

ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION

OCTOBER 2010

ACCREDITATION BEST-PRACTICES AND IMPLICATIONS IN A RESOURCE CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENT

Herman A. Berliner
Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Hofstra University
TIAA-CREF Institute Fellow

Liora Pedhazur Schmelkin
Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Dean of Graduate Studies
Hofstra University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accreditations are third-party verifications of quality. At the extreme, accreditations can be gatekeepers—without the accreditation you cannot operate. Other accreditations are more or less voluntary depending on particular state policies. Most programmatic accreditations, however, are voluntary and serve the verification function. Accreditation can also provide a roadmap to continuous quality improvement through feedback on a program or a school. Even preparing for an accreditation visit has a positive effect, assuming you believe in the standards being applied.

Every school that undertakes an accreditation has the responsibility, as its own best advocate, to present the facts in the best light possible. But information presented should always be accurate. Building in sufficient time for the process increases the likelihood that it will work smoothly. Major changes cannot be made at the last minute without undercutting the stability of a program which weighs into the accreditation equation.

The financial consequences of accreditation must be recognized, especially at a time like this when much of higher education is resource constrained or worse. Accreditations, especially the most sought-after, cost money. Accredited programs are normally more resource rich; most institutions work continuously to remain in compliance with accreditation standards. The negative consequences of not doing so are too great. On the other hand, there is more flexibility in meeting the needs of unaccredited programs. There are far fewer, if any, visible consequences to reducing the resources allocated to these programs. The downside is most likely an educational quality that is not as high as nationally accredited programs, but this is hard to measure and even harder for students and their families to clearly see. In challenging financial times, increased needs among accredited programs will likely come directly from unaccredited programs in the absence of any discretionary resources that can be diverted from the non-academic areas.



INTRODUCTION

All of us work very hard to differentiate our respective universities and all of us recognize that the more successful we are in terms of “product differentiation,” the more successful we are in terms of controlling our own destiny as a college or university. Through decades of observing how institutions differentiate themselves, we know that many of the alternatives are now commonplace and predictable choices. Virtually every institution has the polished website and the glossy brochures that show the look of the campus. A combination of impressive buildings and green quads is commonplace. Great teaching, a wonderful first-year experience, a balanced curriculum, very positive outcomes assessment, small classes, terrific internships, civic engagement, effective career placement, a student-centered environment, vast co-curricular activities, and a comprehensive athletics program are all areas where we work hard to convince our students, our potential students and their families, friends, teachers and guidance counselors that we are clearly different from and better than other institutions. But in reality, most of these measures (with the possible exception of outcomes assessment) are overwhelmingly subjective. And we have yet to meet senior administrators who publicly will say anything that is not positive about their institution and/or fail to point out what differentiates the institution from other good colleges and universities.

A few weeks ago, we received a thick envelope from the provost of another good institution. The envelope contained this institution’s next five-year plan plus a note from that University’s provost. The note was somewhat personalized in that it began by stating that the provost’s university and Hofstra University have many academic accreditations in common, and that this clearly demonstrated the quality of both institutions. In a few short sentences, this provost had educated us regarding key characteristics of that person’s institution and had also highlighted what we already knew, namely the importance of accreditation. Accreditations, very simply stated, are third-party verifications of quality. For the informed public and for those of us in higher education, knowing an institution’s accreditations provides a very helpful and accurate snapshot of the institution’s quality. In addition to providing external quality assurance, accreditations also offer institutions a viable roadmap to continuous quality improvement.

ACCREDITATION BASICS

The 80 institutional and programmatic accreditors in the United States, recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and/or the U.S. Department of Education, can be categorized into four major types: regional, national faith-related, national career-related, and programmatic. We focus on the first and the last, with a primary emphasis on programmatic accreditations. On the one hand, regional accreditations (e.g., Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), which are essentially mandatory for public and nonprofit private degree-granting institutions, focus on the institution as a whole and the process that we describe below (self-study, site visit, etc.) is much more comprehensive in nature, involving the entire institution. On the other hand, programmatic accreditations vary in their scope, with some focusing on a school or a broad discipline (e.g., law, business) whereas others focus on a single major or more narrowly defined field of study (e.g., clinical psychology, rehabilitation counseling).

