



Accreditation: The Current Gate to Quality Assurance in U.S. Higher Education

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Before going into the reason for this essay, I feel compelled to say that I have been studying quality and quality assurance in education since the mid-1980s. I have been in adult training and development, and in higher education as an administrator and instructor, have been a Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award examiner and an examiner for a voluntary regional accrediting agency, and have been part of an institution's accreditation process.

My views are strictly my own and are based on experience, research and discussions with colleagues from the academic and quality worlds. What I am writing will not be greeted with happiness from either world, because I believe there is a rift in discourse analogous to what C.P. Snow said in 1959 about the great divide between the sciences and humanities: might as well get the controversy going from the educational philosopher's perspective.¹

My comments apply to the accreditation schemes existing in the United States. The Bologna Process is on its way to completely re-establishing the quality assurance structure of higher education in Europe based on what the quality world would identify as quality assurance principles. Some countries use slightly different schemes such as the quality audit, as practiced in Australia, while other countries in the developing world are at different stages of advancing national quality assurance systems for their universities.

Therefore, a number of my comments could apply to the other existing and new schemes, although the context creates a different application or interpretation. On the other hand, the complexity of the higher education system in the United States is such that comments are really geared toward the diversity of institution and mission, the role faculty play at colleges and universities, and the different degree of administrative control in relation to faculty and discipline influence. This is what I have called the tension between vertical integration versus horizontal representation.²

Let us get to the core of this article:

1. Is accreditation the best way to pursue quality assurance in U.S. higher education? Accreditation associations have been around since approximately the end of the 19th century, and accreditation is seen as the process to measure quality in higher education. If nothing else, it is what people are accustomed to.

2. What is it that accreditation does for an institution? Accreditation provides recognition that colleges and universities are able to demonstrate they meet certain



expectations and requirements in terms of resources and interactions. This allows the opportunity to generate purposed student learning. States recognize colleges and universities through licensure and charters, granting them the authority to operate and award degrees and diplomas. For the most part, however, states seem to defer to accreditation as the main avenue for documenting performance excellence due diligence in the name of consumer protection.

3. Why is it that accreditation programs in the United States have not adopted the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award education criteria? First, the customer service model does not work in higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) generally are three organizations in one: academic affairs, business affairs and student affairs. While customer service can work for the business affairs sector of a campus—such as billing and accounts receivable, physical plant maintenance and investments—and to a lesser extent for student affairs—including financial aid, residence halls, student union and student health—it does not work well for academic affairs. Student experience and awareness change from the first year to the time they are about to graduate. This demonstrates the expectation changes and value definitions about students' experience.³

Second, the criteria do not reflect or account for the nature of faculty governance and participation that is different between K-12 and higher education. While the process of faculty governance can be linked to different aspects of the criteria without much ado, the emphasis in total quality management (TQM) is on a strong central administration telling the units what to do.⁴ The Education Criteria shares this bias as well.

The decision making schema found in many K-12 institutions tends to be top-down; however, higher education is more akin to a flat organization that highlights the traditional core values of academic freedom and disciplinary concerns as represented by faculty. The one-size-fits-all mind-set of Baldrige does not allow for this distinction. Third, the Baldrige criteria ignore the affective or personal value component to learning that makes defining and measuring learning difficult. The student service sector, with its whole student development philosophy, is not taken into account except in an indirect way—but in all fairness, most accreditation criteria also minimize the role of the student service sector in student learning.

Some background

What makes writing a short article about accreditation in the United States difficult is its unique nature. Education institutions are not directly overseen by the federal government



because of the U.S. Constitution's 10th amendment. It's left up to the states and, as indicated, while states recognize colleges and universities, for the most part they rely on accreditation to do the more detailed due diligence of HEIs under their jurisdiction.

Accreditation is a form of self-regulation, and it is pursued at three levels: regional, national, and specialized or programmatic. All bodies have to be approved by an oversight board for higher education, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or by the U.S. Department of Education (recognizing accrediting bodies specifically tied to the financial aid gatekeeping function).

Associations that deal with specialized or programmatic accreditation only look at specific programs, although the scope of their review can have institutionwide applications and implications. This type of accreditation seems to be gaining traction as an additional layer of quality assurance. Quality control may be more at play here than simply assurance. "[T]he longer term development is nearly always going to be in the direction of institutional accreditation, complemented by program accreditation in certain areas ... or in certain cases (e.g. institutions not able to be accredited in all areas, but doing well in a few, or those seeking to mark their excellence in a particular subject/discipline)."⁵

Program accreditation is the next step after internal quality assurance has been performed⁶ to demonstrate the program's alignment with current disciplinary practice. It is also a means to distinguish itself from what programs at other universities have to offer.⁷

Even from the beginning, accreditation has always had its detractors. For example, at first, accreditors used a single set of numeric criteria. By the 1930s, however, the six voluntary regional accrediting agencies began using their own stated objectives based on distinctive institutional goals as the basis for evaluating institutions.⁸ Institutional reliance on line-item budgeting and institutional planning made accrediting bodies focus on inputs and some throughputs, but not output. Part of this was also because of the feeling that the peer-review process that faculty had to undergo and the evaluation environment that existed in the classroom were built-in determiners of quality.^{9, 10}

As quality initiatives and cries from the accountability and assessment/evaluation sectors of education suggested that the emphasis on institutional inputs was not enough, there has been a slow and gradual movement toward incorporating a focus on student learning as a measurable result, and also putting in place and measuring continuous improvement. During the 1990s, the Pew Charitable Trusts supported the call for the reform of higher education by



providing funding for a series of initiatives to generate “concrete evidence that alternative ways of doing things are practicable and scalable—not just ‘experiments’ that work only under a limited set of circumstances and that require unsustainable levels of additional support.”¹¹

Accreditation was one of these target areas for three reasons, according to Peter Ewell:

1. HEIs have invested a high degree of resources in the accreditation process.
2. Most of the regional accrediting agencies were already seriously engaged in thinking about how to re-energize undergraduate teaching and learning.
3. Because accreditation is a self-regulating system and HEIs are more willing to listen to the call for reform from the accrediting bodies than they are to respond to demands imposed by state governments or the media-sponsored ranking systems.

