



How to fix accreditation

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A couple of weeks ago I explained why accreditation has become a self-indulgent, essentially meaningless exercise.

It was interesting that all the comments I received regarding that piece were supportive; not a single person stepped forward to defend the process as it currently exists.

To reiterate, I am not opposed to quality assurance. I have consulted extensively with business and industry, and I understand implicitly that it's an important dimension in everything we undertake.

But accreditation, in its present form, does not ensure quality or anything else. It obsesses over irrelevant minutia and glosses over important considerations that deserve more in-depth analysis and critique.

So – as promised - here is how we can revitalize accreditation. No small task - but it can be done. Again, pay attention.

First, we need to keep the overall importance of accreditation in perspective. It often becomes the tail that wags the dog. If graduates are getting jobs in their majors – and their employers see that they have mastered the relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to do those jobs – then accreditation is redundant.

Second, we need to champion honesty as the primary outcome everyone is striving to achieve. This means senior administrators need to stop trying to control the narrative and begin rewarding those who vigorously pursue the truth regardless of where it leads.

Third, the institution should never be informed when a site visit will take place; the accrediting agency should only have to give 24 hours' notice when the review team will be coming to town. Colleges and universities should be constantly prepared to be assessed.

Fourth, eliminate the self-study the institution conducts before a site visit. Accrediting agencies should publish a detailed list of all data colleges and universities should perpetually preserve as well as how they should be organized. Moreover, the chief executive officer should formally affirm the veracity of the quantitative and qualitative information provided to the review team.

Fifth, the external review team should have immediate and unrestricted access to all files, forms, spreadsheets, and other artifacts the institution is required to maintain – and they should never have to wait for someone to provide the requested documents.

Sixth, the review team should be able to visit anyone at the institution at any time during their visit. Senior administrators are programmed to promote the narrative; those on the front lines are generally more in the know about how things are really going. For example, if I want to know how well academic advisors are doing their jobs, the last person I want to talk to is the director of academic advising.

Seventh, there should be no social interaction between the review team and the administration, faculty, staff, and students 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.

Eighth, we need to eliminate the “preliminary” de-briefing the review team typically provides before they leave town. They haven’t had time to appropriately compose a meaningful evaluation, only one that has been assembled under unreasonable time constraints.

Ninth, 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 a polite way of getting free labor through manipulation. You get what you pay for, as dad used to say.

Finally, we need to eliminate the senior administrator “in charge” of accreditation. This position is unnecessary and simply represents another mechanism for controlling the narrative. If faculty and staff are well-versed in what they should maintain - and held accountable for doing so by their regular supervisors - an oversight position is superfluous.

Administrative bloat is real, and it is killing higher education.

Implement these recommendations and I guarantee accreditation will mean something. I am also confident that those who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo will be bitterly opposed to virtually all these suggestions for reasons that have a lot more to do with ego and self-preservation than anything else.

Look. This is not brain surgery; all we need is the resolve to emphasize the truth over the obsequious bureaucratic entanglements that permeate the present model.



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