

The New “Ecology” for Higher Education: Challenges to Accreditation

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As American higher education enters the second decade of a new millennium, it inhabits a landscape that is rapidly being transformed. If current trends continue, college students in 2020 will participate in new kinds of learning experiences, access new kinds of learning resources, and deal with broader ranges of providers than ever before. Meanwhile, providers themselves will harness almost unimagined new technologies, will face escalating demands for performance, and will be forced to operate in an increasingly seamless global marketplace for higher education. Together, these conditions constitute nothing less than a “new ecology” for higher education. Its characteristics are increasingly removed from the kinds of on-the-ground, face-to-face, bricks-and-mortar conditions in which today’s accreditation approaches evolved. As a consequence, they are bound to pose challenges to these approaches. This brief paper examines the nature of these changes and the specific challenges that each poses to established accreditation practices. It then goes on to note the kinds of changes in accreditation practices, and particularly for WASC, that might be needed to meet these challenges.

- **New Patterns of Participation.** The dominant pattern of college attendance in America no longer has individual higher education institutions at its center. At least three dimensions of this dominant pattern can be discerned, some established and some emerging. First, for about a decade and a half, the majority of students earning a baccalaureate degree will have attended two or more institutions in doing so, and a fifth attending three or more. These developments are raising issues about how learning transfers from one institution to another in a cumulative and coherent fashion as a student works toward a credential. Adding to this fractionalization, some parts of an institution’s curriculum may be delivered by third-party providers—raising parallel questions about “transfer” of content *within* a given institution. For-profit companies such as StraighterLine, for example, allow institutions to essentially outsource common lower-division courses required to earn a baccalaureate degree. Both situations render obsolescent accreditation’s dominant paradigm of accrediting individual institutions.
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- **New Kinds of Providers.** A second, more recent, development has been the rapid growth of new kinds of providers. Pure distance-delivery institutions are becoming more common and the for-profit sector now serves some ten percent of the nation’s undergraduates. Accreditation standards developed in an era dominated by face-to-face classrooms and faculty-centered approaches to teaching and learning are becoming ill-suited to these new institutions. At the same time, the new for-profit business model is not well understood by regional accreditors and poses challenges to established notions of governance. Finally, looking even farther into the future, some cutting-edge

providers are not higher education institutions at all and there is growing availability of learning resources that learners can access on their own. Meanwhile, internet-based information resources can potentially allow a dedicated “student” to master all the material contained in a baccalaureate program without attending an organized institution of higher education at all.

- **A New Paradigm of Teaching and Learning.** Also fading into history is the traditional academic calendar based on fixed time-based terms (semesters or quarters) and one-way transmission of content. In contrast, the emerging new “paradigm” of teaching and learning—best illustrated now by a handful of competency-based institutions like Western Governors University (WGU)—is based on a mastery model in which students make academic progress by successfully completing, at their own pace, successive examinations, demonstrations, or performances. In contrast to the traditional seat-time approach, this model is not only asynchronous, but is also characterized by a wide diversity of individual learning experiences. No two students at WGU, for example, will have engaged the same “curriculum,” although all will be expected to meet common outcomes standards. At the opposite end of the continuum, another feature of this new paradigm of teaching and learning is characterized by far more standardized and structured learning experiences built using a growing body of insights about how people learn provided through cognitive science. Institutions employing this mode, like the British Open University and many U.S. for-profits, rely on a centrally-developed, standardized curriculum delivered by adjunct faculty or at a distance. By 2020, it is very likely that a majority of the nation’s college students will be experiencing one of these two transformed modes of provision. Both of these approaches effectively “unbundle” the faculty role by separating the functions of course design, content delivery, assessment, and mentorship. And both therefore challenge accreditation’s traditional faculty-centric and resource-based view of quality, and their associated review standards. Both of these approaches also require established standards of mastery based upon an agreed-upon array of intended learning outcomes consistent with the needs of the 21st century. So both therefore challenge accreditation to help establish what these intended learning outcomes ought to be.
- **Constrained Resources.** The current global economic downturn was preceded by a long period of state budgetary shortfalls and consequent disinvestment in public higher education. And available evidence suggests that most states will be in structural deficits throughout the coming decade, even if the economy rebounds more broadly. Growing gaps between rich and poor accompanying these economic trends, moreover, already mean that higher education is unaffordable to growing numbers of students. These conditions put pressure on accreditation to ensure that institutions are paying proper attention to the stewardship of their fiscal resources for future survival—demanding attention to efficiency as well as effectiveness. They also raise questions of equity, if institutions are turning their backs on qualified but less-well-off potential students in their admissions and financial aid policies. Finally, they put pressure on accreditors themselves to make the accreditation process more efficient by reducing duplication, streamlining reporting, and harnessing technology to enable “virtual” presence and collaboration.
- **External Demands for Performance.** The last five years has witnessed unprecedented public challenges for higher education to become more accountable for results. All expectations that the change of administration in Washington would reduce the pressure on colleges and universities to demonstrate student success and acceptable learning outcomes among graduates have vanished with the Obama administration’s new goals for higher education and its accompanying accountability provisions. Whatever the fortunes of the respective political parties in the decade to come, therefore, the need to be accountable for learning will likely remain. What is more, the nature of the demand has shifted. Accreditors have been asked by regulators with growing stridence over the least twenty

