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A Litmus Test of Academic Quality

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Introduction

The paper discusses the major issues connected with the accreditation procedures in higher education system in the U.S. The questions raised are as follows: what are the reliable and credible indicators of quality instruction that could be measured in the process of accreditation of higher education institutions? How does greater transparency in the accreditation process serve students and the public? What is the role that accreditors on federal and state levels can play in improving institutional accountability or changing institutional behaviour; and hence, what are the standards and implications of federal vs. state involvement in the accreditation process? What is accreditation's role in addressing problems raised by arbitrary denial of transfer of credit? And what role does accreditation play in assessing distance education?

What are the 'credible' indicators of accreditation? A litmus test of academic quality

The purpose of accreditation is to ensure that higher education institutions provide education of acceptable academic quality throughout the U.S. 'Active for the past 100 years, this private, voluntary system of self examination and peer review has been central to the creation of a U.S. higher education enterprise that is outstanding in many respects... Accreditation is a key litmus test of threshold academic quality' (<http://www.chea.org/default.asp>). Accreditation agencies are of national or regional scope. They develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met. Institutions and/or programs that request an agency's evaluation and that meet an agency's criteria are then "accredited" by that agency' (GAO, 2007). In its turn, an agency seeking national recognition by the Secretary must meet the Secretary's

procedures and criteria for the recognition of accrediting agencies, as published in the *Federal Register*. The Secretary, after considering the Committee's recommendation, makes the final determination regarding recognition.' (<http://www.ed.gov/>). The issue of what should be measured while accrediting an institution of higher education has been often raised. 'Accreditors mainly focus, not on educational performance or results, but on a variety of inputs, including the number of books in the library, the credentials and demographics of the faculty, student credit hours, what percentage of students live on campus, how many courses are offered at night, and so forth' (Martin, 2004: 15). However, there is still no consensus among education authorities on what indicators should the agencies be measuring for accrediting colleges and universities. The associate vice president of academic affairs at James Madison University, T. Dary Erwin, raises the issue of the importance of 'collegiate outcome assessment' (Erwin, 2004: 9), while the Chairman of American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Jerry L. Martin, notes that 'under the current accrediting system, the college curriculum has fallen apart' (Martin, 2004: 14). In certain instances the competence and professionalism of accreditors have been questioned: 'Former U.S. Senator Hank Brown, who recently served as President of the University of Northern Colorado, reports that the accreditors did not ask what the students were learning but focused mainly on whether the faculty was happy. (Martin, 2004: 15-16). Martin offers ways of tackling the 'credibility' issue of the accreditation process: 'Colleges could be required to answer questions that demonstrated their legitimacy—with penalties for fraudulent declarations. That should be sufficient to identify the institutions that are "colleges" in name only' (Martin, 2004: 16).

Historical background for the present power struggle

The attempts of standardization of instruction requirements at higher education institutions that could be traced back in history gave rise to the idea and process of accreditation. 'Following the model of the Land-Grant College Association (1887), The National Association of State

Universities formulated the definition of the “standard American university.” (Geiger, 2005: 57). Zook and Haggerty (1936) were setting criteria for the accreditation of higher education institutions, while Haggerty (1937) emphasized the importance of measuring faculty competence for the purposes of accreditation. In 1949 the National Commission on Accrediting and the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions were formed (Harclerod and Eaton, 2005: 266). In the meantime, accreditation bodies in specialized fields started emerging. (Harclerod and Eaton, 2005: 269). Besides, ‘a presidents work group on accreditation, consisting of twenty-five leaders from all types of institutions, developed a prospective new association to be called the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)’ (Harclerod and Eaton, 2005: 267-268). The multiple types of accrediting organizations create multiple interests and engender power struggle for influence. Hence, national and regional interests and standards of accreditation often come into clash.

Federal versus regional interests and the degree of transparency

Accreditation is the primary “reliable authority” for federal and state governments funding for higher education. Accreditation is required for student access to federal and state grants and loans. Accreditation is required for institution and program access to other federal funds for research and programs and state funds for operating.

