

Book Review

*Higher Education Accreditation:
How It's Changing, Why It Must.*

Paul J. Gaston. Sterling, VA:
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Higher Education Accreditation: How It's Changing, Why It Must traces the history of accreditation (regional, national, and special). Gaston explores the disconnect between public (including the federal government) perceptions of accreditation and accreditation agency requirements and provides a pathway for accrediting agencies to make positive changes.

Conceived in the late nineteenth century, accreditation served to distinguish between credible and inadequate institutions of higher education. Since its inception, accreditation has gained many other missions, such as ensuring the transferability of courses from one institution to another, promoting effective governance practices, disseminating best practices through the peer review process, providing a platform for public review of higher education institutions, promoting professional development for faculty, advocating change throughout higher education institutions, and serving as a gateway for government support to institutions of higher education. Accreditation's role as gatekeeper for government support increased its authority over institutions and raised the stakes for institutions because many institutions depend on federal funding. Thus, withdrawal of accreditation can threaten the survival of an institution.

In *Higher Education Accreditation*, Gaston identifies several accreditation issues. Accreditation procedures and protocols have not kept up with the changing educational environment. For example, institutions today (as compared to the late nineteenth century) have more diverse student bodies, including more first generation college, commuter, and underprepared students. In addition to the challenges faced from the changing educational environment, the

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public demands accountability of the institutions it funds. Consequently, higher education institutions must obtain United States Department of Education (USDE) approved accreditation to qualify for student financial aid, research funding, and other forms of public support (p. 55). The dependence of the federal government on accrediting agencies results in a paradox: "An increasing reliance on accreditation

by federal and state governments to ensure that funds directed to higher education are well spent, and increasing tension between government and accreditation regarding accreditation's effectiveness in this regard" (p. 58). Gaston indicates that this paradox is also rife with misconceptions.

Appointed in 2005, the Spellings Commission identified several shortcomings of accreditation: (a) the internal predominance of accreditation, (b) institutional interests placed above the public by accreditation agencies, and (c) a lack of transparency regarding accreditation processes and judgments. Among the Spellings Commission's recommendations is one that accreditation agencies have been moving toward for some time now—the focus on educational results rather than inputs (e.g., student-teacher ratio, new state-of-the-art buildings). Since the 1980s, accreditation has shifted from looking at processes and inputs to measuring outcomes supported by an emphasis on assessment. This example of the disconnect between public perceptions and accreditation requirement changes over the last three decades exemplifies the difficulty of changing perceptions about accreditation.

Regional accrediting agencies developed at a time when regional cultures were truly very different. Advantages of regional accrediting agencies include lower travel costs and ease of organizing peer evaluators. One major disadvantage is that accreditors and the accredited may become too well acquainted, which could lead to a perception of leniency or bias. All regional accrediting agencies operate in a similar manner and have comparable organizational structure, standards, and processes (p. 113). Regional accrediting agencies may experience pressure to make the following changes: further emphasize quality, focus on educational outcomes and student performance (both in the classroom as well as obtaining employment and performing on the job), emphasize operating more efficiently and economically, protect diversity of U.S. higher education, encourage innovation, differentiate between strong and weak institutions, provide useful information to the public, and include more public members in leadership and review teams (pp. 112–138).

National accrediting agencies, which are not confined to any region, reflect a wide array of priorities, motives and assumptions. They cover a broad variety of institutional types, such as for-profit, non-profit, community college, four-year college, and university. Initially, they were a means to ensure quality of non-degree programs to allow students access to Title IV student aid funds. Interestingly, not all national accrediting agencies assume direct responsibility for quality improvement. National accrediting agencies may feel pressure to change by defining themselves more in terms of their natural alliances with regionally accredited institutions and with specialized accreditation.

Specialized accreditation can be traced back to the formation of the American Medical Association (AMA). In 1904, the AMA appointed a committee to compile a

list of medical schools in order of student success rate on licensure exams (p. 19). According to Gaston (p. 20), there are currently 62 specialized accreditors in a wide variety of disciplines (such as funeral services, nutrition, music, and veterinary medicine). Specialized accreditation has already responded to many criticisms due to its focus on licensure. These criticisms include an emphasis on learning, heightened accountability expectations, and increased distance learning preference (pp. 154–177). However, many changes remain including the need to adapt to changing institutional priorities, increase awareness of interrelationships between departments and disciplines, shift to competency based learning, adopt appropriate competency assessments at each stage of the curriculum, and communicate in a clear, cost-effective manner. Specialized accrediting agencies need to work more closely with each other to have a similar vocabulary, processes of peer review, and evaluation. In addition, specialized accrediting agencies need to work more closely with regional and national accrediting agencies.

