

# Inside Accreditation

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## COVID AND CHANGE-ADJUSTMENTS CAN HIGHER EDUCATION HANDLE DEEP CHANGE?

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is the private sector organization that provides recognition for agencies that seek accreditation oversight for colleges and universities and institutional programs. CHEA is also a primary advocate for institutional self-study and continuous improvement in higher education. During CHEA's recent 24th Annual Conference held January 2021, over 370 registrants from 31 countries, representatives from governmental agencies, and higher education stakeholders participated in conversations that were amplified by elements of social injustices and inequalities manifested exponentially by the pandemic.

For the past nine months, the scourge of the pandemic has dominated news, lives, daily conditions of families, economic social infrastructures, political upheavals, and international relations and has disjointed all norms associated with higher education. Universities of all sizes, demographics, and varying cultural identities or Carnegie classification scramble every day to stay ahead of the fray of an invasive contagion. The pandemic threatens enrollment, brings questions about quality teaching and learning, and has resulted in mental health decline of faculty and students, fluctuating directives from boards, and the ever-present awareness that these conditions will perhaps persist for a year or more.

All of these "unpredictables" are frightening for institutions that operate from the lens of consistency and stabilized structures. One such constant in higher education is the assurance of quality in operations and academic programming. Faculty and staff are shifting in thought and in traditional teaching and learning modalities; students are shifting in confusion about what to

do... "go to a class space; stay in my room with a laptop; commute; go to a space on alternate days"....and the indecisiveness and confusion is compounded by taking a COVID test every week and not knowing the results for sometimes up to four days. As one student succinctly put it, "I am confused and afraid." That fear is not just of epidemiological concern. It is also fear of an eroding of democratic values, the rise in racial and cultural unrest, the manifestation of social injustices through televised homicides, economic deprivation, mistrust of established systems, and the realization that perhaps education is only the great equalizer if you have access.

Yet, college students and their families continue to look for new norms and revert to higher education's traditional model of institutional stability as the anchor to ground society into new "normals." There is still a public demand for higher education to provide quality learning and experiences to students who will be the problem solvers and decision makers for the post-COVID era.

So, what is higher education to do in accepting the challenge of creating a new generation of learners and leaders? There are many ways to examine options for the challenges ahead. Premier in the process is the realization that higher education must be flexible, innovative, and willing to embrace the formidability of change. Society, students, families, faculty, staff, stakeholders will not be the same post-COVID. Technology, teaching, and learning will usher in a different relational "touch" system between student and teacher. Brick and mortar buildings and classrooms will take on new purposes as incubation laboratories and community and partnership hubs. Communities will

view colleges as think tanks and problem solvers for social concerns and have the expectation that students will emerge as change agents and not just degree holders. Change will not be a choice...it will be a necessity.

Secondly, as resources shift because of fluctuating enrollments or differentials in state allocations, universities must begin to prioritize what is essential to their mission and the students that are served. Will traditional missions change, post-COVID? Will traditional student populations move from residential to online? Simply put, how are streamlined budgets going to be distributed to ensure institutional stability and academic quality?

The year 2021 did not take a pause because of COVID and neither will subsequent years. University leadership should take the position of visioning for tomorrow although so much of the attention is on the shock of the here and now. Strategic planning and looking into the years to come will encourage and support ideas of innovation, creativity, and sustainability. Now is the time to think about new emerging academic programs that will drive the economy; support existing programs that are essential to economic mobility and social consciousness and change; and re-examine the essential connectivity between a liberal arts education and science-based curriculum. Moreover, most important to this exercise is the aggressive leap to developing partnerships with municipalities, non-profits, and other corporations to build a new understanding around the college experience.

Thirdly, we must maintain the expectation of continuous improvement in higher education. Through the self-study processes, administrators, faculty, staff, and the community have the duty to always look for ways to be better. The question that faculty always asks of students is "Is this your best work?" The same question should be asked inwardly. If ever the response to the question

is "yes," then higher education has slipped into compliance and complacency. Higher education should always be in the mode of continuous improvement, trying to be better tomorrow than today. Accreditation affirmation signals that not only has an institution or program met high demanding national standards of performance, but that they are also continuing to seek improvements on quality expectations. It is that quality that will result in students and graduates demonstrating their fullest potential as manifested in their critical thinking competencies, community citizenry, civic engagement, creative and innovative experiences, and their commitment to life-long learning in whatever form that may be.

Institutional and program quality is the one constant that the public has of higher education. Defining quality in a time of change is the new requirement for universities and higher education. How that quality is reframed begins with thoughtful conversations between stakeholders, colleges and universities, and accreditors. The ultimate expectation of quality is in the demonstration of what students will **be able to do** to change tomorrow in the post-COVID years.

*A national advocate and institutional voice for academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is a U.S. association of degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. CHEA is the only national organization focused exclusively on higher education accreditation and quality assurance. Dr. Cynthia Jackson-Hammond is the current president of CHEA.*

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