At the extreme, accreditations can be gatekeepers—without the accreditation (e.g., Liaison Committee on Medical Education accreditation for domestic medical schools) you cannot operate. Other accreditations are more or less voluntary depending on particular state policies. For example, although accreditation by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) is voluntary in the field of education, in NY State, in order for teacher-preparation programs to be certified, they have to be accredited by either NCATE or TEAC. Most programmatic accreditations, however, are voluntary and serve the verification but not the gatekeeper function. If you look at programs in business or journalism or engineering or in many other areas, the accreditations are purely voluntary and the majority of programs are not nationally accredited (though they are typically state approved or registered). But these voluntary accreditations, especially in a time of great economic constraint, also carry an additional cost factor and can distort resource allocation.

BENEFITS OF ACCREDITATION

Before we discuss any possible concerns, we should focus first on the benefits. Accreditation can provide invaluable feedback on how a program or a school is doing. Even preparing for an accreditation visit has a very positive effect, assuming you believe that the standards being applied make sense and are a gauge of quality. Typical accreditation standards look at the quality of the faculty and their qualifications to teach in the area in which they are teaching. These qualifications are a combination of educational credentials, scholarly productivity, and experience with the weighting factors often dependent on the accreditation involved. The number of full-time faculty and the extent that the program is taught by full-time faculty are also important considerations. The diversity of the faculty (and also of the students) is always a key factor. Curriculum is also an accreditation factor; specifically, does the curriculum provide students with the skill set that the standards require? And inextricably interwoven into the curriculum standards are the learning goals that you expect a student to meet and the assessment of whether in fact those goals have been met. Accreditation standards also typically look at the quality of the students in the program and at times set specific standards as to the quality (and perhaps even the quantity) of the students who should be accepted. Support factors also weigh heavily in any accreditation—are there sufficient scholarships available; does the library and do electronic information sources support the curriculum as well as the research of the faculty; are the space and the instructional equipment sufficient; and is there the needed financial and administrative support for the program? Working with the standards and preparing for the accreditation provides helpful insights for even the most knowledgeable insider.

Is there one most important factor from within this list of important factors that most needs to be paid attention to? In today's world of higher education, outcomes assessment holds an especially important place in accreditation. All the other factors noted are inputs, but at the end of the day, outcomes are what matters most.

Before the preparation process even begins, the accreditation involved needs to be critiqued very carefully. First and foremost, who is accredited and does the list of accredited schools clearly suggest quality? Is this a group that you want to be part of, and will receiving accreditation—given the other schools involved—be that verification of quality that you are looking for? The smaller the number of schools accredited and the stronger the quality of those schools, the more valuable the accreditation will be. Another important consideration is a focus on the specific standards themselves and how they are to be interpreted and applied. We have already alluded to the fact that the standards need to make sense. More specifically, are the standards simply a laundry list to be followed in a standardized prescriptive manner, or are they more appropriately interpreted within the context of the mission of the institution and the program under review?

Two other issues should also be confronted at this stage. First, who will oversee the process of preparing for accreditation? Every accreditation needs to have a capable person in charge but most importantly this person needs to be a champion and passionate advocate for the accreditation. From our experience, the person in charge also needs to be a detail person. Accreditation is all about details. It will not happen without myriad details coming together. Second, and we will discuss this in much more specificity later, what will the added costs be of the accreditation and how do these additional costs mesh with the priorities of the institution? It makes no sense whatsoever to go ahead with accreditation in one area without knowing as precisely as possible what the extra costs will be and where those funds will come from.

PREPARING FOR ACCREDITATION

Rarely does an institution only have one specialized accreditation and often the number approaches the one dozen or more level. Given the number of accreditations involved, there are distinct economies of scale that enter into the preparation of the accreditation materials. In addition to the information on the program or school being accredited or reaccredited, accreditation self-studies often look for more general information on the college or university involved. One office (such as an Institutional Research office or a provost's office) should be responsible for all this information. Regardless of the accreditation involved, most of the general information needs are similar or identical and having one office with this responsibility not only saves time, effort and scarce resources, but also ensures the integrity and consistency of the information provided.

