

Chapter 5

Institutional Accreditation and Participatory Engagement in Online For- Profit Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to propose a participatory stakeholder engagement approach to institutional accreditation particularly in the online for-profit sector. Components of this approach are inclusion, engagement, and mutually valued goals of revenue generation, student outcomes, and social responsibility. The approach is applied to several accreditation themes including mission, governance, faculty, institutional effectiveness, and public good. It concludes with a path forward for accreditors and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Online higher education institutions (HEIS) in the for-profit sector may be described as sometimes having mercurial relationships with institutional accreditors. Hardly a week goes by in which an article does not appear in the higher education trade publications about a for-profit institution under investigation, closing, merging, or

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partnering with a private or public institution, offering online program management opportunities, converting to a non-profit entity, and a plethora of other issues, most leading to accreditation challenges. For all HEIs in the United States, accreditation is the overt indicator of quality and integrity as well as the gateway to accessing student federal financial aid.

Rather than reviewing the past 20 years of reports, results of senate hearings, a variety of real or perceived transgressions, and the accreditation challenges in the for-profit higher education sector, particularly with online institutions, this chapter briefly considers current factors affecting the online sector, then proposes a path forward using a participatory stakeholder engagement approach for institutional accreditors and institutions. Further it addresses specific accreditation themes based on a cross-accrediting body review by standard/criteria/components, and by policies and processes that have led the authors to these themes that, though common across accreditors, may be particularly challenging for online institutions in the for-profit sector. The authors propose how a Participatory Stakeholder Engagement (PSE) approach to accreditation offers not only a path to enhancing and affirming relationships with accreditors but may have the added benefit of leading to positive institutional outcomes.

After describing the PSE approach, the authors discuss the following key accreditation themes in the context of PSE.

- Mission, Integrity, Strategic Planning, and Finance;
- Governance;
- Faculty Models;
- Institutional Effectiveness;
- Public Good.

This chapter is informed by the perspectives of the authors who have nearly 50 years combined experience working with institutions and their accreditors in the United States and internationally, serving on and leading teams, and presenting at accreditation conferences globally. Additionally, the authors have collaborated on the development and application of the PSE approach in one institution as well as consulting with other institutions on the model.

BACKGROUND

Accreditation in the United States is a voluntary, non-governmental, peer-review process designed to demonstrate institutional quality and accountability. In general, institutional accreditors develop a set of quality standards for all institutions regardless

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