Inside Accreditation

CHEA Council for Higher Education Accreditation
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ARE THE URGENT ISSUES OF TODAY DRIVING A RETHINKING OF WHAT "QUALITY" MEANS FOR ACCREDITATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION?

Judith Eaton, President, Council for Higher Education Accreditation

This is my final Inside Accreditation *as President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). It is my pleasure and privilege to have worked with you in this role for the past 23 years. My thanks to friends and colleagues around the world for the opportunity to be part of our shared attempts to form and shape the future of accreditation and quality assurance. Sometimes we succeeded and were proud of our efforts; other times we had to learn from mistakes and misjudgment. All of it was and is valuable, important and well worth our time and attention. And, much of it was most enjoyable – working with dedicated, smart and, at times, passionate colleagues all focused on serving students and society by serving the cause of furthering quality in higher education.*

I am leaving quite soon, on July 31, 2020. However, I will be available as President Emeritus*, working with CHEA in a variety of ways over the next year. You can still reach me at* eaton@chea.org*.*

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Three issues – large-scale distance learning, financial fragility and race and equity – are driving the immediate future of accreditation, perhaps leading us to a rethinking of what "quality" means. We are experiencing an unparalleled scale of distance learning offerings, growing numbers of institutions that are financially fragile now and that are likely to be in the future and an intensification of attention and needs in relation to race and equity. It behooves all of us to examine how we are interpreting and applying accreditation standards as well as the importance that we need to invest in these issues:

• **Quality and distance learning:** We think that we know how to examine distance learning for quality, but do we?
• **Financial scrutiny of institutions and programs:** Are there accreditation practices that may not

work in an era of growing numbers of financially endangered institutions?
• **Race and equity:** What does examination of accreditation standards, policies and practices tell us about the current and future role and work of accreditation?

Covid-19 has been powerful as a driver of the expanded reliance on distance learning and the concern about financial viability. Race has been the primary driver of greater attention to equity. What is common to all three issues? They need to be addressed now; they cannot be put off for a future agenda. Many accreditors already have standards and policies in these areas. The language is often general, as is characteristic of the framing of a number of such expectations. The challenge now is to address how the standards and policies might be re-interpreted, emphasized and applied. All of this may play a part in an emerging redefinition of quality for both higher education and accreditation.

QUALITY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

When higher education made the major shift to distance learning in response to Covid-19 in spring 2020, many of us thought this would be short-term. At most, this enormous expansion of online teaching and learning might last into the summer but, certainly, by fall 2020, in-person education would be back. This is not happening. As of this writing, fall is highly likely to be predominantly online, whether hybrid or fully.

When confronted with the shift this past spring, accreditation saw itself as well positioned. There was good reason for this confidence. Almost all accrediting organizations apply their standards to both in-person and online learning. Several have separate standards for online. However, as the spring progressed, the voices of students about their online experiences gave us pause. Survey after survey has shown that significant numbers of students found the online experience to be less than they wanted or needed. Even separating out the issue of dislike for the delivery mode – versus the delivery mode being acceptable but dissatisfaction with the quality of the experience – students raised serious concerns. A number of surveys show that students believe that there has been too much distance in "distance learning." Students may have been dissatisfied – restless or distracted – in classrooms, but they felt cheated in front of a laptop.

How do we counter this and how can accreditation assist? The surveys showed that students are especially dissatisfied with the extent of their own engagement in the distance learning experience. This is where the attention of accreditation might profitably go to help institutions and programs maintain and enhance quality in large-scale distance learning.

Using the lens of student engagement, what shifts in interpretation and application of standards may be valuable? As I describe in a recent

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Today's issues driving accreditation are large-scale distance learning, financial fragility of institutions and race and equity.
• Accreditation standards in these areas would benefit from some re-interpretation as well as additional emphasis and application.
• The net result may set us on a path to rethinking what "quality" means.

