

Let's Make Improvement the Centerpiece of Accreditation

Paul E. Lingenfelter

According to the U.S. Department of Education the first two functions of accreditation are to:

- assess the quality of academic programs
- create a culture of continuous improvement

See U.S. Department of Education, "Accreditation in the United States," <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html#Overview>, accessed November 1, 2020.

Both are essential. Unfortunately, the usual approach to quality assurance is antithetical to a culture of continuous improvement. Quality assurance is based on meeting minimum standards. Continuous improvement is based on high aspirations and constant efforts to improve. Is it possible for accreditation to serve both purposes? Yes, but only if we change our approach to accreditation.

Clearly, an accreditor must make a categorical judgment: does the institution meet the standards established for accreditation? And the stakes are high. Failing to secure accreditation means losing eligibility for Title IV federal student aid, a vitally important source of revenue for nearly every institution.

In the early days of accreditation these categorical judgments were made largely on the basis of institutional inputs. Is the faculty qualified? Is the library adequate? Are the facilities adequate and well-equipped? Continuous improvement wasn't much of a concern.

In response to the growing importance of postsecondary education, the focus of accreditation has expanded beyond inputs to encompass institutional processes and outcomes. Is the institution effectively pursuing its mission? Is it achieving its goals? Are students achieving *their* goals? Is the institution improving?

Although accreditors have conscientiously sought to address improvement, the actual practice of accreditation is focused predominately on assuring compliance with a check list of minimum standards. The objective for the institution is to achieve perfect compliance. A peer reviewer with ambitions to demonstrate rigor may work very hard to identify a standard or part of a standard that remains unmet. Difficult, contentious conversations often then ensue. Failing to meet any standard or part of a standard is a serious problem.

A culture of continuous improvement is also based on standards. There is a floor – what is minimally acceptable – but there is no ceiling. The point is not to get by, but to get better. Improvement requires shared goals, measurement of performance, a search for effective

strategies, and a commitment to pursuing them. A culture of continuous improvement sets high aspirations, cultivates cooperation, and minimizes contention

I have served as a peer reviewer for a regional accreditor and as a reviewer of site visit reports for a specialized, professional accreditor. In a review of a highly regarded research university, I observed a competent team of peer reviewers struggle with an evident failure to meet an accreditation requirement. The university had no general strategy for assessing student learning as a means of assuring quality and improving instruction, nor did it provide any evidence of fledgling or departmentally based strategies for documenting what students have learned and can do. Nobody was quite willing to charge this institution as “failing” to meet standards, possibly because the task of assessing and improving student learning is complicated in a comprehensive university. But with a charge confined to judging compliance and concluding the university’s failure didn’t rise to the level of denying accreditation, the peer reviewers checked the box and were silent on what could and should be done to improve.

When working with a specialized professional accreditor, I observed a fine set of fundamental standards disaggregated into an elaborate checklist of categorical assessments. Peer reviewers were instructed to judge compliance with each of the categorical requirements, not to suggest means for improvement. A finding of “partially compliant,” signals failure to meet standards fully, not the normal human condition of having room for improvement. Unsurprisingly, institutions and peer reviewers frequently lapsed into bitter arguments over these categorical assessments. While struggling heroically, the accreditor failed to create “bullet-proof” assessments with perfectly consistent reports, and the institutions involved lost opportunities to get advice from external advisors on how they might become stronger and more effective.

If many institutions were routinely denied accreditation, perhaps the primary focus on minimum standards would be justified. But very few institutions receive a failing grade. Institutions seeking accreditation for the first time generally either succeed or drop out before completing the process when it becomes clear they cannot meet minimum standards. Nearly 100% of institutions seeking the renewal of accreditation achieve renewal, as one would expect in a mature system assessing compliance with minimum standards.

Although *one* high-stakes judgment is unavoidable and appropriate, accreditation cannot foster continuous improvement when most accreditation judgments are framed as categorical questions. *It is not possible to improve on a categorical variable.* So long as accreditation focuses on meeting minimum standards, the accreditation process will be less a conversation about improvement and more like a jury trial – is the defendant guilty or not guilty? A high-stakes compliance process cannot be an instrument for continuing improvement.

On nearly every measure used to determine accreditation, performance varies among institutions and within institutions at different times. For accreditation to foster improvement, it must provide feedback that extends well beyond compliance with standards. It would help if peer reviewers rated performance on a scale, perhaps of five steps, ranging from below minimum standards to exemplary performance. Such ratings should be justified on the basis of

evidence provided by the institution or observed in a site visit. Their utility and credibility will be reinforced by providing suggestions for improving performance.

Institutions receiving ratings below minimum on essential standards would be denied accreditation, be placed on probation, or receive warnings as is normally done today. Institutions that exceed minimum standards (the vast majority of them) would have, in place of a bureaucratic compliance exercise, the benefit of external assessments and counsel on how they might improve.

Performance on the one essential categorical judgment – does the institution meet minimum standards – must necessarily be part of a public record. That assessment, along with objective information about institutional characteristics, policies, and student outcomes, is necessary to inform the decisions students make about enrollment and to determine eligibility for Title IV student aid programs.

I suggest, however, that judgments on where and how institutions might improve need not, and should not, be part of a public record. When minimum standards are met, peer reviewer assessments and suggestions for improvement should be formative, not summative. Cultivating a shared aspiration for better outcomes is most conducive to continuous improvement. If ratings of areas for improvement were publicly disclosed, they would inevitably become either positive or negative factors in institutional marketing. Instead of a marketing tool, detailed accreditation reports should be a tool to help the institutional administrators, faculty, and trustees who are responsible for taking actions necessary for improvement.

Where institutional performance is clearly above minimum standards, the stakes of improvement feedback would be lower. Institutions would be expected only to strive for improvement, not necessarily to follow the specific recommendations of site visitors. The assessments and suggestions of accreditors for improvement would naturally carry more weight for the smaller number of institutions failing to meet, or dangerously close to not meeting standards. Such institutions need both strong incentives to improve and help in doing so.

Making improvement the centerpiece of accreditation would not compromise the quality assurance process. Instead, it would make accreditation more valuable for institutions, students, and society at large by giving the vast majority of institutions that clearly merit accreditation the benefit of external feedback on ways to improve