

Invited Article

Accreditation

The Elephant in the Room

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Much has been written over the past few years about the quality of our institutions of higher education, yet much of it has been written by individuals who are not always as informed about the process that assesses that quality as they need to be to write about it effectively. In this article, I will attempt to describe the purposes of accreditation, the types of accrediting bodies and the relationship among them, and the relationship between accreditors and the state and federal governments.

Regional Accreditation

Based on the philosophy that “a free people can and ought to govern themselves through a representative, flexible, and responsive system” (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012, p. 2), regional accrediting bodies began in the late 19th century. At the time, groups of college and university presidents met to establish a definition of a college and define its purpose and appropriate curriculum, to distinguish it from a high school diploma. Today, being an accredited institution still signifies that an institution has a purpose appropriate to higher education and has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that purpose; that an institution maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers; and that it is successful in achieving its stated objectives.

By the 1950s, specific core features of the process to be used among the members of these associations formed to assess their quality had been identified. They included

- a mission-centered review,
- self-study done by the institution,
- a peer review model,
- emphasis on institutional improvement, and
- formation of membership associations.

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Later in the decade, these associations partnered with the federal government to ensure that the money spent on the tuition by the federal government for service personnel returning from the war through the G.I. Bill was going to “quality” institutions.

In 1965, the Higher Education Act was passed by the federal government and identified specific responsibilities of accreditors as they related to Title IV eligibility. These included the determination of how well institutions were managing federal funds, the measurement of the value of credentials earned, and the identification of the role of gatekeeper by accreditors.

Currently, there are six accrediting associations, with seven accrediting bodies. They include, from oldest to youngest,

- New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (1885),
- Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (1895),
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (1895),
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (1917),
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (1919),
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (1948), and
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (1952).

Though the accrediting bodies are all organized differently, all purport to assess the quality of the institutions within their membership. In assessing the effectiveness of each institution in fulfilling its mission, as well as its compliance with the requirements adopted by each respective accrediting body, all are designed to stimulate improvement and ensure the public of its continuing accountability to them. Regular communication among the regional accreditors occurs through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) and is designed to ensure regular and effective communication among them. The group has undertaken several projects to ensure consistency in evaluating areas such as distance learning, competency-based education programs, and for-profit institutions.

National Accrediting Bodies

Currently, there are seven national accrediting bodies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. They include the following:

- Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges
- Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training
- Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools
- Council on Occupational Education
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission
- Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accrediting Commission

Each of these bodies is recognized to accredit entire institutions, individual programs within accredited institutions, and independent schools and colleges anywhere within the United States; however, their member institutions tend to have a single focus (i.e., distance education, faith-based institutions, career and occupational programs). The oldest of these programs coincides with the awarding of the G.I. Bill, almost a full century after the oldest regional body.

Programmatic or Specialized Accreditors

More than 40 organizations are recognized by the federal government as reliable authorities to assess the quality of specific academic programs within institutions of higher education. They include areas within Arts and Humanities, Educational Training, Legal, Community and Social Services, Personal Care and Services, and Healthcare. Programmatic accreditation may be an optional quality review within an institution, but it is required in some states for graduates from those areas to qualify to take the licensing examination in that area. Separate quality standards are developed by experts within each discipline from those that are used to assess the quality of the institution within which the program resides.

If a program within an accredited institution fails to demonstrate compliance with the programmatic accreditors' requirements, the institution will possibly also be out of compliance with the institutional accreditors' requirements. Regular communication between the regional and programmatic accreditors occurs to ensure that the institutions they serve are consistently reaching high quality standards.

Federal Government

The federal government does not accredit institutions; however, it does recognize accrediting bodies that the U.S. Secretary of Education believes to be reliable authorities in assessing the quality of higher education institutions and programs they offer. Additionally, the federal government provides financial assistance to students through various programs including Title IV. Through the recognition process, institutions accredited by the accrediting bodies are eligible to receive federal financial aid.

States

States have the responsibility of consumer protection as it relates to higher education institutions. Complaints about costs, fair trade (distance education), licensure, and so forth are regulated by each state, and all institutions that do business within a given state must be approved by a state regulating agency to do so. Additionally, states provide funding for operational expenses, as well as tuition assistance to institutions, both public and private, within their respective states.

Current Issues

Since their inception, accrediting bodies have responded to the cultural and social changes within society at large that affect higher education institutions. As modes of delivery evolved, these bodies updated their requirements for institutions to meet to retain accredited status. The offering of bachelor's degrees by community colleg-

es, competency-based programs in lieu of course-based programs, partnerships with non-higher education institutions to provide academic programs, and a strong emphasis on student success (former emphasis was on student access) are issues being tackled by institutions and assessed for their quality by accreditors.

Given the investment the federal government makes in the education of its citizens, it is no wonder that it wants to see how successful institutions are being in educating students. Recently, the government has made high demands on student achievement measures such as graduation rates, licensure rates, and loan repayment rates. The recognition of accrediting bodies now includes documentation that the data are not only being collected but also used in assessing the quality of the institution.

There is concern from accrediting bodies and institutions themselves on how these data are being used. Using data for improvement is one thing, but using data to close institutions and/or remove financial aid is another. Many institutions with open admission policies and a large number of part-time students have lower graduation rates and students with larger loans and higher default rates; however, these very students need to attend institutions of higher education to get out of the cycle of poverty. Hopefully, with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, some clarity on the use or misuse of data will be cleared up.

In this age of transparency and accountability, institutions of higher education have many masters including regional accreditors, programmatic accreditors, federal and state governments, and their students. There is a constant cry for documentation of what they do and how they do it. The time and energy it takes to respond effectively to all of these masters is enormous; therefore, the cost of quality is high. Though regional and programmatic accrediting visits are generally once every 7 to 10 years, the ongoing assessment of the quality of their endeavor is an annual expense. Complaints of the cost of accreditation ring loudly. There is no way around spending money to assess effectiveness and quality. Unfortunately, that is the cost of doing business. The benefits of confidence in the institution and its offerings by the general public, the ability of students to transfer or attend graduate schools, and the ability of students to enter the workforce far outweigh these costs.

References

- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. (2012). *Principles of accreditation: Foundation for quality enhancement* (5th ed.). Retrieved from <http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp>