

U.S. Accreditation: Meeting the Challenges of Accountability and Student Achievement

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Abstract

Accountability and student achievement have posed major challenges to U.S. accreditation for the last decade. The responses to these challenges have been shaped not only by the origins, values and structure of accreditation, but also by the fundamental features of U.S. higher education with its history of decentralization, diversity and complexity. This paper offers brief profiles of U.S. higher education and accreditation as well as describing their complicated relationships with the federal government. The profiles provide the context for consideration of how U.S. accreditation has addressed both accountability and attention to student achievement, meeting these challenges within the framework of its longstanding values, processes and practices.

Keyword: Accreditation; Accountability; Quality

1. Overview

Accountability and student achievement have posed major challenges to U.S. accreditation for the last decade. The responses to these challenges have been shaped not only by the origins, values and structure of accreditation, but also by the fundamental features of U.S. higher education with its history of decentralization, diversity and complexity. This paper offers brief profiles of U.S. higher education and accreditation as well as describing their complicated relationships with the federal government. The profiles provide the context for consideration of how U.S. accreditation has addressed both accountability and attention to student achievement, meeting these challenges within the framework of its longstanding values, processes and practices.

2. U.S. Higher Education

The United States has no single, national authority or ministry for higher education. The enterprise is decentralized, with responsibility for higher education distributed among the 50 states, institutional governing boards and, at times, local political units (e.g., cities or counties). Each of the states is vested with the authority to establish or license a higher education institution and to authorize the institution to award degrees. Institutions are self-governing with elected or appointed boards of trustees and are individually charged with the vital responsibility for academic leadership.

The higher education enterprise is diverse. The earliest institutions were private and nonprofit: Harvard was founded in 1636, followed by the College of William and Mary in 1693 and Yale in 1701 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Today there are 7,400 public and private nonprofit and for-profit accredited schools, colleges and universities (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2010a). Educational structures or institutional types vary greatly: four-year undergraduate colleges, research universities, two-year community colleges, vocational schools, liberal arts institutions, comprehensive master's institutions and single-purpose institutions (e.g., art, business and information technology schools).

U.S. higher education is complex, with institutions offering certificate, associate degree, baccalaureate, master's and doctoral-level credentials in

thousands of disciplines and program areas. Institutions may be single-campus or sustain multiple locations throughout the country. Institutions have detailed and complicated relationships with all levels of government: local, state and federal. They have multiple sources of financial support: public funds, student tuition, corporate funds, individual donations, endowments and foundation support. They serve multiple constituents, not only students, but corporations and government (in the case of research) and the general public (in the case of economic and community development). They house major medical centers, major art centers and major athletic programs.

3. U.S. Accreditation

As with higher education institutions, accreditation began as a private (nongovernmental) enterprise, a creation of colleges and universities that dates back to the nineteenth century. U.S. higher education has long relied on some form of self-evaluation as its central means to judge quality and effectiveness. Known as “accreditation,” this is a process of both assuring threshold quality and improving quality in colleges and universities. It is used to determine how well higher education serves students and society.

All accreditation is built on the two fundamentals of self-regulation and peer/professional review. In addition, accreditation both reflects and reinforces three core values of higher education as essential to academic quality: institutional autonomy or the independence of a college or university to set its own academic direction; academic freedom or the expectation that faculty are to decide what and how to teach as well as who may teach and who is taught; and commitment to institutional mission or the purpose for which a college or institution is established as key to judging its effectiveness.

Some accrediting organizations review colleges and universities. Others review specific programs, e.g., law, medicine, engineering. In a number of fields, especially the health professions, graduation from an accredited program is a requirement for receiving a license to practice. As of 2008-2009, there were 79 recognized organizations; 19 accredit institutions and 60 accredit programs. To do their work, accrediting organizations rely on funding from colleges, universities, and programs, expending \$100 million in 2008-2009 (CHEA, 2010a). Accreditation depends heavily on faculty and academic administrators

from higher education who voluntarily participate in self-studies, serve as peer and professional reviewers and serve on accrediting organizations' decision-making bodies.

To obtain and maintain accredited status, colleges and universities undergo periodic review. Typically, a college or university will have multiple accreditations, although the numbers of accreditors varies based on the offerings of the institution. For example, the University of Michigan, a large, public research university, has institutional accreditation and 25 programmatic accreditations. The University of Charleston, a private masters-level institution in West Virginia, has institutional accreditation and four programmatic accreditations.