Baldrige and accreditation

Three alternative accreditation programs based on the Baldrige criteria came out of the activities sponsored by the trusts: The Higher Learning Commission’s Project Academic Quality Improvement Program at the institutional level, and projects by the Teacher Education Accreditation Council and the American Academy of Liberal Education at the programmatic level.

Comparing current accreditation criteria or standards at the institutional accreditation level with those of even 10 years ago shows a migration by accrediting agencies to some of the criteria requirements found in the Baldrige education criteria. Criticism remains that accreditation is still focused on peer review. Many critics see continued reliance on the self-study and peer review as making accreditation a self-serving proposition. Calls for reforming accreditation focus on the creation and application of external standards, the use of third-party audits, and for accrediting bodies to use similar language in their criteria.

Some of the criticism leveled against the regional accrediting agencies ignores the challenges of accrediting a highly varied set of institutions of various sizes offering greatly different programmatic offerings. There are close to 4,000 traditional HEIs. According to the current form of the Carnegie Classification Index, there are six different classification types of HEIs, and within these levels, there are at least three subcategories, except for the Tribal Colleges classification. To use one set of standards is to potentially ignore what it is these institutions do best and the relationships they have with their stakeholders.



The most significant criticism raised against all types of accreditation is the lack of emphasis in and documentation of student learning. Much of the current thinking about student learning is based on the constructivist approach to learning, in which the student is responsible for making his or her own meaning of the information presented through the various learning opportunities found on campus. A lot of learning happens outside the classroom as well. For example, the relationship between the learner and the instructor influences whether learning occurs and the extent of that learning.¹² Education is not the same as training because education is more than demonstrating competency *vis a vis* proficiency level. Training focuses on what Fritz Machlup called practical knowledge while education is primarily concerned with intellectual knowledge.¹³ As Sternberg's research points out, creativity, broadly defined, includes aspects of knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and environmental context.¹⁴ Avoiding the issues surrounding the use, focus and construction of learner outcomes, learner assessments and rubrics, the real challenge for HEIs is to come up with a way to document learning to account for those core processes that are too subtle to be measured meaningfully¹⁵ especially in a quantitative manner.

The real challenge is the need to overcome Kim Cameron's¹⁶ effectiveness-efficiency paradox, where the desire to focus on quantifying aspects of what the HEI does in terms of the dissemination and creation of knowledge leads reviewers to diminish the impact that institutional paradoxes have on performance excellence and to try to minimize the importance of qualitative data when it comes to documenting results. Learning is a nonlinear process, sometimes showing up years after the instruction has taken place. The real danger is in documenting surface learning—reproduced information and rote memorization—and deep learning, or meaning through connections.¹⁷

What's next?

These indirect comments about the need to embrace variation probably earn me enmity from the quality group. Now, the issue is what's next? Accreditation is not going away, especially at the programmatic level, because, in most instances, it is becoming part of a quality control process. My personal preference is self-accreditation with an external peer review.

I believe the philosophy of the Baldrige criteria benefits the way HEIs look at themselves. However, I agree with Tito Conti, one of the founding fathers of the European Foundation for Quality Management, that the focus on the award structure itself detracts from effective



fundamental change.¹⁸ Because of the previously described and inherent limitations involved with applying the Baldrige education criteria to HEIs, it is more beneficial to come to an agreement as to the nature and purpose of higher education.

Globalization, as evidenced by the General Agreement on Trade and Services, has made higher education into a commodity vis-a-vis stocks of knowledge and intellectual capital. Colleges and universities are expected to be cogs feeding the knowledge industry, with learning becoming subservient to workforce development and technological benefit as a means to foster creativity and innovation.

As John Dewey pointed out long ago, learning and knowledge are different.¹⁹ The difference between the two rests in the nexus between meaning and value. If an underlying premise for learning for the knowledge industry is to foster creativity and innovation, then measures of learning cannot confuse learning and knowledge. This means that using Csikszentmihalyi's three-pronged system model for creativity—domain (discipline), field (gatekeepers) and the individual person—quality assurance for HEIs needs to address how the balance between the three parts of the system distinguishes learning from knowledge and come up with acceptable notions of generating evidence based on better defined goals.²⁰

Higher education is plagued with unclear goals, imprecise technology and fluid participation.²¹ Discussing the nature and purpose of higher education allows for clearer goals based on constructivist rather than merely behavioral notions of knowledge or learning. It also allows for ways to come up with multiple realistic qualitative and quantitative indicators that provide acceptable evidence while recognizing the diffuseness of the nature of learning. Additionally, it redefines the role of academics based on more realistic and noncontradicting sets of expectations in defining and facilitating learning at the institutional as well as academic unit levels.

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