Chapter 21

Establishing Continuous Readiness for Specialized Accreditation

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ABSTRACT

Accreditation, whether it be institutional or specialized, is an essential and powerful part of life at academic institutions. This case study provides an overview of accreditation, recent trends, and the role the central administration can play to establish a continuous state of readiness for accreditation. The role of the Office of the Provost and the Office of Institutional Research in particular are explored. Procedures and tools, which may be used to address readiness for specialized accreditation, are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Successful accreditation or the loss of accreditation often has far-reaching consequences for academic institutions. For example, institutional accreditation by a regional accreditor, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) or the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, or national accreditation, is necessary for students to be eligible for federal financial aid. In several professions, such as health, education, and social work, graduating from a program that has specialized accreditation is a prerequisite for licensure to practice. With stakes this high, colleges and universities are concerned about accreditation, but often do little planning and preparation at the central administration until the accreditation visit is almost upon them. If major weaknesses exist,

there is then insufficient time to correct them, leading to recommendations, citations, and even loss of accreditation. Deans and directors leading the unit being accredited usually have the responsibility for the preparation and successful attainment of accreditation, generally with no involvement from the central administration. When there is turnover in the unit leadership, or the leadership is weak, the vulnerability to losing accreditation becomes acute. Therefore central administrations of institutions would be well advised to remain attuned to the health of academic programs on a continuous basis, not simply on the eve of accreditation visits.

Another reason for the involvement of the central administration, including institutional research, in preparation for accreditation stems from the seepage of accountability issues into accreditation. A few decades ago, accreditation and accountability spoke different languages. One focused on inputs and quality assurance, while the other focused on outputs, outcomes, and efficient use of resources. In the past few years, with the growing movement in accountability in higher education, accreditation requirements have increasingly moved toward language familiar to accountability: retention and graduation rates, outputs, outcomes, assessment. Thus the role of institutional research and the timely availability and review of data rises to a new level of importance.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a national umbrella organization that reviews and recognizes regional and specialized accrediting bodies that successfully navigate CHEA's scrutiny. CHEA describes accreditation as "…the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or program meets at least threshold standards for, e.g., its faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programs provide evidence of fiscal stability." (CHEA, 2009, p. 2). In the United States, accreditation is voluntarily sought and conferred by non-governmental bodies (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities [NWCCU], 1982). There are two basic types of accreditation: institutional accreditation and specialized accreditation. In Institutional accreditation the entire institution is the subject of the review, and examines not only the academic offerings but all central aspects of the institution including student support systems, the library, the financial health of the institution, and governance. Due to its breadth, institutional accreditation does not focus in depth on all academic programs. Having institutional accreditation therefore indicates that on the whole, the institution is doing the job it claims to be performing. Institutional accreditation is usually undertaken by regional accrediting bodies and is therefore sometimes referred to as regional accreditation. It may also be awarded by national faith-related accreditors. Institutional accreditation is often critical to the survival of an institution. In contrast, specialized or programmatic accreditation focuses on a single program or a single discipline consisting of several programs either within institutions of higher education or in free-standing institutions devoted to specific disciplines. (NWCCU, 1982; Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 1999; CHEA, 2009). Similar to specialized accreditation is National career-related accreditation which is mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and non-degree. In 2007, there were 61 specialized or programmatic accreditors recognized by CHEA and/or the US Department of Education (CHEA, 2008)

In recent years, assessment of student learning and the use of assessment data to make changes to the program that result in a cycle of continuous improvement, have become key components of institutional and specialized accreditation. (AACSB International, 2007; CAPTE, 2007; Christy, McNeal and Lewis, 2002; NCATE, 2007; SACS, 2004).

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