

Letter from the President

Balancing Competing Goods *Accreditation and Information to the Public About Quality*

March 2004

Background

THESE DAYS, HIGHER EDUCATION AND ACCREDITATION are frequently being pressed to provide additional information to students and the public about higher education quality. When comments and questions focus on accreditation, we hear, for example: “Accreditors need to disclose more about higher education quality.” “Accreditation is secretive.” and “Accreditation is a mystery.”

Yet, accreditors – and the institutions, programs they review – have, for many years, provided significant amounts of information to students and the public. Indeed, one sometimes hears expressions of frustration from educators because so much effort has already been invested in creating an incredible array of print and electronic material available about our 6,800 accredited institutions and more than 18,000 accredited programs. With access to the World Wide Web now routine, great amounts of this information are instantly available to students, the public, the press and government.

Accrediting organizations provide clear and concise information about accreditation policies, processes and practices. They make information about accreditation decisions readily available to the public. The approximately 80 recognized accrediting organizations in the U.S. offer a voluminous amount of other accreditation-related information through both print and electronic sources.

This said, students and the public tell us they want more – or at least something different. The climate in which we are living challenges accreditors, institutions and programs to give yet additional thought to how we

describe higher education quality and how higher education and accreditation carry out their respective responsibilities to inform the public in this area.

The Climate in Which Accreditation Now Operates

We live in a society of heightened scrutiny of all kinds of institutions, organizations and businesses. One only has to mention Sarbanes-Oxley, Enron, Arthur Anderson, Janus, and United Way and heads nod affirmatively. More and more businesses, organizations and institutions are being asked to “lift the veil” and provide more diverse information about their resources, how they operate, how they spend their money and, most important, how they add value. It is unreasonable to think that higher education and accreditation – our primary means of assuring quality – would be exempt from this scrutiny.

We also live in a society of nearly universal access to higher education. Increased demand for higher education has resulted in increased demand for information that is “consumer friendly” and couched in the language of individual benefit. While many of us are still uncomfortable with higher education treated as a consumer good, many students and the public are not. Increasingly, providing additional information about higher education quality is viewed as serving the public interest.

Who is pressing for more information from institutions, programs and accrediting organizations? *Students and families* want to know more about the institutions and programs for which they are paying tuition. The *press* routinely has questions here. Most recently, *federal*

political leaders engaged in the current reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and *state political leaders* seeking to balance budgets are joining students, families and the press in the call for more information.

Questions and Issues

What do people want? Many are satisfied with the idea that accreditation exists, along with assurance that government and educators check to see that accreditation operates properly. Others are calling for more explicit, concise descriptions of “quality” or the added value of higher education. Yet others want accreditation to assist students to make quick and reliable judgments about selecting a college or university or paying the tuition of a particular college or university. This helps explain the popularity of, e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Princeton Review* and other similar publications.

When students and the public seek additional information about higher education quality, they tend to focus on three issues.

- They ask accreditors to provide more information about accreditation process: *“How does accreditation work?”*
- They ask accreditors, institutions and programs to provide more information about results of specific accreditation reviews: *“What are the assets and the weak points of the institutions or program in which I am interested?”*
- They ask institutions and programs to tell more about performance, especially student achievement: *“What skills and capacity can enrollment in your institution or program help me to achieve?”*

The Dilemma of Competing Goods

For those of us in accreditation, we are struggling with competing goods. On the one hand, the nature of accreditation review – a judgment-based peer review of complex issues related to quality assurance and quality improvement – calls for at least a modicum of discretion and a modest commitment to some privacy and confidentiality. This is vital to the ability of accreditation to confront difficult and sensitive quality issues in a constructive manner.

On the other hand, accreditors are firmly committed to openness and candor. Indeed, all accreditors identify

providing students and the public with general information about quality in higher education as one of their responsibilities.

How do we in accreditation further respond to these calls for information? How do we balance the competing goods of assuring some zone of discretion needed to sustain a robust accreditation enterprise and meeting the public’s reasonable desire for more information about quality?

Here are several suggestions for consideration. They are not easy to implement. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) may be an appropriate forum in which to bring institutional and program leaders, accreditors, students and representatives of the public together to explore the viability of these ideas. Achieving a balance between the discretion needed by accreditation to do its work effectively and the public’s desire for additional information is a complex challenge. However, it is also an important opportunity to retell the story of the success of self-regulation of higher education through accreditation.

If we were to pursue these suggestions, two key conditions will need to be met. First, accrediting organizations, institutions or programs should be primarily responsible for providing this additional information to the public. They can work together to determine the division of labor: what will be made available by accrediting organizations and what will be available from institutions. Second, information to students and the public about institution or program quality should be grounded in the mission and success indicators established by the institutions and programs themselves. In short, responding to these calls for information must take place within the context of continued self regulation of higher education.

