



U.S. Higher Education and Accreditation: A Quality Perspective

By Henry Lindborg and Stephen D. Spangehl

“Accredited” is a word used to describe colleges and universities that most people understand only vaguely. The public appreciates these desirable labels, but few people grasp what they actually represent: what criteria must be met to warrant them, how disinterested and unbiased those making the judgments are, what training and oversight the judges receive, or what happens when an organization is judged as failing to meet prescribed expectations.

Even fewer recognize the consequences, privileges and responsibilities of a higher education institution’s being accredited or what that status might mean to them personally—in hiring a college graduate, paying for an employee education benefit program, selecting an institution to attend or helping family and friends make similar life-changing and largely irreversible decisions about college.

Traditionally, the public judges higher education by reputation, what David Garvin classified as “perceived quality.”¹ Because institutions are diverse, and we in the United States lack widely agreed on and easily articulated performance standards, many people base their evaluations on a combination of indirect measures, ranging from name recognition, campus social life, the ranking of sports teams and whether institutions have high admission standards, to the number of alumni in the “power elite” or the starting salaries of graduates. At the same time, many assume that the accreditation stamp is a mark of quality assurance, indicating that an institution conforms to a single set of rigorous standards, however poorly these may be understood.

Some history

A review of the history and types of higher education accreditation reveals a more complex picture. Accreditation in the United States is the result of a set of historical events, some accidental and some purposeful. Currently, there are three kinds of accreditation

agencies: regional, national and specialized, all operating independently of one another, often examining the same institutions.

Regional accreditation is the oldest, as three of the six regional accrediting commissions began in 1895. As their names imply, each commission provides accreditation to entire institutions that have home bases within their regions or groups of states.

The largest—the Higher Learning Commission, formerly the North Central Association—accredits more than 1,000 institutions in a 19-state region. The smallest, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, accredits institutions only in California and Hawaii, plus in a smattering of U.S. Pacific Ocean territories, such as Guam.

There is a commission for New England, one for the Old South, one for the northwest and western states (including Alaska) and one for the Mid-Atlantic states stretching from New York to Maryland and Washington, D.C. Inexplicably, the smallest has two separate commissions, one for two-year colleges and the other for baccalaureate and higher institutions, while each of the larger regions have only one commission each, accrediting all types of institutions.

All the commissions are private, not-for-profit membership corporations, and the institutions they accredit select their boards, provide their funding, determine their processes and standards, and provide the peer reviewers that judge whether the institutions meet the standards and deserve to be accredited. Accreditation by a regional commission covers all of an institution's programs, campuses and operations, including distance education programs across the United States or around the world. Regional accreditation is an all-or-nothing business—either an institution is accredited, or it is not.

Regional is a somewhat misleading term for these commissions. Although the six regions are separately governed, autonomous and sometimes fiercely independent, all use similar processes and standards. Their standards are minimum, threshold requirements for institutions to operate, qualitative more than quantitative, and more specific about resource requirements than institutional performance.

The standards guide peer reviewers in determining subjectively what is appropriate, reasonable or typical in light of the institution's declared mission or purpose, letting institutional public/private, secular/religious, proprietary/nonprofit, large/small and urban/rural differences

rationalize uneven judgments. Maximizing quality is not the primary concern, although the regionals all let their reviewers provide advice on improvement along with their judgments.

Quality and accreditation

The level of quality assurance that regional accreditation provides is unclear, although most would admit that accredited institutions are less risky than those that never sought accreditation or lost it. No one, however, would suggest that all accredited institutions have equal quality or that the thresholds used to judge them are particularly rigorous.

In addition, 50 or more specialized or program accreditors set standards for specific programs within larger institutions or in institutions so specialized they offer only one kind of program, such as independent law schools not connected with universities. Many of the specialized accrediting agencies are outgrowths of organizations dedicated to the welfare and support of professional groups, such as lawyers, dentists, physicians, social workers and teachers. Although every specialized agency claims to be supporting high standards in its profession, critics accuse them of setting standards to first protect their professionals.

For professions in which licensure is required to practice—such as law, medicine, nursing, teaching, chiropractic and pharmacy—the specialized agencies have often worked hard to ensure that only graduates of the programs they accredit can be licensed. In turn, their rigorous resource requirements for programs may have the effect of limiting access to their profession. For example, enrollment limitations in medical schools have forced U.S. students seeking to be physicians to go abroad and then jump licensing hurdles when they return to the United States to practice.

A few specialized agencies accredit programs in fields without licensure—such as business studies in management, marketing and finance—so accreditation, in some cases, may denote prestige rather than enable employment. The specialized agencies all accredit nationwide, and some have even extended their operations to programs in institutions outside the United States.

Looking at the big picture

National accreditation is a more recent innovation, created to accredit institutions that the regionals would not, which originally included for-profit institutions and post-secondary

schools not offering associate or higher degrees. Now all the regionals have accredited proprietary institutions, so the distinction between regionals and nationals has blurred. In particular, the emergence of for-profit, degree-granting institutions—and the capital venture firms that acquire and direct them—has created major tension in the traditional picture.