As with higher education, U.S. accreditation is decentralized enterprise. All of the 79 accrediting organizations are independent and create and use organizationally specific standards to assure that institutions and programs meet threshold expectations of quality and to assure that colleges and universities improve over time. These standards address key areas such as academic quality, accountability, finance and facilities, curricula and student learning outcomes. They focus on quality, accountability, capacity, process and results, tailored by each accreditor.

All accrediting organizations apply have similar processes and practices: a self-review by the institution or program against the accreditation standards, an on-site visit by an evaluation team of peer experts sent by accrediting organizations and a subsequent review and decision by the accrediting body to award or deny accredited status. This review is repeated every three to ten years if the institution or program is to sustain its accreditation. Accreditation is a periodic, standards-based, evidence-based, judgment-based, peer-based process.

4. Role of Accreditation in U.S. Society

Accreditation plays four major roles in U.S. society. It assures quality, provides access to federal funds, engenders public confidence in higher education and eases transfer of credit (Eaton, 2009b). "Accredited status" means that students and the public can expect that a school or program lives up to its promises. It means that students can have confidence that a degree or credential has value. Accreditation signals that the public can have confidence in the worth of an institution or program.

For students, accreditation:

- Provides access to federal and sometimes state financial aid to those who qualify and attend institutions accredited by recognized accrediting organizations.
- Assists with mobility by assuring that the sending institution or program has met threshold expectations of quality.
- Signals to prospective employers that an educational program has met widely accepted standards, with graduation from an accredited program, in some cases, a prerequisite for entering a profession.

To the public, accreditation:

- Confirms that an institution provides reliable information to the public about, e.g., academic programs, student services, student achievement and institutional performance.
- Promotes accountability through ongoing external evaluation of an institution or program.
- Identifies institutions and programs that have voluntarily undertaken explicit activities directed at improving quality (CHEA, 2010d).

5. Accreditation and the Federal Government

In the early 1950s, private-sector accreditation entered into a partnership with the federal government to serve as a “reliable authority” with regard to the quality of higher education. The primary purpose of the federal review was to assure that federal funds for students, research and programs were spent only in legitimate colleges and universities. This arrangement, commonly referred to as the “gatekeeping” role of accreditation, put these private-sector organizations in the pivotal role position of providing (or sometimes blocking) institutional or program eligibility for federal funding.

Although, as noted above, the United States has never had a national ministry of education, the role of government in overseeing both accreditation and higher education has expanded and become more complex over the years. A driving force here has been the growth of higher education enrollments, accompanied by ever-enlarging government financial investment in colleges and universities. Cohen and Kisker (2010) report that, in 1945, there were 1,768 institutions of higher education in the United States, serving 1.677 million

students as compared to the 7,400 accredited institutions and their programs serving 27 million students in 2008-2009 (CHEA, 2010a). Major pieces of federal legislation provide a record of this expanding federal role and investment:

- 1944: Servicemen's Readjustment Act provides financial assistance to veterans of the Second World War
- 1952: Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act continues and expands federal funding available for returning veterans and establishes nongovernmental accreditors as "reliable authorities" as to quality of educational offerings.
- 1958: National Defense Education Act provides major support to higher education, including loans and fellowships.
- 1965: First federal law devoted to higher education (Higher Education Act) -- establishes the basic structure for ongoing grant and loan programs for students.
- 1972: Major expansion of federal student aid, including making funds available to students attending for-profit institutions and affirming that federal assistance is to go to students and not institutions.
- 1992: Federal oversight of accreditation incorporated into Higher Education Act, in part a reaction to concerns about the extent to which students were defaulting on federal loans.

As accreditors initially took on the gatekeeping role and responsibility, the federal government viewed them as making an "invaluable contribution" to the development of educational quality. For example, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1970 described accreditors as "the primary agents in the development and maintenance of educational standards in the United States." And, because of the concern to work with the federal government while, at the same time, to assure that this did not lead federal involvement in the academic self-determination of colleges and universities, the 1958 National Defense Education Act and the 1972 General Education Provisions Act prohibited federal intervention in the academic and administrative matters of institutions. As stated in the 1972 legislation, "no provision . . . shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school or school system" (Eaton, 2010).

