

# The Kentucky Gazette

Without Fear or Favor

## **Opinion: The accreditation process for colleges and universities is broken: Here's how we can fix it**

**Aaron W. Hughey, opinion contributor**

Accreditation is a hot topic these days. Many readers probably think being “accredited” signifies strict adherence to standards. And once upon a time, that might have been true. Many of my colleagues still believe this is the case.

But it's not.

Ostensibly designed to assure the public our educational institutions are fulfilling their intended obligation to society, accreditation has devolved into a meaningless exercise in self-preservation.

In my four-plus decades in higher education, I have been involved in four accreditation cycles (served on committees, written first drafts, met with visiting teams, etc.). As such, I believe I have some insight into how the accreditation process tends to play out.

At best, accreditation is a necessary evil, an essential aspect of our branding initiatives. At worst, it creates the false impression we are being responsive to the needs of our constituencies.

Please note that 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.

Here is the inside scoop.

Accredited institutions usually go through “reaffirmation” every decade or so. This consists of an arduous and time-consuming process that keeps everyone on edge for about three years.

It's a huge distraction for faculty and staff who are struggling to carry out the increasingly underappreciated duties and responsibilities associated with meeting the complex and continually shifting needs of the stakeholders we serve.

In short, we conduct an internal review using the perpetually updated, constantly evolving, and arguably arbitrary standards provided by the accrediting agency. This assessment consists of a lengthy and effusive internal discussion and debate culminating in an exhaustive self-study which is sent to an external review team to digest before coming to campus to verify its contents.

Everything is done in a very formal and highly structured manner that adds to the aura of credibility.

Faculty and staff are assigned to various committees and subcommittees that pull together the data mandated by the accrediting agency. Some attention is given to program viability, departmental efficacy, learning outcomes and curricular concerns, but the real emphasis is always on quantity rather than quality.

The initial draft produced by the committees and subcommittees is then subjected to a series of edits and re-writes until senior administrators feel it conveys exactly the picture they want presented. 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.

Once the document 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 accrediting agency, which relays it to an external review team. The team, selected due to their supposed ability to be independent and unbiased, look over the self-study, come up with some suitable questions, and then head to campus.

The review team spends a few days interacting with faculty, staff and a few hand-picked students. At the conclusion of the visit, they develop a preliminary report, share it with a few members of the campus community, and then head home to compose a more thorough narrative consisting of observations, conclusions and recommendations.

By-the-way, pushback by faculty and staff on these recommendations, even when accompanied by solid evidence, is seldom taken seriously. There have been multiple occasions where I pointed out clear data misinterpretations that led to erroneous conclusions. In every instance, I was told it was better to just implement the suggestions.

At the end of the day, the institution is re-accredited with a few superficial caveats. The administration is happy, the accrediting agency feels their existence is justified, and the public is appropriately reassured - and none the wiser. The carefully choreographed dance ends and we go back to business as usual until the episode eventually repeats itself.

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

But it does not have to be this way. Here is how we can revitalize accreditation. Admittedly, this is no small task - but it can be done. So 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.

Which is why change will more than likely have to be imposed from the outside, i.e., by legislators or their designated oversight agencies. Higher education has demonstrated conclusively that we do not have the will – nor the ability – to effectively regulate ourselves.

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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