years to require institutions to pay attention to student learning outcomes in the course of a review. These efforts have met with considerable success, as shown by the findings of last summer's survey of institutional assessment activities conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). Now there is a demand to go beyond just "doing assessment" by examining the average performance of selected samples of students. The new expectation instead is ensuring that *all* graduates measure up to established learning outcomes *standards*. The growing press for such standards is shown by the draft Degree Profile just issued by the Lumina Foundation for Education to stimulate the discussion of common standards for higher education, and the "college-ready" standards for high school exit recently promulgated by the National Governors Association in collaboration with the Chief State School Officers. Regional accreditors have done a fine job of developing institutional capacity to do assessment. But they have little experience with engaging institutions constructively in conversations about actual expectations and performance with respect to student learning outcomes.

- **External Demands for Transparency.** Accompanying these external demands for specific performance in the realm of student success and meeting acceptable levels of learning are growing calls for both accreditors and institutions to become more transparent about what they do and the results they achieve. For many years, regional accreditation's traditional practices of revealing only the accredited status of the institutions they review caused little public comment. In an age of accountability, though, this stance has become increasingly untenable. At the very least, accreditors will be pressed to publish the broad findings of all reviews by identifying areas of challenge and exemplary performance—a task with which all of the regionals are now struggling. At the same time, they will be under greater pressure to broaden public participation in what is perceived by many outsiders to be a "secretive" process by increasing the number of public members on Commissions and, where appropriate, expert public participation on review teams. At the same time, institutions are being asked to show more about their internal operations—standards of student academic achievement, quality of resources and learning experiences, and so on—and their academic results. Accreditors are the vehicle for these demands, so will increasingly be called upon to require institutions to disclose certain things and check up on how well they are doing so.

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- **A Global Higher Education System.** Finally, the U.S. higher education system is not operating in isolation from those of the rest of the world. Just as students move from institution to institution and state to state with greater frequency, foreign students are coming to the U.S. and U.S. institutions are operating abroad in greater numbers. Distance delivery is accelerating these phenomena and it is likely that 2020 will be characterized by a "flatter" higher education world. Increased globalization has several dimensions that affect accreditation. First, it means that academic standards for undergraduate and masters-level work are converging across national contexts. The Bologna process in Europe is the most visible manifestation of the emergence of aligned global standards, with counterparts in Australasia, as well as Central and South America. To be acceptable abroad, U.S. standards for student learning outcomes will need to be aligned with these new prototypes and be assessed in similar fashions. Another dimension of the going global is that the quality of U.S. institutions operating abroad must be assured. At the same time, in order to gain credibility, non-U.S. institutions are beginning to seek and receive recognition from American accreditors. Both

of these should entail establishing partnerships between American accreditors and other national quality assurance agencies, which need to know what U.S. accreditation entails and what they can expect when dealing with it. Finally, a “flattening” world demands that U.S. college graduates have global competencies including an understanding of other cultures, geographic knowledge, and foreign language skills. One implication is that these should be added to established lists of generic competencies that accreditors require institutions to teach and assess.