Inside Accreditation, reviewing standards and policies that affect curriculum, scheduling, faculty and grading are central to scrutiny of engagement. This includes how much and how often students are connected with a faculty member and how extensive an opportunity for student-to-student engagement is a part of instruction. It includes how much of instruction is live in contrast to extensive use of video and the availability and accessibility to course materials. It includes a rethinking of the scheduling and pacing of class time and assignments.

Assessment and accountability for student achievement are essential here as well. The purpose of the additional attention to engagement is to further the learning gains of students. Are the expectations of accreditors about assessment and evidence of student learning leading to student success in large-scale distance learning in all types of institutions? Does grading reflect this?

FINANCIAL SCRUTINY OF INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS

We read about it every day in our trade press: Institutions of all sizes and types are struggling financially, but especially smaller, private institutions. Institutions are drawing down reserves and increasing reliance on lines of credit. At the same time, they are experiencing revenue losses (e.g., tuition, room and board, auxiliary services) and expenses are increasing (e.g., Covid-related equipment and supplies, improving the technology needed for distance learning). Part of the challenge for accreditors is to assure that, even under fragile financial conditions, institutions can continue to provide quality programs to students.

All accrediting organizations have standards that call for resources commensurate with the needs of an institution to serve students well. All have standards that call for fiscal sustainability. How might future application of current fiscal standards assist and allow for institutions to manage their way out of the fragility without having to resort to, e.g., warning, probation, show cause and, at its most severe, removal of accredited status? Can accreditors work with institutions to anticipate the impact of this fragility and assure that financial management and planning, although perhaps involving painful choices, is likely to sustain an institution over time and meet quality expectations?

Yes, federal and some state law and regulation address finances. However, accreditation is also a partner in this scrutiny. And, accreditation is best positioned to actually assist institutions to both protect students even in the face of financial difficulty and to aid institutions in strengthening their fiscal condition, in contrast to focusing mainly on identifying financial weakness, as law and regulation often do.

RACE AND EQUITY

The issue of race and equity in the United States is perhaps the most challenging for accreditation and the country. The Covid-19-driven issues of large-scale distance learning and fragility of finances that emerged were particular to the virus. In contrast, race is a longstanding, painful and unresolved issue, although progress has been made over the decades.

Higher education has been confronted, in spite of its commitment and strong efforts over many years, with expectations to expand the extent to which institutions contribute to a more equitable society. This includes enrollment and graduation of students, employment and promotion of faculty and staff and an expanded diversity of leadership for the profession. The "replication of inequality" charge is made often and, at times, with justification. Accrediting organizations have long paid attention to equity issues, with standards and policies that address, e.g., diversity, inclusion and campus climate, much of this focused on race and gender. The issue is: Is this enough moving forward?

Here is where re-interpretation, additional emphasis and more forceful application associated with these standards can bring about more forceful and compelling examination of race and equity. Three ways in which accreditation can be more exacting and intentional with their standards and policies are to (1) assure and, where needed, strengthen equity expectations in standards, (2) intensify and expand attention to accountability grounded in equity (e.g., more energetic use of data especially focused on inequities related to student success) and (3) scrutinize campus climate with greater emphasis on race and equity.

There are two additional and difficult dimensions to this issue. First, current approaches to race and equity challenge such fundamentals as current practice of academic freedom and free speech. For example, there is now considerable interest in race-based solutions to longstanding equity problems and little patience or respect for some earlier solutions that were not race-based and are now viewed as ineffective. This raises questions about how accreditors scrutinize key features of institutional organization such as shared governance, the role of faculty, student life and administration in relation to academic freedom and free speech.

Second, the race and equity conversation, combined with the impact of Covid-19, has made more prominent the social service needs of students, e.g., food and housing, employment and assistance with mental and physical health needs. This may mean that higher education is moving away from its traditional, primary investment in itself as first and foremost an academic enterprise devoted to intellectual development. Increasingly, higher education "quality" may include how well higher education meets these social service as well as academic needs.

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Colleges and universities may be reconfigured as a result of (1) distance delivery challenging the traditional on-campus collegiate experience, (2) financial fragility forcing a rethinking of institutional management and operation and (3) greater emphasis on success in addressing race and equity. All of this will factor into future expectations of quality in higher education.

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