Even with these protections, however, the accreditors' gatekeeping role has attracted more and more federal attention to academic matters, e.g., transfer of credit, distance learning and textbooks. Accrediting organizations, although independent, are increasingly directed and judged by the federal government, perhaps the beginning of replacing both institutional and faculty judgment in academic matters. Especially the Higher Education Act of 1965 and its successive reauthorizations have been central to this expansion of law and regulation governing accreditation standards and practice.

The primary means by which government oversees accreditation is through a process called "recognition." Accrediting organizations must be reviewed at least every five years by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). The review is carried out by a committee that advises the U.S. Secretary of Education, the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). If accreditors are to play the "reliable authority" and gatekeeping roles, they must be periodically reviewed by this committee. NACIQI is composed of eighteen members: six members each appointed by the U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Secretary of Education. Members may be from education, the business community, government or the general public -- provided that each appointment meets the requirements in federal law.

To achieve recognition, accrediting organizations must meet ten recognition standards that are in federal law. These cover areas such as student achievement, curriculum, faculty, student support services, and financial and administrative capacity. These organizations are also subject to a broad array of regulations that accompany the standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). As of 2008-2009, 57 accrediting organizations were recognized by the federal government (CHEA, 2010a).

6. Private Sector Oversight of Accreditation

Accrediting organizations are also voluntarily scrutinized by the private sector through the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a nongovernmental, institutional membership organization established in 1996 to provide national coordination of accreditation. This scrutiny is also called "recognition" and is similar to the federal government's process, but with a different purpose and standards. Private sector recognition focuses primarily on

the effectiveness of an accrediting organization in assuring threshold academic quality and quality improvement. This contrasts with the federal government's primary role (as indicated above) of assuring that federal funds are appropriately spent.

CHEA has six standards by which it reviews accrediting organizations. The standards place primary emphasis on academic quality assurance and improvement for an institution or program. They require accreditors to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage purposeful change and needed improvement, employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision making, continually reassess accreditation practices and sustain fiscal stability.

CHEA-recognized accreditors are normally reviewed on a 10-year cycle. The review is carried out by the CHEA committee on recognition, a group of institutional representatives, accreditors and public members that scrutinizes accreditors for their eligibility for CHEA recognition and determine whether the accreditor meets the recognition standards. The review includes a site visit. The committee on recognition makes recommendations to the CHEA governing board to affirm or deny recognition to an accreditor (CHEA, 2010c). As of 2008-2009, 61 accreditors were recognized by CHEA (CHEA, 2010a).

7. Accreditation and Accountability

7.1 Accountability, Government and the Public

An intense dialogue about accountability has dominated discussions among higher education leaders, accreditation and government in the United States for a decade. "Accountability" refers to how and the extent to which higher education and accreditation accept responsibility for the quality and results of their work and are openly responsive to constituents and the public. Accountability emerged as a high-profile issue particularly with the 2005-2006 U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education. And, attention to accountability put a spotlight on accreditation and its claim to assure and improve quality.

As Daniel Yankelovich (2006) framed this issue, the United States, since 2001, has been experiencing a decline of trust and confidence in many social institutions whether, e.g., corporations, banks, insurance companies, religious

institutions -- or accreditation. This decline of trust has been accompanied by a rise in interest in regulatory intervention in all of these areas. As faith and confidence diminished, calls for greater accountability became louder and louder. Government responded, expanding regulation and oversight in many phases of U.S. life, including accreditation as well as higher education.

The Futures Commission, reflecting this absence of trust and confidence, found accreditation lacking with regard to accountability issues. Its work influenced the federal Higher Education Act, reauthorized in 2008, resulting in additional demands on accreditors to be more accountable. And, the subsequent establishment of rules to implement the revised law that took place during 2009 and 2010 expanded accountability expectations even more. Throughout the decade, interest in regulation for greater accountability from higher education and accreditation remained high, similar in some ways to the approaches that government had taken with, for example, banks, the financial industry, housing and the automotive industry, as the country struggled to deal with a major economic recession.

When lawmakers, the press and students seek greater accountability from accreditation, they are looking for accreditors to:

- Provide transparency -- easily available and readily understandable full information to the public -- about the actions and decisions of accrediting organization when awarding or denying accredited status to institutions and programs.
- Not only develop rigorous standards for quality, but also assure that the standards are rigorously enforced.
- Assure that institutions and programs provide readily available and easily understandable evidence of student achievement and information about higher education performance with regard to students achieving their educational goals, e.g., graduation, transfer, entry to graduate school and job placement.