In preparing for an accreditation review, all the areas outlined above need to be addressed, but when should you start? Economic theory makes a distinction between insurers and risk takers, and this distinction exists as well in higher education. Accreditations come with timetables. Most likely the starting point is when a program or school files for accreditation candidacy or when the school files a self-study; from then on the clock is ticking. For a re-accreditation, the starting point is periodic and known from the point of the last accreditation and any changes are communicated to the program or school. Following the submission of the self-study, what comes next will be an assessment of that study by the accrediting agency followed by a visit by the accrediting agency to the program, followed by a more substantive assessment, which leads to a give and take and finally the accreditation recommendation and action on that recommendation.

The later an institution starts the process, the more the institution or individuals in an institution display risk taker characteristics, the more likely the process will not work smoothly. Even the best institutions and the best programs are not perfect. Taking the time to review and assess while there is still time for adjustments is invaluable. And this is especially true when what needs to be adjusted cannot be done instantly. For example, what if you need more faculty expertise in a particular area? Or what if you need to in any way modify the curriculum? Both take time to be done right and both are part of a collaborative collegial process that works well if adequate time is built in but can become much less pleasant when pursued under the gun. Additional funding which might (and most likely will) also be needed is far easier to build into a budget when there is adequate time.

Building in sufficient time has another very important benefit in terms of the accreditation. If major changes need to be made and they are made at the last minute, it undercuts the stability of a program which also weighs into the accreditation equation. For example, if the curriculum needs to be changed, if those changes are made at the last minute, there may not be sufficient time to assess outcomes with the change in place. Or if a key hire is made at the last minute or a key position is unfilled at the time of the accreditation process, program stability will be compromised. Is this fatal? It can be, depending on the extent of the instability but more likely it can lead to a deferring of a new accreditation or probation for an institution that is already accredited. As an aside, probation can be visible or invisible and that makes a great difference. An invisible probation is just communicated to the institution involved while a visible probation is at least displayed on the accrediting agency's website and may also be required as part of any institutional mention of the accreditation. In any event, accreditation is not an area where it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Being turned down or being placed on probation—to the extent it becomes public—can be more harmful to an institution than never having applied for or received the accreditation in the first place.

THE PROCESS

When the draft report is completed (and well before it is due), it is essential that the report be fully reviewed by central administrators. The destiny of a school or program and the destiny of the college or university are inextricably interwoven. For the accreditation effort to work, program administration and university administration need to be on the same page, especially in terms of commitments made and plans for the future. If there are differences, they need to be resolved sooner rather than later and no self-study should be submitted when there are issues not yet resolved. Also, when the draft is complete -- and this next step is optional but highly recommended especially when a new accreditation is being pursued -- we believe there is great merit in having a simulated visit. These visits can often be organized through the accrediting organization and make use of seasoned visiting team members. Even the best prepared accreditation effort can benefit from a dry run. Having participated on both sides of a simulated visit—as a member of the visiting team and as a program being visited—we know firsthand the insights that can be transmitted and received as part of this exercise.

Once the report is prepared and submitted, there is a waiting game which will culminate (assuming that the self-study is not fatally flawed) in a visit that may be preceded by a pre-visit assessment of the report. This assessment can either be in writing or communicated through a conversation between the head of the visiting team and the person on campus directing the accreditation effort. Whatever is communicated should be taken very seriously. You are receiving valuable

information on areas or factors that will be scrutinized and the school or program involved should also be scrutinizing these same areas to make sure that everything possible has been done to be in compliance.

The actual visit matters a lot. It serves an important purpose in verifying what the institution has presented in support of its candidacy for accreditation. You can be sure that in a typical accreditation visit—when a team talks with students, faculty, administrators, alumni, community leaders etc.; when it looks at student files, faculty files, curriculum materials, and other supporting documents; when it observes firsthand the facilities and resources available—the visiting team will be in an excellent position to verify or question the materials presented in the self-study. Every school that undertakes an accreditation has the responsibility to present the facts in the best light possible. After all, the institution is its own best advocate. But it should always be accurate information that is presented. If any aspect of the program being accredited has been misrepresented, the results will not be pleasant nor do they deserve to be. We know from firsthand experience that this happens rarely but it does happen. Academic dishonesty should always have negative ramifications. On the other hand, any school that knowingly presents accurate information in a less than positive light is also doing itself a disservice. This is an approach sometimes pursued by those in charge of the accreditation effort to get the accrediting agency to join with these individuals in pushing for more resources for the school or program. An accreditation recommendation is, at the end of the day, an assessment of overall high quality. The more you downplay your accomplishments and highlight the areas that are not perfect, the more you diminish overall high quality judgment so necessary to have the process end with the desired result.

