

What should the states require – and not require of accreditation, and why?

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We are in the midst of a national dialogue, perhaps even a national debate about the role of accreditation in higher education

Things have become a little tense from time to time in the last year, and I've decided it is time to get a little fun back into these conversations.

Montaigne wrote, "No one is exempt from uttering nonsense; the only misfortune is to do it solemnly." I'm afraid I have a reputation for talking very seriously about higher education, as well as talking nonsense from time to time, so I take this as a personal rebuke. My new year's resolution is to lighten up, but it won't be easy.

About 25 years ago I gave my first commencement speech at a small community college in southern Illinois. At the end of the ceremony, as I walked off the stage with the president, he said, "Thanks Paul. That was fine; everybody can't be Bob Hope."

I want to begin by focusing my remarks on the last word of the title of this session, the word "Why?"

Why are we having this debate? Is it about: Power? Legitimacy? Academic autonomy? Voluntary accreditation? Public accountability?

I'd say it's about all of the above, and every one of these issues is worth a vigorous debate. But these hoary issues are not the reason we are in this discussion. They are means, not ends. And they've been around for decades.

We are having this debate because the bar for higher education has been raised. Higher education is no longer optional, it is essential. The stakes are very high.

You've been criticized, unfairly, for focusing solely on "inputs." Of course this was the focus years ago, and you've moved on.

The focus on inputs, now obsolete, was related to obsolete attitudes about education. Schools and colleges used to be accountable only for providing resources to students. If the inputs were ok, and the outcomes were not "up to standards" the student was to blame.

Schools didn't fail, students did. And the students who failed in school pumped gas or worked in factory jobs, and that was ok.

Students still have to perform, but schools and colleges are being held much more accountable for student success. High rates of student failure are now intolerable. The idea of a "failing school," was unthinkable when I was growing up, but times have changed.

How do schools fail today? By not engaging students, by failing to challenge them, by not providing an appropriate curriculum, adequate supports, or an environment conducive to learning, and by not dealing with inadequate teaching.

We certainly have had, and we may *still* have, the world's finest system of higher education. But I am convinced it has to get better.

Some still debate whether more educational attainment is necessary. In my mind that debate is settled. Most of the jobs growing in the country require postsecondary education. Most high school students, 80%, expect to need and obtain a baccalaureate degree. The world is getting more complex, and democracy and safeguards for human rights are becoming more fragile. I'm not prepared to accept the social and economic consequences of high unemployment and poorly educated voters.

Others question whether more attainment is possible. I think it is both necessary and possible. Over the past two centuries we have steadily educated an increasingly larger fraction of our people to a higher standard. I have no doubt we have the capacity to do more. We already do a pretty fair job of educating average people who are born into wealthy families or who have great athletic ability.

About 18 months before the report of the Spellings Commission, SHEEO published *Accountability for Better Results*, the report of the National Commission for Accountability in Higher Education. This Commission said the organizing principle for accountability should be pride, not fear, aspirations not minimum standards. It argued that accountability should not be about finger-pointing and sanctions, but about clear goals, shared commitments, collective responsibility, and self-discipline.

It described an appropriate division of labor among governments (state and federal), accrediting agencies, institutions, faculty, and students. And it asserted that meaningful, collective, self-disciplined accountability requires evidence – monitoring results, and working for improvement.

I'm sure some think this report's emphasis on self-discipline and collective responsibility is "soft," lacking the "sticks" and external threats required for real change. Others think it went too far by calling for a unit record system so policy makers could evaluate the success of the "system" (and their own performance, by the way!) in graduation rates, transfer, and student aid. And others have objected to the recommendation that states assess student

learning, not as a tool of institutional accountability, but to monitor the educational needs and attainment of their citizens.

I'm willing to defend all of these recommendations, but I want to focus on what this report asked of institutions and accrediting agencies. The Accountability Commission asked institutions, faculty specifically, to define learning objectives, assess student performance, and work for improvement. And it asked accrediting agencies to define meaningful standards for different degrees, to assess institutional performance and capacity against established standards, and to make accreditation reports more publicly transparent.

I've been thinking hard about how these recommendations might be implemented -- I realize they are challenging. And I am persuaded no significant improvement is possible without the voluntary commitment and energy of the academic community.

I know many in the academic community understand the need, and are working on these issues. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of faculty, who are working creatively and hard to improve teaching and learning.