7.2 Transparency

With regard to transparency, especially as this relates to student achievement, a 2006 CHEA survey found that, among the active, recognized accrediting organizations, 12 provide any detailed information on the results of an accreditation review; 11 provide information about institution or program

performance or student achievement; and 15 require that institutions or programs make public the information they compile about institutional and program performance or student achievement (CHEA, 2006).

Both CHEA and USDE, the bodies that review accreditors for recognition, have requirements about transparency. USDE requires that accreditors provide information to the public about accredited status and, in the case of major negative actions, to provide detail associated with these decisions. CHEA requires that accreditors hold institutions and programs responsible to inform the public about student achievement and to inform the public of their accreditation decisions as well as the reasons for these decisions.

For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), one of the seven regional (institutional) accrediting organizations, publishes a *Statement of Accreditation Status* (MSCHE, n.d.) on its Website that provides basic information about an accredited institution accompanied by a description of its most recent accreditation activity:

INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION

Enrollment

(Headcount):

Control:

Affiliation:

Carnegie Classification:

Degrees Offered:

Distance Education Programs:

Accreditors Approved by U.S. Secretary of Education:

Other Accreditors:

Instructional Locations

Branch Campuses:

Additional Locations:

Other Instructional Sites:

ACCREDITATION INFORMATION

Status: Member since

Last Reaffirmed:

Most Recent Commission Action:

Date: Description of Action Brief History Since Last Comprehensive Evaluation:

Date: Description of Action Next Self-Study Evaluation:

Next Periodic Review Report:

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) provides information on accreditation decisions to the public and its *Public Notice of Accrediting Actions* (ACEJMC, n.d.) on its Website:

The Council publishes the names of units to be reviewed for initial accreditation or re-accreditation well in advance of the reviews. This notice is accompanied by an explicit invitation for comment by third parties, limited to written comment speaking directly to a unit's compliance with the Council's published accreditation standards.

Within 30 days of the decision, the Council notifies other appropriate accrediting agencies, appropriate State regulatory agencies, and the public of: final decisions to award accreditation, re-accreditation, or provisional accreditation; final decisions to deny, withdraw, suspend, or terminate any unit's accreditation, or take other adverse action; and final decisions by units to voluntarily withdraw from accreditation or allow their accreditation to lapse.

Within 60 days of a final decision to deny, withdraw, suspend, or terminate any unit's accreditation, or take other adverse action, the Council makes available to other appropriate accrediting agencies, appropriate State regulatory agencies, and the public on request, a brief statement of the reasons for the decision, accompanied by any comments the affected unit may wish to make regarding the decision.

The Council submits to the Commission on Higher Education Accreditation copies of its annually updated directory of accredited programs; any proposed changes in its policies, procedures, or accreditation standards that might alter its scope of recognition or compliance with requirements of the Commission; any annual report it may prepare; and any annual data summary, or other information, that the Commission may request.

7.3 Enforcement of Quality Standards

With regard to enforcement of quality standards, the recent focus on for-profit higher education by the federal government had raised serious questions about whether robust action is routinely taken when accreditation standards are not being met. Lawmakers are demanding that accrediting organization not only formulate rigorous standards, but take all needed steps to enforce these expectations. This has especially been an issue with regard to the recruitment and marketing practices of several large for-profit providers of higher education, such as the Apollo Group, Education Management Corporation and Kaplan, Inc. -- whatever their sources of accreditation.

7.4 Varying Perceptions of Accountability

The accreditation community envisions accountability differently from most lawmakers, the press or students. Historically, accrediting organizations have viewed themselves accountable, first and foremost, to the institutions and programs they accredit. They believe that accountability to colleges and universities will result in accountability to students and the public. This helps to explain the standard practice in the United States of not making accreditation reviews public.

Moreover, the accreditation community views accountability as primarily a “formative” process. This means that when accreditors review institutions and programs and find flaws in these operations, they call for remediation of deficiencies even as they award or continue accreditation. Only in instances of extreme deficiencies would accreditation be denied or removed. To the higher education community, accreditation is about enhancing quality over time, not making an instant up-or-down judgment. This is in contrast to a “summative” approach to accountability that is often heard from lawmakers: If there are deficiencies, accreditation should be denied or removed.

7.5 The Accountability Initiatives of the Academic Community

Government aside, higher education has been a heavily scrutinized enterprise for many years. Colleges and universities have ongoing, formal accountability obligations to multiple constituents, including students, governing

boards, institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations and local, state and federal governments. Higher education is also accountable to alumni, donors and the taxpaying public.