However, there are certain discrepancies between federal and state influences in accreditation process. On the one hand, ‘The United States has no Federal Ministry of Education or other centralized authority exercising single national control over postsecondary educational institutions in this country. The States assume varying degrees of control over education, but, in general, institutions of higher education are permitted to operate with considerable independence and autonomy.’ (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html#Overview>). On the other hand, the federal government influence is clearly felt, ‘If the institutions or program being

accredited fails to meet minimum standards, the obvious sanction is withdrawal of approval. Since accreditation is, in theory, voluntary and nongovernmental. However, in practice, since the federal government requires accreditation by some federally recognized accrediting association for the institution to be eligible for federal research and student aid funds, the process has in effect become much less “voluntary.” The issue then shifts to the federal government’s decision to approve a given accrediting association for inclusion on the Department of Education’s list. For these decisions the department is presumably influenced by the recognition status accorded the association in question by the recently formed (1996) Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)’ (Schmidtlein and Berdahl, 2005: 86).

The important link between eligibility for Federal student financial aid and accreditation is recognized by Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, Chairman of the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness. But he also acknowledges the shortfalls that perpetrated the system and urges authorities to make necessary improvements. ‘The lackluster focus on academic achievement and student learning outcomes has resulted in the fact that more than half of our Nation’s students do not graduate in 4 years. Low graduation rates may be compounded by the fact that parents and students lack the necessary information to determine whether a particular college or university is a quality institution or appear to meet the needs of that particular student. Recognizing the importance of accreditation, last month Chairman John Boehner and I introduced H.R. 4283, the College Access and Accountability Act, which strengthens the accreditation system by empowering consumers through sunshine and transparency. The bill also maintains the important link between eligibility for Federal student financial aid and accreditation’ (McKeon, 2004: 2). T. Dary Erwin, the associate vice president at James Madison University also focuses on increasing transparency in accreditation, ‘the Commission believes that H.R. 4283’s provision strikes the appropriate balance between ensuring accountability and maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of the accrediting process (Erwin, 2004: 9).The 4283 Act was criticized for ‘federalizing’ higher education. However, McKeon emphasizes that this Act would in no way

infringe upon the autonomy of universities. What the Act requires is the increase of accountability by making accreditors' reports public. Creating a College Consumer Profile would be one step towards this process: 'By creating a College Consumer Profile, focusing on student learning outcomes and requiring accreditors to make some of their reports public, we will ensure that these consumers are able to accurately measure the academic quality of a postsecondary education' (McKeon, 2004: 3-4). However, Dale E. Kildee expresses certain reservations regarding publicizing accreditors' results: 'I am mindful about the concerns of institutions that disclosure may lead to unfair comparisons with other schools. The trick here is to find the right balance. We need to work to do so. The overall key to ensuring accreditation remains a positive force in higher education and ensures its independence and integrity of the process. The moment that Congress or the executive branch begins to affect this independence, I believe this integrity will be compromised' (Kildee, 2004: 7).

As for regional level of accreditation, it is based on where your institution is located. There are five regional bodies; and depending on where your institution is located, if you want to receive Title IV funds and if you want to be regionally accredited, you have to do it within that region. State influence in accreditation process is directly linked with state appropriations often expressed in performance funding measured by 'score' on performance criteria. '37 states reported using performance measures in higher education policymaking, and 23 reported using them in the budgetary process. Eight of the latter 23 states reported a direct linkage between an institution's "score" on performance measures and part of its budgetary allocation' (Zumeta, 2001: 167). Therefore, influence struggle, funding issues and transparency penetrate the national vs. regional levels of accreditation. These issues are important, because accreditation changes institutional behavior.

National versus regional accreditation standards and credit transfer issues

It should be noted that accreditation standards at federal and state levels appeared to be the most debated and controversial issue in the Spellings Commission and recent Reauthorization of Higher Education Act (Reactions, 2006; The Chronicle of HE, 2008). The debates on the criteria and regulations of accreditation, as well as its linkage with federal and state funding are still continuing.

