

KEEPING ACCREDITATION VALUABLE

Why the integrity of peer-review must be upheld

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I recently participated in a day-long symposium with several student debt advocacy groups and state attorneys general, hosted by Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum. Panel discussions ranged from the changing student loans landscape to problems facing student borrowers, higher education policy changes at state and national levels, and balancing innovation with consumer protection. As the day's conversations progressed, it became clear that many have lost trust in the institution of accreditation.

As practitioners, we believe accreditation has value beyond allowing access to federal funds by qualified institutions. We believe that accreditation has value beyond its strengths of maintaining institutional autonomy and academic freedom. We believe accreditation's value goes beyond serving as a stamp of approval for assertions of credibility during analyses of credit transfer.

Several personnel from state attorneys general offices questioned peer review's value and asked if states could become a stronger member of the regulatory triad (i.e., state authorization, the U.S. Department of Education [ED], and accreditation agencies) when there is mistrust or distrust in regional accreditation and ED. Granted, the question arose due to an issue with student disclosures at an institution outside the northwest region, but the premise was that accreditors were not doing the work that warranted them an equal partner in the triad and that states could fill this presumed lackadaisical oversight. At this point in the symposium, it sounded as though these high-ranking members of states' judicial systems were steadfast in a desire to turn the triad into a monad. They did not appear to understand the main intent behind peer review—the ability for each of our institutions to hold each other accountable to established standards.

Each Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)-accredited institution is a member of a trade association. Our trade is higher education and we have voluntarily associated with one another, promising to hold one another accountable by meeting minimum standards of excellence established by the respective associations. This accountability is tested each time we submit a new report or substantive change request to the Commission, for our peers review each institutional submission and come to a conclusion about the veracity of the material and adherence to the standards.

The Commission relies on our work—the work of volunteers from member colleges and universities. We raise our hands to signal that we want to help with the oversight of other institutions. We sit through training to become peer evaluators and await our selection to evaluate a peer institution as a member of a team of individuals. Finally, we serve as peer evaluators.

If you have served on a peer review team, you know how much work it takes: We receive documentation from the other institution (usually hundreds of pages). We review specific standards for which we lead the review, yet we must also review other standards to help the balance of the team

produce a solid peer review for the receiving institution. All of this work is accomplished in a small amount of time (usually weeks) prior to a physical, face-to-face meeting with the visited institution.

The visited institution awaits questions from the team that are derived from the documentation provided. Where there are gaps in a team member's review, the institution must provide evidence that they meet each of the standards to the satisfaction of the reviewer and the visiting team. Where evidence is weak or lacking, the team decides on the level of severity in the final reporting requirement.

In a previous position with another university, I conducted a visit to a well-known state university in another region. This institution could not produce a single federally-mandated piece of evidence required for the visit (which was written into that accreditor's standards). As a novice evaluator, I requested the evidence from the university to no avail. I informed the chair of the team that I was dissatisfied and the reasons for dissatisfaction with the results provided. The team chair and I met with the university president to let him know that we had not received the federally-required documentation. The president was ultimately unable to produce the document prior to the conclusion of our visit. This lack of evidence made it into the final report as a damaging unfulfilled request of the team. I say "damaging," for it was a basic requirement of accreditation—one that could negatively affect the institution's continued accreditation status without a quick fix with the evidence provided.

I was the only member of that team to find this recommendation, and I had a choice of whether or not to bring up the issue and surface the issue to the team and to the campus. I potentially stood between this state university and their institutional reaffirmation. If they lost their accreditation (which was possible without this documented evidence), they could lose public trust, current students, and state/federal funding. As an ethical individual, I stood by my assessment and the team stood behind me. Our peer review of this institution included this carefully crafted recommendation that would help inform the Commission of the gravity of the issue, withstand any potential legal challenge, and steer the institution toward ultimate compliance.

Maintaining accreditation is paramount to an institution's credibility. Losing accreditation is the kiss-of-death to most institutions; as such, it should be treated with utmost respect and reverence.

Keeping accreditation valuable is accomplished through peer review, but we must be willing to uphold the integrity of peer review. It is not easy to tell an institution that they are weak or lacking in a specific area of compliance, but it is the main purpose of peer review.

To maintain the quality and rigor of peer review:

- The institution under scrutiny must be open and honest in its self-assessment;
- Peer reviewers must complete their assigned tasks prior to and during the visit;
- Peer reviewers must be honest during the review and document the areas of non-compliance they encounter;
- The chair must trust the team and produce a final document that is able to withstand scrutiny and cross-examination; and
- Institutions that do not maintain compliance with the standards must be removed from the association.

If we (peer reviewers) will not uphold these standards, there are other members of the triad who would love to take our place. I, for one, would rather sit on a three-legged stool.