

## Is Accreditation Good for the Field?

### Accreditation

*Seven Perspectives From Outside Academia*

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#### Abstract

In this essay, I look at the question of nonprofit academic program accreditation from the perspective of various groups external to the academy. How do those who are not program and center directors look at accreditation? What is the person without academic titles such as professor or senior lecturer, the everyday person, likely to say? What about the constituents considered important to academic nonprofit programs such as students, parents, nonprofit organizations, donors, and legislators. The thoughts expressed here are not based on extensive literature reviews or scientific research but rather various discussions over the years, experiences getting support for starting and maintaining programs, and listening to public comments and observations in the media. Perhaps they will stimulate thought on the topic, and if so, then they are worthwhile.

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## Nonprofits

### Employment

An important outcome of academic nonprofit programs is the employment of its graduates in the sector. The sector has always been characterized by its emphasis on a college or university degree rather than a particular degree. In fact, I do not know of a single nonprofit at the local, regional, or national level that gives preferential hiring considerations to graduates of nonprofit academic programs at the undergraduate or graduate level. Why would they? Why not just hire those with the skills and knowledge needed. There is considerable employment mobility between the sectors, and that is not likely to change. In fact, some people are very vocal that nonprofits should be run more like businesses.

Maybe the real contribution of nonprofit education programs is not the employment of its students. Perhaps it is the insight and understanding of nonprofit organizations imparted to students who take nonprofit courses (including volunteerism and philanthropy) and wind up sitting on boards or volunteering for parent-teacher organizations, soccer clubs, churches, and other community-based organizations.

### Workshops and Training

Would nonprofit academic program accreditation make a difference in the offering of workshops and training provided to volunteers and employees of nonprofit organizations? Probably not. National nonprofits such as the Boy Scouts of America have their own training units. Besides their own in-house training programs, nonprofit organizations, just like corporate America, use an array of consulting firms who do a multimillion-dollar business. Is accreditation likely to affect this? Probably not.

### Proprietary Research

Many nonprofit organizations conduct proprietary research for any number of reasons, including program evaluations required by government and private foundation grants. Nonprofits sometimes turn to academic institutions for their research needs but often use consultants and private research firms. Their selection is based on a variety of criteria, and the most crucial may be the track record and reputation of the people who or organizations that will do the work for them. Would accreditation indicate critical expertise for doing research? Maybe.

## Program Applications

### Undergraduate Major

Undergraduates generally comprise the entry-level professionals for nonprofit programs, yet most undergraduates do not consider the possibility of working for a nonprofit when they enter colleges and universities. Would it matter to the typical undergraduate student if the nonprofit program at their school of choice was accredited? Probably not, unless the student had to graduate from an accredited undergraduate program to enter a graduate program. This is the case in some fields such as social work in which graduation from an accredited program makes a difference at the graduate level.

### **Graduate Programs**

In programs such as engineering in which undergraduate and graduate education is accredited, graduate programs will only accept applications from those with degrees from accredited undergraduate programs. Because nonprofit graduate programs often include people making career changes or hoping for career enhancement, would it make sense to accept only students with undergraduate degrees from accredited nonprofit programs? Graduate business schools often require extensive undergraduate work from those without business degrees. If nonprofit program accreditation sets minimum standards for student acceptance into programs, will nonprofit accreditation follow a course similar to engineering and business schools?

The student perception may be that unnecessary hurdles are created. Would non-program students be allowed to take nonprofit courses, or would these courses be available only to students in the program? Is this a way to protect the use of scarce resources such as full-time faculty? For whom does limiting enrollment increase the perceived status of the program, and what does that mean for external audiences? Perhaps it does not mean much except to exclude potential students, many of whom might be highly motivated and have good academic credentials. In a field promoting civil society, should there be exclusionary academic programs?

### **Certificate Programs**

Many colleges and universities offer certificate programs in nonprofit management, volunteerism, and philanthropy. In addition, a large number of community colleges offer certificate programs. Many people in certificate programs are taking them to gain practical knowledge such as how to raise funds for their nonprofit. The proof of the courses and certificate programs is the utility of the learning. Accreditation could make such programs more difficult to offer, through the establishment of instructor qualification, student admission criteria, and content requirements. Is local or regional reputation more important than a national accreditation for certificate programs, some of which are already under the auspices of organizations such as the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance or Association of Fundraising Professionals?

