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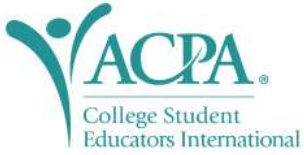
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DEVELOPMENTS

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The Problem with Accreditation as an Extension of Privilege and How to Fix It: A Primer and a Roadmap for New Professionals

written by: Aaron W. Hughey, Ed.D.

The accreditation system for colleges and universities is broken.

It has been broken for quite some time even though those on both sides of the equation refuse to acknowledge what has become increasingly obvious to those of us who work in the academy: Accreditation has evolved into a potent mechanism for perpetuating power structures that have become entrenched in the culture of higher education.

Unfortunately, the general public still thinks being “accredited” means something related to inherent quality and value mainly because we have convinced them this is the case. It is high time those of us who work in the sector come clean about what is really going on with the modern accreditation process.

I have worked in higher education for a long time. I spent 10 years in administration before joining the faculty just over three decades ago. I have been involved in four accreditation cycles (served on committees, written first drafts, met with visiting teams, etc.). As such, I have some familiarity with how accreditation is typically approached by senior administration.

At the same time, I am acutely aware that my time in the academy will be ending relatively soon. I will probably not see many of the changes that need to be made implemented before I retire. So, this is really a missive to the graduate students preparing to enter the field and the new professionals currently being handed the baton from those of us who were once where they are now. Our legacy is your destiny.

Why has accreditation become such a self-serving and largely meaningless practice?

Here is the problem. Very few people who work in the academy or at an accrediting agency are genuinely interested in whether higher education is truly meeting the needs of its stakeholders. Everything we do when it comes to accreditation is designed to create the appearance that we are being responsive to the needs of our constituencies. That is all that seems to matter.

And when it comes to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in particular, creating the illusion that the institution is truly committed to these ideals is much more important than actually committing to the principles. When you cut through all the rhetoric involved in paying homage to DEI values, very often little remains of any substance.

But when you read the accreditation report, these tenets are often touted as priorities that drive strategic decision-making at the institution.

Some years ago, I was on a committee charged with conducting an institutional DEI climate survey. I am sure many readers are familiar with the drill. Through this avenue, persons of color did an exceptional job identifying their issues of concern and the committee did a good job of accurately highlighting those concerns. This picture that emerged was decidedly not flattering. Comments from respondents included “I do not feel seen or heard at this institution,” “my department head rarely asks for my input and seldom takes my suggestions seriously,” “I overhear my colleagues using racist and sexist language on a fairly consistent basis,” and “I am expected to teach all the courses no one else wants to teach and I am the only minority in my department: coincidence?”

There were multiple pages of these (and decidedly worse) comments; consequently, the report was never released. Interestingly, the survey was repeated a few years later in a way that was designed to yield a more favorable result; i.e., questions were worded in a way that discouraged negative responses from persons of color. For example, if you replace “Do you feel marginalized at this institution?” with “Do you feel there is a systematic effort to marginalize you at this institution?” it tends to alter the meaning and character of the responses received. It is a subtle change, but it makes tangible perceptions seem more like “just” subjective opinions.

The accreditation process often follows a similar trajectory.

Accredited institutions typically go through reaffirmation every 10 years or so. This consists of an arduous and time-consuming process that keeps everyone on edge for about three out of every ten years. It is a huge distraction for the faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals who are continually struggling to carry out the increasingly underappreciated duties and responsibilities associated with meeting the complex and constantly shifting needs of the stakeholders we serve.

In short, we conduct an internal review using the perpetually updated and ostensibly arbitrary standards provided by the accrediting agency. This usually involves a lengthy and effusive internal debate and dialog which culminates in a self-study report that is sent to an external review team. They dissect the report extensively before coming to campus and attempting to verify its contents. It is all done in a very formal and highly structured manner that adds to the aura of credibility.

What really happens when a college or university pursues accreditation?

Here is the inside scoop.

Faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals are assigned to various committees and subcommittees that pull together the data mandated by the accrediting agency (enrollment numbers and trends, retention statistics, graduation rates, etc.). Some attention is given to program viability, departmental efficacy, learning outcomes and curricular concerns, but the emphasis is always on the numbers. The initial draft produced by the committees and subcommittees is then subjected to a series of edits and re-writes until the senior administrators (typically the accreditation coordinator and the department heads, directors, deans, vice presidents and the provost) in charge feel it conveys exactly the picture they want to present. The primary objective is always to show the institution in the best possible light. Anything that distracts from that goal is severely downplayed or discarded.

Over the years, I have been in many meetings with those same senior administrators where the goal was to develop and refine the final report that would be submitted to the accrediting agency. The pressure to follow the predetermined party line can be immense and those who dare to offer an alternative interpretation for what the

data really mean are often discredited, marginalized, or simply ignored. Sometimes they are dismissed from the committee altogether.

Once the report is in its most sanitized form, with a few sacrificial blemishes thrown in to make it seem more convincing, the finished product is sent to the external review team, which has been selected by the accrediting agency due to their supposed ability to be independent and unbiased. They look over the report for a while, come up with some suitable questions, and then head to the campus that is currently under the microscope.

The team typically spends a few days interacting with the faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals at the institution, led by senior administrators who carefully manage whom accreditors talk to, what they see, and where they are allowed to wander around. At the conclusion of the visit, they develop a preliminary assessment, which they share with select members of the campus community before heading home to compose a more thorough narrative, that includes what seems to be going well as well as issues that need to be addressed.

At the end of the day, the institution is typically re-accredited with a few caveats. The administration is happy, the accrediting agency is pleased, and the general public is appropriately reassured and none the wiser. The carefully choreographed dance ends and we go back to business as usual until the episode repeats itself in due course.

The existing power structure is reinforced and marginalized players continue to be marginalized.

And that is accreditation in a nutshell: A completely meaningless endeavor in any universe that values truth and authenticity. But the accreditation process does give us all something to do for a while (you know, instead of the jobs we were hired to do) and it allows those who are easily self-deceived to sleep better at night.

It does not have to be this way. We could come up with a system that would promote legitimate improvement and ensure that higher education is effectively adding value. To realize this dream, though, we need to fundamentally change how we conceptualize the process as well as how it is implemented. No small task but it can be done.

What needs to be done so that accreditation can accomplish its intended purpose?

The good news is that there is a way to make accreditation meaningful again. If you are a graduate student preparing to enter the academic world or if you are a new professional just beginning what we all hope will be a long and productive career as a faculty member, administrator or student affairs professional, please take note. You have a unique opportunity, and I would argue an obligation, to significantly improve and enhance the accreditation process, especially as it relates to persons of color and DEI ideals.

Want to conduct an authentic assessment of what is really going on at the institution? Then consider the following 10 recommendations. This really is not brain surgery; all we need is the resolve to emphasize the truth over the inherently self-serving interests that permeate the present model.

First, we need to champion uncompromising honesty as the number one outcome everyone is striving to achieve. This means senior administrators need to stop trying to control the narrative and reward those who vigorously pursue the truth regardless of where it leads. This includes taking an unflinching look in the mirror as it relates to our commitment to DEI ideals.

Second, the institution should never be informed of when the site visit will take place; the accrediting agency should only have to give 24 hours' notice regarding when the review team will be coming to town. Colleges and universities should be perpetually prepared to be audited. I am convinced this would cause those benefiting from their privilege to be justifiably anxious.

Third, we need to eliminate the self-study the institution conducts before the site visit. Accrediting agencies should publish a detailed list of all the data colleges and universities should constantly maintain, and how they should be maintained, and have the chief executive officer formally affirm the veracity of that data. This includes both quantitative as well as qualitative information related to DEI programs and services.

Fourth, the external review team should have immediate and unrestricted access to all the records, spreadsheets, forms, and other documents the institution is required to maintain. Someone should always be available to make that happen and the team should never have to wait until someone provides the requested information. Statistics related to DEI should be readily available.

Fifth, the review team should be able to visit anyone at the institution at any time during their visit. Senior administrators are programmed to follow the narrative; those on the front lines are generally more in the know about how things are really going. If I want to know how well academic advisors are doing their jobs, I want to speak directly to the academic advisors themselves as well as the students they are advising. The last person I would often want to talk to is the director of academic advising. Persons of color and underrepresented faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals should be especially accessible during the visit.

