Humphreys College

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TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION (FINAL PART)

By Richard C. Giardina, WASC Associate

The following text is the second *part of Dr. Richard C. Giardina's presentation as delivered at Humphreys College in November 2011. The first part offered a brief overview of the avowed purposes of accreditation, especially of regional or institutional accreditation. It also outlined the development of relationships between private accreditation and federal government oversight. It discussed the tensions in the regional accreditation-federal oversight relationship. The second part addresses trends and choices in higher education accreditation.* ~Editor

Whither Accreditation?

What are accrediting agencies to do? How will they "retain the confidence of the public to oversee educational quality in a nongovernmental peer review system" [Brittingham (b), p. 19]? How will they stave off federal imposition of "some 'one size fits all' standard for quality"? How can accreditation and the federal government "eventually achieve the appropriate balance between institutional diversity on the one hand and meaningful standards of quality performance on the other…" [Dickeson, p. 9]? What must private, peer-based accreditation do to continue to maintain its pivotal role in ensuring educational quality? To these questions we now turn.

It is clear that there are many challenges facing regional accreditation at this point in the twenty-first century. As we have already seen, the federal government wants accrediting agencies to take on more of a regulatory role as a condition for continuing to tie federal higher education funding to accreditation status. But in addition to this, higher education itself is undergoing tremendous changes. Not-for-profit and for-profit institutions of higher learning are operating more and more across regional boundaries. Distance learning programs know no boundaries whatsoever. Educational partnerships between two or more institutions, either domestically or across national borders, are increasing. Students are transferring credits from two, three, and more institutions. Institutions are expected to produce more results with less financing.

In the midst of such profound changes, "accreditation must have robust legitimacy within the academy and beyond it. Without that legitimacy and the credibility and confidence that support it, the system can collapse." Unfortunately, it's been said that "knowledge of and support for accreditation remains a mile wide but an inch deep" [Ikenberry, p. 2. and p. 4].

Higher education accreditation has been characterized as an "overloaded pack animal" that is "burdened with expectations and duties far beyond either its design or its capabilities." This results in a "series of anomalies: an accreditation system designed by institutions to meet institutional needs but cast in the large and growing role of serving public purposes"; a self-regulatory system having to implement external regulations; an evaluative system also striving to provide helpful, big brother-type consultation; an essentially pass/fail system, in which most institu-

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tions pass, "in a world that craves rankings." It is somewhat disingenuous for accrediting agencies to guard their role as the gate-keepers of federal financial disbursements "without expecting the strings, conditions, reporting requirements, and other forms of accountability that inevitably accompany federal appropriations" [Dickeson, p. 3].

What's to Be Done Here?

All sorts of answers abound, including:

- Decoupling accreditation from federal funding
- Abolishing regional accreditation while setting up some sort of national accrediting agency with national standards
- Realigning accreditation on a non-geographical basis, perhaps using the Carnegie classification of colleges and universities
- Establishing levels of accreditation instead of the basic "accredited" or "unaccredited"
- Developing a separate structure for accrediting for-profit institutions

But the Higher Education Act of 2008 has, at least for the time being, enshrined the status quo. Nevertheless, "because the stakes associated with higher education are so much higher for policy makers today, aggressive action on the accountability agenda is more likely and a proactive response on the part of the academy is more urgent" [Ewell, p. 7]. Wolff [p. 3] takes up the challenge, seeing accreditation as having the "potential for playing a new, and major, role in redefining accountability."

First and foremost, assessment of student learning must become more sophisticated, more informative, and potentially more comparative. The title of a recent study— "More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education"—says it all. While the report applauds accrediting agencies for leading the charge in the assessment battle, it makes it clear that assessment results are not always used or even reported in ways that can be used to "improve student accomplishment and inform the public about institutional performance." [See Kuh and Ikenberry and also NILOA press release, p. 1.]

There will be demands that assessment results be reported on an annual basis; that the results be quantitative; that they be standardized; that they be amenable to comparison across time even if not across institutions; and that they make reliable judgments about quality. There will be continuing pressure to document student learning in all aspects of their education. For example, while there is clearly movement to document programmatic learning in the major, to what extent are major programs specifically delineating the critical thinking and communication skills required of their students and assessing possession and appropriate utilization of those skills in ways readily communicable to the student, the potential employer, and the public? And how are accrediting agencies positioned to assure the public and its federal government surrogate that that their internal review processes meet the "need for external validation of institutional quality and worth" AND that their determinations—and the evidence and data they demand to make those determinations—are "sufficient for public purposes" [Finkin, p. 13]?

