



# Audiology Education in an Era of Government Oversight (Is Big Brother Watching?)

By Doris Gordon

**A**s we think about the year to come, let's renew our focus on achieving excellence in higher education by rigorous accreditation. You have heard members of the ACAe Board and myself repeat this concept again and again, but let me reiterate on why it is important and what can happen when it is not a top priority.

Education is facing new and more intense scrutiny. Why is this happening now and why should we be concerned?

The federal government spends more than \$180 billion (in today's dollars) to support higher education, as noted in major news publications over the past few years, and, more recently, in an article by a member of the Editorial Board of the *New York Times* on October 20, 2016. This includes many aspects of higher education, including student aid. With such a huge investment, it makes sense that the Department of Education (DOE) would want to know whether or not this money was spent wisely. Their valid concern is the

quality of academic programs, competency of degrees offered, student attrition, graduation rates from the college or university, debt incurred by students, and, most importantly, the accreditation standards with which institutions and programs must comply.

In recent instances, two for-profit colleges were "subjected to fraud investigations" demonstrating mismanagement in finances, operations, and program curricula. The DOE also found the responsible accrediting body at fault, in that it

was not monitoring and/or providing sufficient oversight. These situations caused the “collapse of the institutions” and hundreds of millions of dollars wasted. The lack of assessment and attention provided by the accreditor, coupled with their stamp of approval, provided a gross disservice to students, the general public (yes, the taxpayer), and to the overall principles of the two institutions. Here is a case where accountability seemed nowhere in sight.

As a result, there is current talk within DOE about wanting to play a more major role in accreditation, and this could include all accreditors. As we know, the government can sweep with a broad brush and might use those bad actors in the for-profit sector as an excuse to put non-profit programs under the microscope as well. Also, we know in health-care professions, the demanding scrutiny within an accreditor’s standards to keep the specialized health-care programs accountable is high. But lax behavior can occur anywhere and this must be remembered.

Fortunately, for audiology education, the American Academy of Audiology has supported not only the need for quality education, but the absolute necessity of demonstrating quality through an independent and fully accountable accreditation body.

Wise leaders established the ACAE over a decade ago as a means of verifying educational rigor and assuring the profession, the public, the educational establishment, and, dare we say, even the government of the quality of each accredited program.

Here are some of the ways ACAE anticipated concerns of the DOE by:

- Paying attention to the constituencies, i.e., programs offering the doctor of audiology degree

- Writing qualitative, rigorous standards and monitoring how they are followed
- Working collaboratively with programs so that they understand the ACAE standards and expectations, and assist programs in self-study and continuous program improvement
- Providing incentives/benefits for programs using ACAE’s web-based integrated platform
- Lifting expectations in accreditation standards, so that students feel the natural pride of a highly regarded profession
- Working with stakeholders within the profession, so that everyone understands that excellence and rigor in education is for the common good
- Providing aggregate data to programs (as available), so that they have factual information about how to make improvements
- Recognizing the impact of the ACAE gatekeeper status, yet emphasizing success rather than failure
- Keeping an eye on the prize—assuring the public that graduates will be qualified to be independent practicing audiologists

In addition, ACAE is always conscious of the need to remain current and effective, and open to self-evaluation. This is accomplished by the feedback we receive on an ongoing basis from programs and ACAE’s membership in the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), an independent agency that examines and evaluates us as accreditors.

CHEA membership is another level of assurance in the chain of quality promoted by ACAE.

As we begin 2017, we look forward to continuing our work with our present accredited programs and with new audiology programs over the course of the coming year. We ask all of you who value education to support ACAE, and lobby to extend its reach into the AuD program community, particularly those with which you are personally connected.

If Big Brother is watching us, we’ll give him something we’re proud of! Happy New Year from ACAE.

*Doris Gordon, MS/MPH, is the executive director of ACAE.*

## References

Editorial Board. (2016) College Accreditors Need Higher Standards, *New York Times* opinion page, October 20.

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