



What's wrong with accreditation?

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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.

I should note this is the first installment of a two-part series based on a longer article I wrote a couple of years ago. This column will focus on what's wrong with accreditation; the next one will explain how to fix it.

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.

OK. Here is the inside scoop.

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. In a couple of weeks, I'll explain how we can make accreditation meaningful again.

Stay tuned.



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