Balancing Competing Goods

More Information about Accreditation Process

As demonstrated above, one valuable source of additional information is accrediting organizations themselves. To their credit, accrediting organizations regularly provide clear and comprehensive descriptions of how accreditation “works.” However, let’s face it, this is often higher education professionals writing for other professionals.

Yes, the information provided is clear and comprehensive to us, nonetheless, students and the public continue to ask for more. There is a message here.

At the national level, CHEA is another source of information. As with the accrediting organizations, CHEA also provides comprehensive information about accreditation, its policies and practices and the challenges accreditation faces. However, CHEA, too, writes mainly for an audience of professionals and, we, too, are routinely asked for more information.

Perhaps CHEA and the accrediting organizations can further enhance the comprehensive information already provided to students and the public by turning to students and the public to “test” the usefulness and clarity of that which is provided. Example I below is one suggestion of a baseline narrative that might be tested. If effective, this information can easily be available on the Websites of all accredited institutions and programs as well as all accrediting organizations.

EXAMPLE I

Students and the Public “Test” a Baseline Accreditation Narrative

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

“Accreditation” is review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs. In the United States, accreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, and the press know that an institution or program provides a quality education.

WHAT IS ACCREDITED?

Colleges, universities, and programs are accredited. In the U.S., colleges and universities are accredited by one of 19 recognized institutional accrediting organizations. Programs are accredited by one of approximately 60 recognized programmatic accrediting organizations. Accrediting organizations that are “recognized” have been reviewed for quality by a private organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or through the federal government by the United States Department of Education (USDE).

HOW DOES ACCREDITATION WORK?

Accreditation is a system of self regulation that generally involves these key steps. (1) Accrediting organizations have developed standards by which an institution and program is reviewed for quality. (2) An institution or program undertakes a self analysis or “self study” based on the standards of the accrediting organization. (3) Peers or colleagues in higher education (along with representatives of the public) review the self study, make a visit to an institution or program to test its veracity and make a recommendation to the accrediting organization about the accredited status of the institution or program. (4) The accrediting organization, through its commission or decision making body (also comprised of peers and the public), acts on the recommendation and makes a judgment about whether an institution or program has met the accreditation standards. This process must be repeated anywhere from every three to ten years for an institution or program to retain its accreditation.

WHY IS ACCREDITATION IMPORTANT?

Whether a college, university, or program is accredited is important to students and the public because:

- Students who want federal (and sometimes state) grants and loans need to attend a college, university, or program that is accredited.
- Employers ask if a college, university, or program is accredited when deciding to provide tuition assistance to current employees, evaluating the credentials of new employees, or making a charitable contribution.
- The federal government requires that a college, university, or program be accredited in order to be eligible for federal grants and loans or other federal funds that can ultimately have an impact on students and the public, e.g., research.
- State governments require that a college, university, or program be accredited when they make state funds available to institutions and when they allow students to sit for state licensure examinations in some professional fields.

WHO ARE THE ACCREDITORS?

In the U.S., the accreditors are private, nongovernmental organizations created for the specific purpose of reviewing higher education institutions and programs for quality. To find a list of all recognized accreditors in the U.S., please go the CHEA Website at www.chea.org and click on “Institutional Database.”

HOW DO I LEARN MORE ABOUT ACCREDITATION?

Information About Contacts

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Results of Specific Accreditation Reviews

Accreditors, institutions and programs alike report promptly and reliably on the award of accreditation, the removal of accreditation and sanctions on institutions and programs that are not meeting accreditation standards but have been given an opportunity to resolve their difficulties. Nonetheless, we are being asked to provide even more information.

A number of suggestions to respond to this call have been offered over the years.* One is to give students and the public additional information by making available the two major documents resulting from an accreditation review: the self study of an institution or program and the report of the site visitors to the institution or program under review. Some accreditors, institutions and programs already do this. Especially in the public sector, these documents have been in the public domain for some time and are sometimes easily accessible through the Websites of accredited institutions and programs.

Another suggestion is to develop a summary report to the public of the results of an accreditation review of a specific institution or program. Some accrediting organizations already have something similar that is used under negative conditions – when an institution or program has its accreditation removed or is close to this. This approach may be broadened to apply to all institutions and programs that have just concluded an accreditation review. The communication might be in the form of an open letter to the governing boards of institutions. Example II on the right is an effort to broaden the application of the summary approach.