Colleges and universities have impressive array of their own national accountability activities, many developed during the past ten years through their national, nongovernmental associations, e.g., the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. These national activities are accompanied by individual colleges and universities around the country that are also developing their own individual institution-based approaches to accountability, augmenting and enhancing these national efforts. Some activities provide a valuable frame of reference and organize institutional approaches to student learning. Other activities provide testing assessment and survey tools.

All the national activities provide tools or frameworks by which higher education informs students and society about what is being done to promote student learning and advance institutional performance. All are characterized by colleges and universities (1) making conscious decisions to assertively address accountability, (2) locating and judging accountability at the institutional level and (3) acknowledging and embracing faculty leadership as central to academic judgments.

Beyond accreditation and the national and institutional accountability activities, various national rankings systems have been developed. Rankings constitute another form of accountability -- institutions voluntarily agree to participate in them and the public relies on them to obtain information and make judgments about colleges and universities. *US News and World Report* annually ranks what it considers to be America's "best colleges," some 1,400 institutions in 2009. It also ranks more than 1,500 graduate schools. The *Princeton Review* currently ranks 368 "best" colleges (Eaton, 2009a).

Accreditation and accountability for student achievement, the third expectation of government, the press and public, is considered in the next section.

8. Accreditation and Student Achievement

“Student achievement” refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained as a result of engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences. Institutional and programmatic accreditation are central to undertakings to address student achievement in higher education. Accreditation is part of aligning the academic community’s longstanding commitment to robust self-regulation and peer/professional review of higher education quality with the challenge of accountability to the public for what students learn.

There is a *de facto* national consensus about doing more about student achievement. The federal government, in its oversight role of accrediting organizations, expects that accreditation will address student achievement. CHEA scrutiny of accrediting organizations includes an expectation that accreditation reviews focus on student achievement as fundamental to judgment about academic quality. States emphasize performance funding that includes considerable attention to student achievement, with some states relying on accreditation for this purpose. The private sector (e.g., employers or foundations) expects accredited status to signal confidence in the work of an institution or program as this relates to what students learn.

There is also a *de facto* international consensus. Organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have all identified major gains in student achievement as essential to the future of nations, the well-being of societies and the world economy. UNESCO’s 2009 World Conference focused considerable attention on the importance of student achievement, especially as we operate in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

The Bologna Process (1999) to establish a European Higher Education Area has at the heart of its reforms a call for defined student learning outcomes for the three degree levels of higher education (baccalaureate, master’s, doctorate). OECD has launched the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project, a study to explore the feasibility of implementing an international assessment of what students know and can do when they graduate from a college or university. This study is taking place during 2008-2011.

In today's climate of accountability, the interest in student achievement continues to intensify, with the work of accreditation as a central focus. Accreditors are challenged to frame and use their standards to assure that institutions set expectations of student achievement, provide evidence of student achievement, inform the public of what students achieve and use the evidence of student achievement to improve. They are urged to be more explicit about calling for creation and publication of evidence of what students learn. They are asked to make the results of accreditation reviews available to the public, especially as this relates to student achievement and institutional performance. Beyond this, there are calls for standardization of expectations of student learning, including common expectations for the undergraduate degree.

Accrediting organizations have responded to these calls through their standards that require institutions and programs provide information about expectations of institutions and programs with regard to establishing expectations of student learning and providing evidence that this learning has taken place.

For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges -- Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE), one of the seven regional (institutional) accrediting organizations, has a policy statement that calls for the organization, when carrying out its accreditation responsibilities, to assure that its decisions take into account the degree to which an affiliated institution assesses student achievement and student success and uses the results of its assessment to improve its offerings, matters explicitly addressed in the *Standards for Accreditation* (NEASC-CIHE, 2005) and *Policy Statement on Student Achievement and Success* (NEASC-CIHE, 2007).