Gaston (pp. 179–180) suggests six categories for changing accreditation: consensus and alignment, credibility, efficiency, agility and creativity, decisiveness and transparency, and a shared vision. Although there has been some movement to align standards, protocols, actions, and vocabulary, accrediting agencies need to make further efforts, especially with vocabulary. If all accrediting agencies had a common vocabulary, communication with the public, including government agencies, might become much easier and more efficient. While consensus and alignment will improve credibility, further improvements can be made by adding “well-qualified and carefully prepared public members” to both review teams and accrediting boards (p. 187). By

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utilizing technology along with a streamlined reporting approach, accrediting agencies can increase efficiency while achieving more effective, less intrusive, and more affordable oversight (pp. 179–203). Accrediting agencies are required to maintain greater agility and creativity to remain relevant and ensure a quality education in the fast-paced evolution of higher education driven by technological innovation (such as online learning and massive open online courses). While decisiveness can be enhanced by standardizing appeals processes amongst the accrediting agencies, effective communication would enhance both transparency and decisiveness. If accrediting agencies change by coming together on the first five categories, Gaston (p. 180) believes that a shared vision—one that is “coherent, principled, and forward-looking” will be the natural result.

Two current items covered in Gaston’s book are the USDE’s role in changing accreditation and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. President Barack Obama set the tone for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in his 2013 State of the Union address—a clearer focus on affordability and students’ success. This task could be handled by accrediting agencies. However, if accrediting agencies did not handle this task, an alternative would be

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developed (p. 109). The USDE’s development of a ratings system, to be implemented in 2015, was an attempt to devise a comprehensive system to evaluate all colleges on several measures of interest to the public (Blumenstyk, 2015). This rating system would be a consumer information tool as well as an accountability tool. The USDE’s college rating system might eventually have allowed accrediting agencies to be decoupled from the Title IV funding just as Gaston suggested. However, the USDE recently decided to eliminate the ratings system and develop a consumer-focused, customizable website. Gaston (p. 109) predicted both the federal government’s attempt to develop an alternative to current accrediting agencies as well as the failure of the federally controlled approach (p. 91).

The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will be debated in the fall of 2015 by the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. Senator Lamar Alexander released a staff white paper on the topic of higher education accreditation that puts forth several proposals to change accreditation (Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015). To refocus accreditation on quality, the white paper suggests that accrediting agencies should remove standards not directly related to institutional quality and improvement, allow flexibility in accreditation reviews allowing institutions with superior track records to have expedited reviews while giving more attention to institutions that need more assistance, and develop gradations in accreditation status rather than the current pass or fail status. In addition, the federal government should separate accreditation from eligibility for Title IV student federal aid. The white paper suggests the following proposals to promote competition and innovation: establish new pathways to accreditation and/or Title IV eligibility for nontraditional providers of higher education (i.e., trade associations, businesses, labor unions, etc.) and eliminate the geographic limitations of regional accrediting agencies. Finally, the white paper suggests that recognition of accrediting agencies should remain independent and free from politics—the decision by the Secretary of Education

to grant recognition to an accrediting agency should not be based on any political motivation. Gaston discussed each of these proposals in full detail, which was prior to the publication date of the white paper.

Higher Education Accreditation is a timely, well-referenced book that gives the reader the history of accreditation and key insights about topics currently being debated in the legislature. The author successfully achieves his purpose by informing the reader about forces behind changes in higher education accreditation as well as proactive changes accreditation agencies can make to improve their relationship with stakeholders. The recommended changes for all accrediting agencies hinge on a unified vocabulary, which would certainly improve relationships among the accrediting agencies as well as their relationship with the federal government. This book is appropriate for anyone who wants knowledge about accreditation as well as anyone involved with accreditation agencies, including individuals in the USDE and elected officials. It provides assessment professionals with a working knowledge of current accreditation changes as well as a comprehensive resource on regional and specialized accreditation. This book provides the day-to-day practitioner with practical information about current accreditation practices as well as possible future scenarios that institutions may encounter to prove accountability (such as student learning and cost-effectiveness).

References

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