on outcomes and focus on graduation, debt rates, employment and salaries will likely persist, attention must be directed on the positive impact of graduates from professional and specialized programs on their communities and society. For instance, social workers and teachers contribute greatly to society, but typically earn lower wages. Students completing accredited programs have the appropriate skills for the workforce because employers are involved in the accreditation process. With advances in technology and research, students are equipped with state of the art knowledge and competencies because programmatic accreditation requirements are adjusted to reflect those advances. Through specialized and professional accreditation, the public is protected and benefits because graduates are prepared with entry-level skills, and educational programs continually strive to improve. The role that specialized and professional accreditors play in serving the public interest is essential, and may serve as a model for other accreditors. The key will be for programmatic accreditors to ensure that the public and lawmakers understand the value of the process and the truly appropriate outcomes.

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