A visiting team typically ends its visit by providing an exit briefing. These briefings normally do not tell you what the recommendation will be but the information provided is nevertheless invaluable. The briefing usually goes into the individual accreditation standards and reports what the team has found in its visit (guided and informed by the self-study). Asking questions and clarifications of the visiting team is appropriate; arguing with the visiting team is not, at this stage, part of the process. You will have a reasonable idea after the visit as to whether you are likely to be accredited or reaccredited. The fewer the issues brought out as part of the briefing, the fewer the variances from the standards, the greater the chance for a successful conclusion.

The only caveat that needs to be applied to the visit and the post-visit briefing is that sometimes (relatively rarely) a visiting team is out of sync with how the accreditation standards should be interpreted. Out of sync can be in either direction—too lenient or too tough. How can this happen and how does it get resolved? At times, a person undertaking a first accreditation visit doesn't have the knowledge base that is an invaluable part of interpreting the standards. Therefore, the interpretation of the standards may be faulty. There is also at times the good friend effect on accreditation. It can happen when a friend (or former colleague) is part of the team that rose-colored glasses are sometimes part of the accreditation process. How are situations like this resolved? When the team report is sent in draft form (with an accreditation recommendation that has not been shared with the school or program involved) to the accrediting agency involved, the staff of the agency reviews the draft and raises whatever concerns, if any, should be raised and these concerns can lead to a re-writing of the draft before it is ever presented to the school or program under review.

THE DECISION

Once the self-study draft has been reviewed and approved, the report (once again minus the actual recommendation) is shared with the school or program involved. The school or program is then given a certain amount of time to comment with the stipulation that these comments be limited to correcting errors of fact or clarifying ambiguous or misleading interpretations. This is not a time to comment on the fairness or unfairness of the accreditation standards. The standards are the standards and they form the basis upon which the program or school is being judged. After this is done the waiting game happens again until the end result is known. Going back to one of the initial points we have made—it pays in accreditation as in so many others things—to be an insurer rather than a risk taker. You can be certain that the better the preparation, the better the chances for a positive outcome.

FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES

There is another key point that we need to go back to and that is the financial consequences of the accreditation, especially at a time like this when much of higher education is constrained or worse. Accreditations, especially those most sought after, cost money. Rarely, if ever, is there a zero marginal cost for an accreditation. If you look at a university, one where accreditation is a priority, it would still be unusual to find that more than 50% of the undergraduate programs have national accreditation. On the graduate level, the percentage could be higher or it could be lower, depending on the mix of graduate programs. If 50% of the undergraduate programs are accredited, by definition 50% of the programs are not covered by voluntary accreditations. There is more flexibility in meeting or not meeting the needs of these programs in comparison to nationally accredited programs where you could be facing a visit, preparing a self-study, or handing in a periodic report.

For nationally accredited programs, it is counterproductive to be a risk taker, but for programs without such accreditations the penalties associated with risk taking are minimized. If there is a greater adjunct percentage in such programs, or greater class size, or faculty with somewhat weaker scholarly credentials, or less state-of-the-art facilities, or a less robust assessment program, you may still easily meet all the state and regional accreditation association requirements. The downside is possibly, even most likely, an educational quality that is not as high as nationally accredited programs, but this is hard to measure and even harder for students and their families to see clearly. Accredited programs are normally more resource rich—if there is no choice, resources have to be found. In robust times this is not, however, a zero sum game. Additional resources needed for accredited programs or to pursue an accreditation can be generated through greater tuition increases and also through more robust fundraising (for scholarship support or faculty support, both of which matter a great deal for many accreditations). Consequently, adding resources to accredited programs in robust times is not at the direct expense of those programs without these accreditations. Unaccredited programs may get fewer additional resources or may not get any additional resources but they are likely not further compromised.