Sixth, there should be no social interaction between the review team and the administration, faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals at the institution. No lunch meetings, no fancy dinners. The review team should restrict their social interaction to the other members of the review team. Oh, and the external team should be made up of diverse professionals from a variety of disciplines.

Seventh, we need to eliminate the “preliminary” report that the review team is asked to provide before they leave town. They haven’t had time to comprehensively assemble an appropriate evaluation; i.e., one that has not been written under unreasonable time constraints. The team needs time to reflect on what they found and discuss it extensively among themselves before offering the institution any conclusions and recommendations.

Eighth, the review team needs to be compensated for their work, which is often grueling and underappreciated. Paying for travel, lodging and meals is not enough. And calling it “service” or “giving back” to the profession is often a way those with privilege take advantage of others; i.e., a polite way to get free labor by manipulating people. This needs to be built into the fee structure. You get what you pay for, as dad used to say.

Ninth, there is no need for a senior administrator (or administrators) to be “in charge” of accreditation. Again, this is just another mechanism for maintaining the narrative. If faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals are well-versed in what data they should maintain, and the accrediting agency is explicit about policies and procedures, then an oversight position is redundant and unnecessary. Administrative bloat is real and it is killing higher education.

Finally, we need to keep the real value and importance of accreditation in perspective. It often becomes the tail that wags the dog. If the institution is doing its job, and this includes prioritizing its commitment to DEI, this will be self-evident in the value it adds to society. For example, if its graduates are getting jobs in their majors – and their employers see that they have mastered relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies, then that is all that really matters.

Implement these ten recommendations and I guarantee accreditation will mean something. I am also confident that those who have a vested interest in maintaining a status quo that has long given them an unfair advantage will be bitterly opposed to virtually all these suggestions. The stated justification for their opposition will no doubt include terms like “unreasonable,” “impractical,” and “unrealistic,” but real reasons have a lot more to do with fear than anything else.

Keep in mind that I am not opposed to quality assurance. I have consulted extensively with business and industry, and I understand implicitly that it is an important dimension in everything we undertake. But

accreditation, in its present form, does not ensure quality or anything else. It certainly doesn't recognize, appreciate, or enhance the contributions of the most vulnerable members of the campus community. It often glosses over important considerations that deserve more in-depth analysis and critique.

We can do better. Or, more accurately, since I am directing this commentary toward graduate students preparing to enter the field and the new professionals who are already here, you can do better. We are pulling for you!

Questions for discussion:

- Why is it important that colleges and universities be accredited?
- How has the increasing adoption of the 'business model' in higher education affected the accreditation process?
- Why do you think some administrators are more concerned with perception than reality when it comes to accreditation?
- Who are the important constituencies on campus that should always be consulted when an institution is undergoing accreditation? How should their voices be accessed?
- How integral to the accreditation process are the institution's DEI initiatives and ideals? How can we measure their efficacy?
- Do you agree that the recommendations noted above would make accreditation more meaningful? Can you think of additional recommendations that would add to the credibility of the accreditation process?

About the Author

Aaron W. Hughey, EdD (he/him/his) is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. He oversees the master's degree program in Student Affairs in Higher Education as well as graduate certificates in International Student Services and Career Services in Higher Education. Before joining the faculty in 1991, he spent 10 years in progressive administrative positions, including five years as the Associate Director of University Housing at WKU. He was also head of the department of Counseling and Student Affairs for five years before returning to the faculty full-time in 2008. Dr. Hughey has degrees from the University of Tennessee at Martin, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Western Kentucky University, and Northern Illinois University. He has authored (or co-authored) over 70 refereed publications on a wide range of issues including leadership and student development, standardized testing, diversity, legal issues (including compliance), technology, and educational administration. He regularly presents at national and international conferences and consults extensively with companies and schools. He also provides training and professional development programs on a variety of topics centered on diversity, equity and inclusion, student success and leadership.

ACPAAdmin

22 June 2023

Volume 20, Volume 20,

Issue 2

<https://developments.myacpa.org/the-problem-with-accreditation-as-an-extension-of-privilege-and-how-to-fix-it-a-primer-and-a-roadmap-for-new-professionals/>