The accreditation standard is:

The institution measures student success, including rates of retention and graduation and other measures of success appropriate to institutional mission. The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services. Rates of retention and graduation are separately determined for any group that the institution specifically recruits, and those rates are used in evaluating the success of specialized recruitment and the services and opportunities provided for the recruited students. (Section 6, Retention and Graduation, NEASC Standards for Accreditation)

ABET, Inc., the U.S. engineering accrediting organization, sets forth precise student achievement expectations in each of the focused program areas that it accredits in computing, engineering and technology. The *2010-2011 Criteria for Accrediting Engineering Programs* (ABET, 2009) states:

Criterion 3. Program Outcomes

Each program must demonstrate that graduates have:

- a. an appropriate mastery of the knowledge, techniques, skills, and modern tools of their disciplines
- b. an ability to apply current knowledge and adapt to emerging applications of mathematics, science, engineering, and technology
- c. an ability to conduct, analyze and interpret experiments, and apply experimental results to improve processes
- d. an ability to apply creativity in the design of systems, components, or processes appropriate to program educational objectives
- e. an ability to function effectively on teams
- f. an ability to identify, analyze and solve technical problems
- g. an ability to communicate effectively
- h. a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in lifelong learning
- i. an ability to understand professional, ethical and social responsibilities
- j. a respect for diversity and a knowledge of contemporary professional, societal and global issues
- k. a commitment to quality, timeliness, and continuous improvement.

The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC), a large organization that accredits primarily for-profit degree-granting and nondegree-granting institutions, expects that every program offered by an accredited institution demonstrates an acceptable rate of student graduation and employment in the career field for which the institution provides education. Accredited institutions must also demonstrate student achievement by documenting that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills and competencies intended by the program objectives as described in the *ACCSC Standards of Accreditation* (ACCSC, 2010):

A. Student Learning, Assessment, and Satisfactory Progress

1. Student Learning

- a. Student learning outcomes for each program are consistent with the program objectives defined by the institution's program design and

development process and meet any relevant academic, occupational, or regulatory requirements.

- b. Student learning outcomes for each program are aligned with the program's objectives, the occupational area of study, and with the level of education intended (e.g., non-degree, degree, degree level).
- c. Student learning outcomes for each program reflect the necessary occupational and academic knowledge, skills, and competencies as applicable.

Student Achievement

1. Student Achievement

- a. The school demonstrates successful student achievement by documenting through its assessment practices that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and competencies intended by the program objectives.
- b. The school demonstrates successful student achievement by maintaining acceptable rates of student graduation and employment in the career field for which the school provided education. The school supports these rates through student transcripts, the school's verifiable records of initial employment of its graduates, or other verifiable documentation.

According to CHEA (2010b), as accreditation plays a vital role in addressing student achievement, the following practices emerge as especially effective in driving this important work. These practices are reflected in the activities of many accrediting organizations that are successful in their efforts with student achievement, institutions and programs. This does not mean that all accreditors employ all practices.

- 1. (Partnership) Accrediting organizations work with college and university academic leaders in establishing goals for student achievement, collecting evidence and making judgments about effectiveness in achieving these goals.
- 2. (Clear Accreditation Standards and Policies) Accreditation standards and policies provide clear expectations about student achievement. Such standards and policies help organize the work of colleges and universities in addressing student achievement in the context of their respective missions.
- 3. (Peer/Professional Review) Accreditation's peer/professional review provides valuable collegial advice and guidance as institutions and programs address student achievement and quality improvement.

4. (Faculty Participation) Accrediting organizations work to broaden and intensify faculty participation in accreditation review, benefiting from their expertise in deciding and judging goals and evidence for student achievement.
5. (Public Accountability and Informing the Public) Accrediting organizations as well as institutions and programs provide the public with easily accessible, understandable information about success with student achievement.
6. (Engagement in National Initiatives) Accrediting organizations acknowledge, as they deem appropriate in the context of accreditation review, the results of institutional and programmatic participation in national initiatives focused on student achievement that have emerged in the past dozen years. These include, e.g., the Essential Outcomes of AAC&U, U-CAN, VSA, CLA, NSSE -- aiding institutional leadership in moving forward.
7. (Student Attainment) Accrediting organizations, working with institutions and programs, focus attention on quality as part of institutional, state and national efforts to increase the number of students who complete educational goals, including degree attainment.
8. (Commitment to Self-Examination) Accrediting organizations, working with institutions and programs, sustain an ongoing review of standards and policies as part of assuring appropriate rigor in expectations of student achievement.

U.S. accreditation's efforts to respond to the calls for greater accountability and student achievement have led to the establishment of a number of practices that enhance the capacity of accreditation to provide robust service in an environment in which interest in the quality and effectiveness of higher education continues to intensify. Additional work remains to be done. And, the challenge remains complex: to be responsive to national concerns while preserving the such vital features of U.S. accreditation as peer review and commitment to academic freedom, features that are part of the success of the higher education enterprise.

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