But these are not ordinary times. Higher education, as noted earlier, is constrained or worse. Many institutions are trying to do more but often with fewer resources. And, for many institutions, at the head of the list of doing more is increasing scholarship assistance, especially in the area of need-based scholarships. Therefore, we are already in a situation where with the same or fewer resources, some of these resources need to be shifted into scholarships. Instead of a zero sum game when it comes to academic programs (or co-curricular/student life programs, or technology programs or general administration), we are most likely already in negative sum game territory. The evidence of this happening today in the academic area is very clear nationwide: tenure lines are diminishing and adjunct teaching is increasing. In such a situation, any increased needs of the accredited programs will likely come directly from unaccredited programs (unless there are still discretionary resources that can be diverted from the non-academic areas).

Accrediting agencies have been reluctant (unwilling) in these difficult times to relax the accreditation standards. Part of this attitude is very understandable—if there is a definition of overall high quality that earns you accreditation or maintains your accreditation, this definition isn't workable if it is elastic. 'More is needed in robust times and less is expected in constrained times' is not compatible with the definition of overall high quality. Also in any given year, even in the best of times, there are institutions that for various reasons are relatively constrained. What if the enrollment modeling equations don't work as predicted; what if there is an unexpected increase in interest rates; what if labor costs or energy costs or building costs increase more than expected? Should these events result in changed accreditation standards? It really isn't workable.

Nevertheless, not having the standards reflect hard times creates the greatest pressure on unaccredited programs. Day in and day out, most institutions work to remain in compliance with the accreditation standards because game playing in this area can have too many negative consequences. But there are far fewer, if any, visible negative consequences to reducing the resources allocated to unaccredited programs. We know that good administration should provide a level playing field

between accredited and unaccredited programs. But will this really happen—given all the best intentions—if there are more negative consequences from that level playing field and far fewer such consequences from just slanting the field in favor of accredited programs? We (and you) may not like the answer to this question but the answer is clear.

CONCLUSION

Many of us in higher education, including the two of us, have long championed accreditation for all the reasons noted early in this article. National accreditation carries a wealth of potential benefits to the program and to the entire institution. But with wealth being limited, our support for these programs comes at a substantial price, a price that increases as these constrained times continue. Our challenge is to meet the accreditation standards without compromising other important academic programs (or important non-academic programs). We know the challenge; each institution needs to find the solution that best fits its needs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Herman A. Berliner, Ph.D.

Dr. Herman A. Berliner, in his 41st year at Hofstra University, serves as the provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. In this capacity, he is second in command to the president at the University. Dr. Berliner has oversight responsibilities for all the Colleges, Schools and academic programs of the University, as well as the Libraries, The Hofstra Cultural Center, the Hofstra Museum, and the Saltzman Community Services Center. He also serves as the chair of the University negotiating team in collective bargaining with faculty.

Dr. Berliner joined Hofstra University as an assistant professor of economics after having earned a Ph.D. in economics from the City University of New York Graduate School. Dr. Berliner's areas of specialty as an economist include the economics of higher education. Dr. Berliner has served in a number of key administrative positions, including interim dean and dean of the School of Business (1980-82 and 1983-1989), associate provost and associate dean of faculties (1978-1983), acting dean of the School of Education (1983-1984), associate dean of University Advisement (1975-1976) and assistant provost (1976-1977). He is presently a TIAA-CREF Institute Fellow and he has served as an associate editor of *The American Economist*.

Liora Pedhazur Schmelkin, Ph.D.

Dr. Liora Pedhazur Schmelkin, in her 32nd year at Hofstra University, is the senior vice provost and dean of graduate studies. Dr. Schmelkin joined Hofstra University as an assistant professor of educational research after having earned a Ph.D. in educational psychology from New York University. Dr. Schmelkin served as director of the Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence (1991-2003); chair of the Counseling, Research, Special Education, and Rehabilitation Department (1988-1993), and Acting Affirmative Action Officer (1997-1998).

Dr. Schmelkin's current scholarly interests focus on the effective teaching of methodology courses, academic integrity, and faculty evaluation. Among her many publications, she has co-written a text on *Measurement, Design, and Analysis: An Integrated Approach*. She is currently the immediate past-chair of the GRE Board and is a past president of Division 5 (Evaluation, Measurement, & Statistics) of the American Psychological Association (APA), a past president of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, and a past member of the Board of Scientific Affairs of APA.