But efforts to improve student learning must become routine, not exceptional. If institutional leaders and accreditors don't encourage and reinforce the faculty who are focused on increasing student learning, nothing much will change.

What should states require from accreditation? In the spirit of mutual accountability and self-discipline, I prefer to focus on what the states *need* from accreditors.

My list has just two items. The first follows from what I've just said: ***States need your help in motivating and enabling institutions to pay more serious attention to defining, pursuing, and achieving necessary learning outcomes for more students.*** AAC&U has done great work in outlining the general knowledge and skills that should be signified by a baccalaureate degree. The academic community – including accreditors, disciplinary associations, academic departments, and individual faculty – must do the work to translate these broad aspirations into specific learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessments to monitor and motivate progress.

I know many of you have a running start on this issue. You've done good work, and I believe you are poised to do more. But I want to urge you to do more *together*.

Diversity has many advantages, but it also has some limitations. You can earn credit for collective responsibility by pursuing more consistency and commonality in your standards and approach. It should be a waste of time for an institution in the U.S. to shop for a less-demanding accreditor. And it would be good if the U.S. had standards for degrees that were at least as consistent and clear as those which are likely to emerge from the Bologna process.

Second, the states need your help in dealing with weak institutions. Substandard institutions should face more pressure to improve. Institutions which are hopelessly incompetent or outright frauds should be shut down. Growing student demand means there is money to be made in higher education. Supply is increasing to meet the demand, and under pressure some suppliers (both for-profit and non-profit) have been tempted to cut corners on quality.

These issues are important because higher education of inferior quality is more socially damaging than it used to be. The consequences of poor quality are more serious, and the costs to students and society are more substantial.

No state, no government has the expertise or the human resources to provide quality control in higher education. Governments are *even less capable* of designing and implementing procedures to motivate and assure continuous quality improvement. So we need you. There is no practical alternative to voluntary accreditation. It must be rigorous and effective.

Over the past three years I've spent a little time with accreditors, and I've learned enough to develop a greater appreciation for the people in the field and for the challenges you face. I think most of these challenges can be reduced to a single issue:

Accreditation has always boiled down to a categorical, yes or no, decision. Yet, most of the issues we face and the problems we must solve involve gradations of performance and quality. We have to deal with continuous, rather than categorical variables.

Only a tiny fraction of the institutions and academic programs in the United States should be put out of business; we can not afford to lose very many institutions given the growing need for higher education. But *all* institutions can improve, and *many* of them should improve a good deal.

Because accreditation is a categorical issue, we too often think of related issues in categorical terms.

Is it meaningful to talk about accreditation as a voluntary activity when most institutions would not be viable without eligibility for Title IV student aid?

Is every accredited institution in the United States delivering consistently high quality educational programs?

Is institutional privacy, the confidentiality of accreditation reports, absolutely essential?

On the flip side, is total transparency absolutely desirable?

The answer to all of these questions is no, perhaps even a categorical no!

It is too much to ask for accreditors to bear the full burden of strengthening the quality of American higher education. You have neither the resources nor the authority to do this work by yourselves. The answer must be more effective partnerships among all who bear part of the responsibility. Collaborative partnerships and open communication are needed to navigate through these tricky issues, make the nuanced judgments and take the thoughtful actions required to improve institutional effectiveness.

Accreditors, governing boards, institutional leaders, the states, and the federal government will need to strengthen mutual trust and communication to address this problem. I understand a “zone of privacy” is essential for candid feedback. And the principle of “do no harm” should apply to every institution capable and willing to serve society.

But those responsible for institutional management and institutional governing boards cannot do their job without full, candid advice and feedback from accreditors. And in cases where an institution is skating too close to the line of unacceptable performance, responsible state and federal authorities should be informed, and perhaps they should become involved in corrective action.

“The devil will be in the details” as we work on these relationships. But we can and should do this difficult work.

I want to close by sharing a comment from Ralph Wolff, one of many in your community I’ve come to respect and consider a friend. In the course of a Wingspread conference on improving accountability and outcomes for student learning, Ralph said something to this effect.

“You know, we should change the way we are talking about accountability for student learning. This shouldn’t be something we *have* to do, but something we *get* to do!”

We all are privileged to be part of this work. Thank you for your attention.