Appendix 1.1

**CHEA Chronicle**

Accreditation: "Sitting Beside" or "Standing Over"?

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Accreditation has had a tortured role in higher education: revered, reviled, revolted against. Its original purpose of assuring public accountability and improving academic quality has sometimes been lost in the rhetoric and in the cottage industry surrounding it. Higher education employs four mechanisms to maintain its public accountability and improve its effectiveness and usefulness to society: internal campus academic program reviews, governmental mandates, academic market place, and accreditation. The latter three share a common purpose of directly addressing external pressures. Governmental laws, rules and regulations require colleges and universities to demonstrate that they are fiscally and socially responsible, and meet appropriate public health and safety rules. The mechanism for this type of public accountability is compliance. A second vehicle for quality assurance is the marketplace. Competition among the providers of education is increasing due to advances in technology and private sector involvement. Product acceptance, fitness for use, and competitive advantage are rapidly becoming a way of thinking to many both inside and outside of higher education. Here public confidence in the institution is directly linked to the perceived return on investment. Institutions of higher education are regarded as vendors in a free and capitalist economy. The perspective is that of the consumer, not the provider.

Accreditation occupies the third corner of the quality triangle. Whereas regulation concentrates on compliance, and competition on marketability, only accreditation focuses on the integrity of the work itself. But accreditation has not fared well in recent years. In fact at times it seems overwhelmed by the forces of an expanding marketplace and increasing governmental intervention. But if these two forces continue unchecked, higher education may be significantly compromised.

Why has accreditation found itself in such a dilemma? Accreditation is not an easy process to define or describe. In theory, accreditation is a collegial process based on self and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Peers both assess the quality of an institution or academic program and assist faculty and staff in improvement. An accreditation of an academic program - or an entire institution - typically involves three major activities. The faculty and staff of the institution or academic program conduct a self study using the accrediting justification than an opportunity for critical reflection. Since very few institutions or programs are in any real danger of losing their accreditation, the goal becomes one of getting through the process with a minimum of aggravation. "Self assessment" is often given over to selected staff and a few faculty members who, if they are lucky, will be given some release time to conduct the self-study and write the report. Accreditation becomes tedious, time consuming, and ultimately too often of little or no consequence when it focus is looking backward rather than forward.

This is a shame, because over the years accreditation has contributed to the quality of American higher education in at least two major ways. First, it has honored and advocated institutional and programmatic autonomy. The starting point of almost any accreditation process is the academic mission, embracing the protection of the independence of what is being accredited. By respecting unique institutional and program missions, accreditation has preserved what has become the envy of the world: a rich diverse array of colleges and universities. If only compliance and marketplace forces were at work, American higher education would surely be more homogeneous than it is today. Second, because of peer assessment, each individual program or institution must demonstrate that it meets the collective standards of its peers. Thus accreditation has nurtured intellectual capital, the pursuit of scholarship relatively unfettered by external politics, extreme pragmatism, and power.

Accreditation has been the most public way for higher education to maintain its set of core values - autonomy, self governance, scholarship and the pursuit of quality through peer evaluation. Accreditation has allowed the academy to set its own standards for scholarship, creativity, and experimentation, without having to worry about efficiency or popularity every step of the way. Accreditation has also been somewhat successful in resisting the "creeping compliance" temptation that somehow quality will be assured with just one more external mandate. But mandates are usually stifling rather than energizing. As one colleague recently commented, "You can not regulate yourself into the future." In essence, through accreditation the higher education community has emphasized the importance of high standards without standardization rather than resorting to high standards through standardization.

If we acknowledge that accreditation is essential for a healthy and vibrant academy, then we must rethink its role and how accreditation can become a more positive and proactive force. Basic to this reframing is a commitment to genuine peer review. Accreditation is built on both self and peer assessment. The Latin root of the word "assessment" is assidere, which means to "sit beside." "Sitting beside" implies dialogue and discourse, understanding the other's perspective before making judgments of quality and integrity. "Sitting beside" is a more effective strategy to incorporate these features than the more common image of assessment as "standing over," which portrays a detached, self proclaimed neutrality and by implication and perception, a superiority.

A return to a view of assessment as sitting beside will allow two essential features of accreditation to emerge - communication and negotiation - which have long been dormant. Communication is important because higher education needs to tell its story more effectively, campus by campus, so that others will better understand before judging quality. In demonstrating the contributions of higher education to society, higher education must, however, learn how to figure student learning and development as well as campus resources into the formula of quality. As one experienced colleague recently told us, "no longer can we think of accreditation as watching the elm trees grow on the quad." Moreover, the communication must be two way, and take the form of a true bilateral negotiation. This negotiation must involve more fully all the stakeholders - professional practitioners, representatives of the public as well as the higher education and accreditation communities. With a more inclusive dialogue, trust can replace the temptation to rely on regulation and erase the current schism among various communities of interest.

The tension between the academic and accrediting communities is most apparent in the role of the specialized and professional accrediting organizations. Universities have long enjoyed being the gatekeeper to the professions and have eagerly (in the past at least) cooperated in getting states to require that students graduate from an accredited program in order to write for certain state licensure exams (e.g. law, medicine, pharmacy). It guarantees relevance and power. But in some professions this bond has become bondage. Presidents and provosts often complain about the proliferation of professional associations and their habit of holding the institution hostage to unreasonable demands. Deans in particular are sometimes weary of the intrusion of accrediting associations on the work life of the faculty as scholars in their teaching, research, and outreach. The intellectual capital of the academy thus is being threatened. When the focus of accreditation gets out of balance and favors the consumers (students, parents, employers, and doing so, the entire academic community must be serious about its ability and will to self govern.

On the other hand, the academic community by itself cannot completely develop its standards of academic excellence without being engaged and having strong linkages with the larger communities. Academic leaders must become more engaged with other stakeholders to preserve and promote intellectual capital and incorporate "fitness for use" in the dialogue. The academy must learn from dialogue and debate with those outside of the academy what knowledge is worth knowing and useful to the future of a democratic society. It must recognize the influence of external societal needs but also defend the development of intellectual capital apart from the current practical pressures to be immediately useful. The more relevant and useful higher education becomes to a democratic society, the more higher education must argue for the preservation of academic freedom in an environment which stresses freedom with responsibility rather than freedom from responsibility.

In sum, accreditation has a very important niche in American higher education. It is intricately linked to self-governance and peer assessment. Last year, the presidents of US higher education institutions voted to establish the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to help strengthen the role of self and peer assessment as one critical means of public accountability and improvement of academic quality. The presidents of higher education institutions have taken the responsibility for laying the groundwork for re-developing and maintaining a strong connection among self-governance and public accountability and improvement of academic quality. The timing could not be any better.

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Bottom of Form