The Authorization of the 4283 College Access and Accountability Act (H.R. 4283, June 22, 2004) also gave rise to certain interesting debates regarding accreditation standards. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point. ‘National accreditation bodies pass the same rigorous and detailed standards as regional accreditation bodies. Similarly, degree programs offered by institutions accredited by national accreditation bodies must meet standards no less demanding than those offered by institutions accredited by regional accreditation bodies. A comparison of standards at a major regional accrediting organization with those of a major national accrediting organization shows that both groups have requirements in the same 12 program-evaluation areas — such as faculty qualifications, learning resources, continuous institutional improvement — and sometimes the national organization has requirements that are even more specific’ (Miller, 2007). In his statement, Erwin indicates that setting standard criteria for measuring quality has presented a major challenge to state authorities. ‘In terms of the State picture, most States have some kind of policy or mandate about assessment in place. These policies vary from Statewide tests such as Georgia’s Regents Exam to the majority of institutions where the States allow the institutions to assess in their own way. States have been struggling with how to define and measure college quality. Often States will only collect what data are available, which many times are things like outputs, which, as you know, does not necessarily indicate what and how well students have learned at a particular institution. The current state of

assessment practice still makes it improbable to generalize beyond a single institution and in many cases difficult to generalize within a single institution' (Erwin, 2004: 8). Erwin makes further argument regarding the priority of federal government involvement in accreditation standards: 'The issues are so complex and the job is so big that a single State can feel overwhelmed' (Erwin, 2004: 9).

Besides, faculty qualification and credit transfer issues become apparent while comparing national and regional standards. 'In the faculty-qualifications area, for instance, the national organization requires a minimum of four years of related, practical work experience in the subject area taught and a related degree at the same level as the course being taught. The regional organization does not specify what qualifications are required. Yet many traditional colleges make a blanket rejection of career-school credits, erecting barriers to student mobility, even though career colleges may offer their students the same curriculum, use the same textbooks, boast faculty members with the same qualifications, and offer students comparable learning resources...Rejection of transfer credits based on bias for regional versus national accreditation is bad academic policy. Blanket credit rejection makes students less likely to pursue a four-year degree because it forces them to repeat courses, add debt to pay for them, and postpone graduation far into the future. It penalizes otherwise worthy students and makes the work of developing a world-class 21st-century work force in this country that much harder. Blanket rejection is counterproductive, counterintuitive, and counter to America's sense of hard work and fair play' (Miller, 2007).

Finally, the overall impression that one might get from debates on federal vs. state standards of accreditation is that of lack of uniformity and consensus on what and how to use the funds allotted for higher education in the most efficient way. The most important questions that remain regarding national vs. regional standards are: on the one hand, how should the institutions be compared across nation, especially under the conditions of diversification of higher education

institutions (Day & Mellinger, 1973; Larson, 1974; Maul, 1969)? On the other hand, what should be national standards? How rigorous should regional standards be?

The role of accreditation in distance education

During the last decade, the development of distance education has provided another increasingly important means to achieve a postsecondary education (Rovai, Ponton, Baker, 2008). There are different opinions regarding the degree of control and supervision of distance education programs by accrediting agencies. The ideas of education representatives making testimonies regarding the H.R. 4283 College Access and Opportunity Act, range from total un-involvement to rigorous supervision similar to campus-based institutions. Therefore, as this type of education develops, the criteria and the degree of involvement in the accreditation process should be further outlined and defined more precisely. The key issues at this point should be protecting students from fraud and abuse. In their testimonies, education authorities Keiser, Davis and Crow extensively discuss the ways of accrediting distance education (Keiser, 2004; Davis, 2004; Crow, 2004).

Conclusion

In summary, it should be noted that high quality instruction, academic freedom, accountability and transparency should go hand in hand. Agreement should be reached between different parties involved on what to consider as reliable and credible indicators of quality instruction and how to best measure them for the purposes of accreditation. The evaluation data should be made a public knowledge to increase transparency and serve student interests. And finally, preserving the unique balanced relationship and golden medium that exists between peer review and appropriate levels of government involvement in the process of accreditation would be the best option for further development of higher education in the U.S.

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