

Accreditation, Public Policy and Presidential Leadership

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College and university presidents and chancellors, when asked to describe accreditation (our primary means by which higher education assures and improves quality) often refer to a *process* that institutions and programs engage on a periodic basis. The response of a president or chancellor to questions about accreditation typically refers to visiting teams on campus or a person's own activity with accreditation teams or accreditation commission work. Some of these experiences are positive; others are less so.

Presidents may also point out that accreditation has been central to higher education's longstanding claim that it can effectively regulate itself. Responsible self-regulation has been fundamental to maintaining a significant measure of independence in academic decision making for institutions and programs. Presidents sometimes claim, quite appropriately, that self-regulation helps to fuel a higher education enterprise that is rich in diversity of types of institutions, types of students and curricular offerings.

What presidents are less likely to talk about, however, is the range of major *public policy* roles that accreditation plays. Whether an institution or program is accredited shapes at least part of the public perception of colleges, universities and programs. A pronouncement that an institution or program is accredited is an important and valued statement about effective performance and quality service to students and society.

The importance of accreditation to an institution or program is always underscored when accredited status is lost. The removal of accredited status is a cause for considerable alarm, triggering, in some cases, legal action and, in other cases, extraordinary measures to minimize the disruption of the education of students who are enrolled.

Accreditation's reach is extensive. Eighty-one (81) institutional and programmatic recognized accrediting organizations in the United States made judgments about the worth of higher education in more than 6,800 institutions and more than 18,000 programs last year.* The credibility of higher education rests, in significant measure, on the credibility of accreditation.

Accreditation's public policy roles focus on four significant relationships: (1) the relationship between accreditation and government, (2) the relationship between accreditation and the private sector, especially corporations (employers) and foundations, (3) the relationship between accreditation and students (and the general public) and (4) accreditation's relationship with colleges and universities. These relationships and public policy roles need to be shaped and defined by the leadership of higher education, especially the presidents of colleges and universities working with accrediting organizations.

The accreditation-federal government relationship is about the federal government's reliance on accreditation as a reliable authority on which to base decisions about institution and program eligibility for student financial aid and other federal funds. At present, the federal government invests up to \$100 billion annually in colleges and universities – determined to a great extent by whether or not an institution or program is accredited. The federal government, in turn, plays a major role in shaping the accreditation process through its periodic recognition of the accrediting organizations that the government considers to be these reliable authorities.

The accreditation-state government relationship is about state reliance on accreditation when making some decisions about state financial support of institutions and programs, licensing of institutions to operate (in some states) and, perhaps most especially, the licensing of individuals in a range of professions. This financial support totals \$70 billion annually in support of

*"Recognized" means that accrediting organizations have been reviewed by an external body and have met the standards of that body. At present, recognition is carried out by a private organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or the federal government through the United States Department of Education (USDE).

instruction, research, public service and student aid. In addition, state lawmakers, as well as their federal counterparts, often take accredited status into account when developing major social policy legislation that involves institutions and programs in initiatives related to, e.g., access, equity and transfer of credit.

The relationship between accreditation and the private sector is about corporations often requiring that an institution or program be accredited when giving donations, providing tuition assistance or making hiring decisions. Similarly, foundations and philanthropic organizations frequently require that an institution or program be accredited when making decisions about grants and other awards. Corporations provided \$4.4 billion (exclusive of tuition assistance) and foundations gave \$6.2 billion to colleges and universities in 2003-2004.

The relationship of students and the public to accreditation is about confidence in the information that accreditors provide about the quality of an institution or program when students make threshold decisions about what college or university to attend. It is about the trust that the public has in our higher education enterprise. To students and the public, accreditation is an important and reliable indicator of quality as well as a protection from degree mills or dubious providers of higher education.

Accreditation, through its public policy roles, influences expenditure of public funds, encourages public trust and builds public confidence in higher education. College and university presidents are vital to shaping the future direction and enhancing the strength and viability of the accreditation enterprise. Where should presidents be more active? What might presidents do?

Presidents, working with accrediting organizations, can further influence and mold the relationship between accreditation and the federal government. At present, efforts to shape this relationship are mostly confined to periods of reauthorization of the Higher Education Act – points of political intensity when the federal government sometimes seeks to additionally regulate colleges and universities. Presidents can work to sustain an ongoing dialogue about self-regulation and government regulation. This dialogue can provide a valuable buffer to the intense political pressures associated with periodic reauthorization.

Presidents can work to strengthen the relationship among states, higher education institutions and accreditation. Presidents, working with accrediting organizations, can encourage state leaders to further acknowledge the value of accreditation as a resource for sound practice in maintaining the quality of a state's educational resources. Governors, state legislators or state higher education executive officers can turn to accredita-

tion more frequently when seeking solutions to major state policy initiatives, e.g., higher education and economic development or higher education and enhanced public accountability. This can be preferable to, e.g., enacting additional state regulation of colleges and universities.

Presidents can work with corporate and foundation leaders in the private sector to sustain an effort to learn more about how those outside higher education can be additionally served by accreditation. Are corporations and foundations adequately informed about what accreditation means and how they might use this information in their decision making? Can additional information needs, e.g., easy access to reliable providers of higher education and accreditation, be met?

Presidents can provide additional leadership in accreditation's current efforts to meet the information needs of students and the public, especially about institutional performance and student achievement. If presidents will lend their prestige and importance to serving students through enhanced information about higher education performance, students may be able to make better choices about their education, leading to more success in their collegiate experiences.

Within higher education, presidents can enrich the relationship between accreditation and the higher education enterprise through leading a national dialogue on the role of accreditation in sustaining the key values and commitments of higher education, e.g., responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom, a mission-based system of higher education and a diverse and decentralized higher education enterprise. Finally, presidents can strengthen accreditation practice by expanding their leadership role in commissions or the decision making bodies of accrediting organizations.

Yes, accreditation is a familiar process by which the institutions and programs that presidents lead are reviewed for quality. But accreditation plays major public policy roles as well – with federal and state government, with the private sector through corporations and foundations, with students and the public, and with higher education itself. Presidents playing additional leadership roles in accreditation can only enhance its stature and importance as a matter of public policy.



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