Accreditation developed when the higher education community was relatively homogeneous: when concepts of what was required to create, staff and operate an institution were common sense to professors and higher education administrators. It worked to send peer teams with vague standards to review one another, because both the range of practice and the community of practitioners were narrow.

The emergence of national proprietary chains that create accelerated courses and programs and staff them in ways radically different from traditional practice has created serious strains. New models call into question the need for full-time faculty, full-time well-prepared students, general education courses, extracurricular activities and services, face-to-face student-teaching contact and many of the other characteristics that have been hallmarks of U.S. higher education. Accreditation has been hard pressed to keep pace.

Advanced postsecondary education also has become increasingly recognized as a basic need for all citizens, so much so that both presidential candidates in the 2008 race called higher education a “human right.” The ability of the United States to compete internationally in an environment in which only knowledge workers earn wages higher than what U.S. citizens consider subsistence levels, has made policy makers acutely aware that citizens should not only have access to higher education, but actually receive it, along with the credentials that testify to it.

Federal funding

Since World War II, the U.S. federal government has provided funds to encourage and support the obtaining of a higher education. To be sure the funds are not squandered, there are accompanying rules: They must be spent in institutions where the quality of education meets reasonable standards. To avoid getting the government into the business of setting educational standards, since World War II, the federal government has used existing accrediting agencies to perform this gatekeeping task. The Higher Education Opportunities Act, the national legislation that provides more than \$80 billion in federal funds for higher education grants and loans,

established a National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity. Its role is to review and recognize accrediting agencies that seek to be gatekeepers for federal funds.

The agencies must be federally recognized every five years for the students who enroll in the institutions or programs they accredit to receive federal grants or federally guaranteed loans. Thus, accreditation by a federally recognized agency is not simply a matter of prestige, but is an essential requirement for institutions seeking to attract more than only the richest students. All regional and national accreditors seek federal recognition, as do some specialized agencies with programs offered in specialized or otherwise unaccredited organizations.

Unlike most modern industrialized countries, the United States is hampered in establishing national goals for advanced education of its citizens. The Constitution, framed around circumstances in 1789, made the oversight of education a state responsibility, and excluded it from federal control.

Where China, Norway or South Africa can establish educational targets for their citizens—and enact the mechanisms to achieve their targets—the U.S. Congress and executive branch are limited to providing funds that will encourage states and private organizations to do the right things to make citizens educationally competitive in the 21st century. Thus, the federal recognition of accrediting agencies as gatekeepers for federal funds becomes one of the only ways the national government can influence higher education policy, practice and performance.

Making accreditation into something more than compliance with threshold standards has always been a goal of agencies. The difficulties in achieving it, however, have been great. When confronted with a series of activities that, if things go badly, could effectively put an institution out of business, most colleges and universities are unwilling to take risks. Accreditors tell institutions that self-study and site visits are tools for improvement—the means to identify what is not working well and fix it.

Some challenges

But the prospect of a team of strangers coming to campus and, after two or three days of review, rendering an accreditation recommendation with critical consequences generally tempers the enthusiasm of institutions to be searchingly self-critical. Some agencies, however, seek new ways to marry minimalist quality assurance with quality performance and productivity improvement. The Higher Learning Commission's alternative accreditation maintenance

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process, its Academic Quality Improvement Program, blends the philosophy and techniques of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program with traditional accreditation. This isolates compliance activities to allow institutions to work on innovation and improvement in an atmosphere free from immediate risks to their continued accreditation.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has introduced institutionally designed quality enhancement projects as a requirement for continued accreditation. The Western Association senior college commission has reengineered its processes so that it conducts separate site visits for compliance and improvement. Many of the specialized agencies, most notably ABET and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, have built standards and processes to stimulate continuous improvement, and many of the health science accrediting agencies show indications of similar future directions.

Yet, the overall higher education industry—both individual colleges, universities and the agencies that accredit them—show high levels of self-satisfaction with their past behaviors and their accomplishment of having made 20th century-U.S. higher education the envy of the world.

They appear unwilling or unable to control higher education costs, which are inflating even faster than medical care. It is unclear whether continuation of past U.S. practices will enable this important industry to compete internationally with vigorous new developments in European and Asian higher education.

Moreover, it is doubtful that past levels of productivity and student achievement—the proportion of American students U.S. institutions graduate and the levels of those graduates' knowledge and skills—can continue to keep the United States competitive with countries rapidly reengineering their higher education systems to achieve previously unimaginable quality and productivity levels. How U.S. accreditation as currently organized and practiced can address these and other 21st century educational challenges remains a mystery.

For the U.S. Department of Education's website that explains the rules for recognition and lists recognized accreditors, go to www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html. For more information about the accreditation bodies mentioned in this article, visit:

- [The Higher Learning Commission.](#)
- [The Western Association of Schools and Colleges.](#)

- [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.](#)

Reference

1. David Garvin, *Managing Quality*, The Free Press, 1988.

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