



OP-ED



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Burdensome Accreditation System Needs Overhaul

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Voluntary, nongovernmental regulation has long been a hallmark of the American approach to quality assurance in higher education. Our system relies on agreement by colleges and universities to pay for the apparatus that maintains the review process, on the premise that the process assures the public that the college has met a standard of satisfactory performance. The review also gives the college advice from well-informed peers about improvements that it may wish to consider. Unfortunately, while the concept remains valid, the U.S. accreditation system's actual operations have become overly burdensome. It's time for an overhaul.

In recent years, several detrimental changes to this model have occurred. The paperwork and the expense of the review process are increasing, as accreditors require more information in each review and ask for more frequent reviews. For smaller institutions, the expense of compliance is disproportionate. This creeping burden derives from federal pressure on both accreditors and institutions to do more, with more required interaction between the federal government and the accreditors. The cumulative effects of these changes are chipping away at the voluntary, nongovernmental character of the American approach. What's more, the pressures from the federal government have led to a more uniform, nationwide set of standards and judgment criteria. This significantly diminishes any recognition of differences in institutional mission and educational philosophy, as well as regional variations. It disregards one of the distinctive strengths of the American higher education system—its diversity.

Will these trends be reversed or continue in the future? Without significant and sustained pressure to change the current system, it is unlikely that the time or expense of compliance will be made any smaller. We would do well to remember that many people expected the true conservatism of the George W. Bush administration to lead to a reduction of government regulation of higher education, but it didn't. Most educators expected the Obama administration to be more favorable toward higher education—as Democratic administrations have usually been in comparison with Republican administrations. But it wasn't. There is no reason to believe now that the Trump administration, despite its calls for reducing government regulation, will do so in the case of colleges and universities. Public skepticism of higher education remains too potent a political factor to be ignored by elected and appointed public officials. We can expect more exploitation by officials of the shortcomings of colleges and universities in order to win public favor.



If accreditors continue to require colleges to do more work as part of the accreditation process, the accreditors must take steps to streamline the process. Failure to do so could lead to a devastating collapse of the entire accreditation system. The strongest, most affluent, and most selective institutions are already more outspoken about not needing regional accreditation at all; their willingness to be good citizens in

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cooperating in a process from which they derive little value is near the breaking point. Meanwhile, the cost pressures are such that the weakest, smallest and least affluent institutions will have even more difficulty in carrying the burden of increased costs and large commitments of staff time. These institutions truly need the third-party affirmation of quality that accreditation provides. In a democracy it is desirable that no institution be exempted, but the need for vigilance to prevent a “one size fits all” set of standards and criteria will become crucial. Although accreditors will be

hard-pressed to simplify the process, they must if it is to survive.

There are plenty of distractions. If the trend toward disaggregation of a college degree continues, for example, accreditors will need to remain focused on whole institutions. Accrediting of a single course, certificate program, or badge is not meaningful, requires too much work and is not cost-effective for either the institution or the accreditor. Moreover, if we truly believe that in undergraduate education the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, we must keep the focus on entire institutions, recognizing the transformative effects of education that go beyond a single course. Accreditors should have a comprehensive perspective on the ways that all components—the major, general education, extracurricular activities and institutional values—contribute to successful performance.



Although the route will not be easy to follow, resisting pressures to change in undesirable ways while enacting needed changes will be of paramount importance in the days ahead.

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