## **Foundations**

If nonprofit academic programs become accredited, will the accreditation become a requirement for consideration of grant requests? Some state nonprofit associations have at one time or another tried to convince foundations in their state that only nonprofits meeting certain standards should be considered for funding. If there is an accrediting body for a grant applicant to a foundation, might the foundation only consider grants from an accredited program? Although we normally think of the intended outcomes of accreditation such as conveying high standards, we should also consider the unintended outcomes.

## **Businesses**

### **Association Membership**

Businesses form associations to promote their interests. For example, the American Trucking Association is committed to developing and advocating inno-

vative, research-based policies that promote highway safety, security, environmental sustainability, and profitability. What would the accreditation of nonprofit academic programs mean to business associations? It might indicate centers and programs to which they would feel comfortable turning for consultation and research and from which they could employ graduates. However, they might also turn to nonaccredited programs. This would be an interesting research area.

### **Licensing**

Licensing to practice a profession or offer a service is sometimes related to program accreditation. Teachers must graduate from accredited schools of education to be licensed. The same is true for many professions. One reason for this is the importance attached to the services provided. Graduates of accredited nonprofit programs would not be solo practitioners, but would work in organizations. There would seem to be no relationship to licensing if accreditation were established for nonprofit academic programs.

## **Government**

### **Quality Education**

Accreditation in the public's mind is often equated with quality, and this is reflected in political bodies such as state higher education boards that sometimes require programs to be accredited if there is an accrediting body in a program area. If not accredited, then programs may be terminated. What happens is that the program and its institution bear the cost of meeting the accreditation guidelines often without financial support from the state higher education board. Do we want to limit nonprofit education programs to affluent programs and their colleges and universities?

### **Accountability**

Just as the public perceives accreditation as implying quality, it also perceives accreditation as implying accountability. One means of judging accountability is whether graduates of programs get employment in the sector, yet many program directors and faculty consider employment of program graduates not really their concern. Nonprofit employment has previously been discussed. Consider the parents, students taking loans, and people hoping to advance their careers. Does program accreditation mean a good job with ability to pay off loans and receive a good return on investment? Maybe it does, but maybe it does not. Is an ambivalent response being accountable? I suggest not.

## **Potential Donors**

Why do donors give? This is the most common reason: They believe passionately in something. Will accreditation make them more or less passionate about supporting a nonprofit academic program? Probably not. Passion will come from a nurtured relationship with the program director and/or faculty of the program, the program activities, and encounters with students. Would it be nice to share with a donor that the program is accredited? Of course it would.

## Media

### Standards and Legitimacy

Media often embrace credentials because they convey expertise, legitimately held ideas and practices, and standards. Credentials such as accreditation lend credence to news stories. If nonprofit academic programs are accredited, then the accrediting organization will likely be viewed by the media source and public to be as responsible as the nonprofit program or faculty member for the information incorporated in the story. In a sense, all programs accredited by the organization will likely be viewed as legitimate conveyers of acceptable practices and valid research and as legitimate commentators on policy, thus making an intrinsic link back to the accrediting body with all its implications of risk.

### Evaluation and Accountability

Media will view accredited programs as representing the nonprofit studies field. As such, accredited programs may be asked to make judgments about the actions of nonprofits and nonprofit professionals. The programs may be called upon to evaluate actions and practices based on the literature and careful research. This should be a positive outcome of the accreditation of programs.

## Conclusions

What conclusions might be drawn from this synopsis of various discussions over the years, experiences getting support for starting and maintaining programs, and listening to public comments and observations in the media? The following are suggested:

### What Accreditation Means

- Accreditation would indicate expertise for those seeking a program to do proprietary research.
- Accreditation would likely create unnecessary hurdles for enrolling in programs with a potential for excluding highly motivated students with good academic credentials.
- The accreditation process cost may limit programs to affluent colleges and universities, with many institutions having had strained budgets since the economic depression of 2007.

### What Accreditation Does Not Mean

- Graduates of accredited programs will be in demand on the job market.
- Foundations will make accreditation a preference for funding.
- Accreditation will enhance relations with the business sector.
- Donors will be impressed.
- Enhanced accountability for student loans and other types of public investment in nonprofit academic programs.

The intended and unintended outcomes of program accreditation must be considered. Is there an unequivocal answer to accreditation based on the view from outside the academy? No. What other considerations need to be raised and explored from outside the academy in regard to the accreditation of nonprofit academic programs broadly defined to include volunteerism and philanthropy?