Of all the suggestions that are offered to enhance information to the public about higher education quality, this is clearly one of the most difficult for institutions, programs and accreditors. First, it is understandable that college and university presidents may be less than enthusiastic about airing current institutional shortcomings (the third bullet above), however tactfully described. Second, accreditation, to be successful, needs to preserve some “zone of privacy” in the course of an accreditation review in which a visiting team and college officials can speak frankly to each other about an insti-

EXAMPLE II

Accreditors, Institutions and Programs Explore a “Summary Report”

SUMMARY REPORT OF ACCREDITATION REVIEW

- What is the result of this accreditation review?
- What institutional or programmatic strengths were identified?
- In what areas might the institution or program improve?
- Did the accreditation review point out any significant issues that impact, positively or negatively, on service to students at this institution or program?
- How might the current accredited status of this institution or program influence a student’s judgment about whether to attend or continue to attend this institution or program?

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tution or program, especially its shortcomings. This is vital to quality improvement, a fundamental goal of accreditation. Third, knowing that key findings of a review are to be public can undermine the enthusiasm with which an institution or program is willing to be candidly introspective, perhaps resulting in accreditation reviews that are increasingly superficial.

Finally, who should be responsible for a summary report? The accrediting organization? An institution or program? All parties? If all parties, how do they reach agreement about the format and content of the document?

More About Performance, Especially Student Achievement.

As pointed out above, institutions and programs already make a great deal of information about performance publicly available. Some institutional membership associations help their institutions by arraying this information in a single location. A key factor in the success of these descriptions of performance is the connection to the mission of a particular institution or program.

* August 25, 1994 memorandum on “Public Disclosure” from Charles Cook, Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, to the National Policy Board.

Institution or program performance can be effectively judged only in the context of the mission or commitment to service that an institution or program has made.

Example III on the right offers yet another format for describing institution and program performance in the context of mission. It is an attempt to provide information to students and the public in a direct and succinct manner, tying together material on accredited status, student achievement and complete with links to key locations at the institution's Website. Institutions might consider arraying this information on their respective Websites as a means of providing a good deal of important material in summary form. Although this example is constructed on an institutional base, it can easily be expanded to accommodate information about accredited programs.

The challenge of providing additional information to students and the public may indeed be an issue that higher education and accreditation can effectively address over the next several years. Three suggestions are offered here to respond to this challenge and the frequent questions from students and the public:

- Accrediting organizations and CHEA can test a baseline accreditation narrative with students and the public (Example I).
- Accrediting organizations, institutions and programs can explore a "Summary Report of Accreditation Review" to assist students and the public (Example II).
- Institutions and programs can explore an "Information Profile" to further assist students and the public (Example III).

We can balance the competing goods of discretion for accreditation and meeting the information needs of students and the public.



Judith Eaton
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 Council for Higher Education Accreditation

EXAMPLE III

Institutions and Programs Explore an "Information Profile"

NAME OF INSTITUTION: _____

ACCREDITATIONS

Institutional Accrerator: _____

Programmatic Accrerator(s): _____

Date of Next Institutional Review: _____

(To learn more about the accredited status of the institution or a program, click on the accrediting organization's name.)

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND MISSION

Institutional Mission: _____

Institutional Goals: _____

Institutional Type: _____

Brief Description of Student Population: _____

Admissions Requirements: _____

Areas of Special Focus (e.g., liberal arts, vocational education): _____

OPTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL INDICATORS OF EFFECTIVENESS WITH UNDERGRADUATES (Indicators must be determined and defined by the institution. These are examples only.)

1. Graduates Entering Graduate School

Year: _____ # of Graduates: _____

Entering Graduate School: _____

2. Job Placement

Year: _____ # of Graduates: _____ # Employed: _____

3. Annual Transfer Activity

Year: _____ # of Transfers: _____ Transfer Rate: _____

4. Persistence and Average Time to Certificate or Degree

1-Yr. Certificate: _____ 2-Yr. Degree: _____

4-Yr. Degree: _____

5. Graduation

Year: _____ # of Graduates: _____ Graduate Rate: _____

6. Completion of Educational Goal (other than certificate or degree - if data collected)

of Students Surveyed: _____ # Completing Goal: _____

7. Other (describe)

Success in General Education: _____

Success in Major Field: _____

Success in Career Learning Outcomes: _____

Success in Licensure/Certification Exams: _____

Additional Indicators: _____

Upcoming CHEA Events

CHEA Board of Directors Meeting

April 26-27, 2004 • Washington, DC

Open Meeting: Revision of the CHEA Recognition Policy

May 12, 2004 • Washington, DC

International Workshop on Degrees and Credentials

July 7-9, 2004 • Washington, DC

CHEA Board of Directors Meeting

September 20-21, 2004 • Washington, DC

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