It is easier to define these emerging changes and identify the challenges they pose to current accreditation practices than it is to delineate the specifics of how these practices ought to change. Nevertheless, these trends suggest the following:

- Accreditors will need to shift some of their attention toward monitoring how students progress longitudinally toward credentials, using the services of multiple educational providers. This may require special attention to examining how the increasingly disparate parts of a student’s experience fit together to constitute an effective path to a given credential or degree. How institutions treat, monitor, and evaluate incoming transfer courses will be an important part of this. In addition, accreditors will need to increasingly recognize—and possibly review—providers such as “outsourced” providers of packaged courses and informational websites. At the very least, they will have to pay more attention to examining the criteria by which institutions decide to use licensed providers such as these and accept their credits.
- These trends, as well as the changing paradigm of teaching and learning, will require even more emphasis to be placed on aligned standards of academic achievement, as well as solid evidence that these standards are being achieved. As noted, this will require attention to what the common elements of a bachelors or masters degree ought to be, as well as how institutions set performance benchmarks on these learning outcomes as “good enough.” For WASC in particular, this may mean devoting particular attention to reframing the contents of CFR2.2, hopefully in cooperation with other regional accreditors. The newly issued Lumina Degree Profile may provide good guidance in doing this.
- Accreditors will require new standards and review approaches to deal with an increasingly “unbundled” set of faculty roles. Reviewing faculty credentials and how faculty members are deployed will no longer be enough. In addition, attention must be paid to how the unbundled components of the traditional faculty role are re-integrated to yield coherent and high quality learning experiences and how individuals are developed and evaluated in these new roles. Current accreditation standards, including WASC’s, are properly focused on the faculty role in delivering content, but less attention is typically paid to the faculty role in mentoring students and assessing their performance. Also, as these distinct roles are increasingly enacted by different individuals, review attention must also be devoted to examining how institutions ensure that they are appropriately integrated and coordinated.
- Review processes will need to be more visibly cost-effective, employing, where appropriate, more virtual communication and less paper-and-pencil reporting. What reporting remains must be indicator-based and ruthlessly focused on institutional effectiveness and student performance. For WASC in particular, the first means critically re-appraising the two-visit model and developing tools and templates for systematically scanning and evaluating institutional websites. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), for example, has developed a useful rubric for examining how institutions present the results of learning outcomes assessments on their websites. The second means continuing to develop the new requirement that every visit include a

focused conversation about graduation rates and eventually extending such requirements to include mandatory conversations about student learning results.

- Accreditors will need to perform a more overt accountability role, with processes more attuned to public concerns about quality, and public participation in the accreditation process through more public members of Commissions and, where appropriate, lay members of review teams. One implication is that the results of WASC reviews should be reported in more detail to external audiences, including summaries of findings and an enumeration of institutional strengths and weaknesses. Another implication is that WASC ensure all that institutions make learning outcomes public, together with appropriately-benchmarked levels of student performance on them, perhaps using a website review tool like the NILOA rubric noted above.
- U.S. accreditors will increasingly need to partner with and mutually recognize the actions of quality assurance authorities in the rest of the world. And as they do so, they will need to align their expectations of what degree recipients at various levels should be expected to know and do with the Qualifications Frameworks already established by other countries. For WASC in particular, this means reviewing and aligning the outcomes standards noted in CFR2.2 with the Lumina Degree Profile and some of the major Qualifications Frameworks of nations where institutions from the region do business. And it means creating more proactive partnerships with the quality assurance agencies of these countries.

As shown by the past ten years, change can happen quickly and become transformational. After all, tools that we now take for granted, ranging from Google to GoToMeeting, were only invented in that time period. The standards we develop to anticipate 2020 must anticipate similar rates and directions of change. But they must also be flexible because we cannot anticipate everything.