Perhaps what we are in store for is a "cycle of continuous accreditation and quality assurance tied to institutional processes and data systems, with relevant information updated in real time" [Ikenberry, p. 7]. Some pundits even predict that, in the future, accrediting agencies will never go away, cautioning presidents and chancellors to expect to have their institutions "under nearly continuous scrutiny by regional accrediting bodies" [Bardo, p. 47].

Let's stick with this terrible thought for a minute. There seems to be a consensus that the regional accreditation process has got to change in order to respond to continuing demands for further accountability on the part of both higher education institutions and the agencies that accredit them. What are some possibilities here?

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As you well—and perhaps painfully—know, the WASC model of two separate capacity and educational effectiveness reviews—a model which is right now under scrutiny—requires clear evidence of authentic student learning and indeed of institutional learning based on a "culture" of evidence. According to Wolff, the accrediting agency is "developing new protocols for looking at learning results." He states: "Such an approach is a major step forward for accreditation, but still may not satisfy those interested in a system that allows for institutional comparisons of learning results" [Wolff, pages 17, 19, and 22]. And he recognizes that "Higher education and accrediting agencies will need to become much clearer about the skills and competencies required for a degree beyond the accumulation of credit for graduation, and assure that graduates consistently achieve these skills in order to graduate" [pp. 23-24]. The good news here is that this is in fact happening across higher education institutions—public and private, large and small, elite and not-so-elite; witness the assessment endeavors right here at Humphreys College.

WASC is intending to push the envelope even further. It is likely that we will see increased focus on the development of common expectations regarding what a baccalaureate should accomplish. Rather than attempting to evaluate the full range of an institution's endeavors, WASC is beginning to focus much more specifically on three things:

1. Core outcomes of the baccalaureate
2. Retention and graduation
3. Institutional systems and processes to ensure quality

Additionally, working through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, it may be possible for WASC to align core learning outcomes across all of the six accrediting regions in the United States.

Other Accreditation-Related Issues

Let's turn to some other issues. First, the quality of the accrediting team members who evaluate institutional evidence. Is the present system which uses essentially unpaid volunteer evaluators with inconsistent levels of training up to the task of truly determining the educational effectiveness of an institution and its component programs? The American peer review process is considered by many to be the greatest strength of our accreditation system. It is perhaps its greatest weakness as well. If nothing more is done, ensuring consistently high quality in evaluators is absolutely essential. Additionally, consideration of expanding evaluation teams to include students, parents, employers, and community leaders, and also of paying peer reviewers, may be appropriate. [See Crow, p. 90 and p. 95.] Wolff recognizes evaluator quality as an important issue. His response is that "regional and specialized accreditors alike are investing heavily in evaluator training to ensure that each review is less personality driven and more evidence based, especially with respect to student learning" [p. 20]. However, at recent Senate hearings, some Senators have been challenging the quality and integrity of the present review process, asking how "colleagues conducting reviews of other colleagues can be rigorous when those being reviewed will themselves, at a later date, be the reviewers." They have also "challenged the worth of accreditation reviews when they are financed by the institutions themselves" [Eaton (f), p. 1].

Transferability of credit is another big issue. Some fear that, if accrediting agencies cannot come up with agreed-upon criteria for credit transfer both within and across regions, external forces may well step in to regulate the matter. All of the regional accrediting commissions have responded to this issue by establishing a common policy statement on credit transfer, encouraging greater transferability while recognizing institutional autonomy. But this issue is not going away. [See Wolff, p. 26.]

Similarly there's the issue of the definition of what a unit of credit is and what it means. The traditional Carnegie definition based on seat-time doesn't necessarily cut it any longer, what with all of the differing ways in which coursework is now being delivered and with the focus on assessed learning as a determinant of program

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completion. Nevertheless, if credit is still going to be the basis for the transferability of courses, for the awarding of degrees, and for the determination of student financial aid, there may need to be a newly-derived definition of what coursework—and potentially what learning—is worth a unit of credit. [See Bardo, p. 51 and 57.] This is a hot button item for the Department of Education, which thus makes it a hot button item for WASC and therefore for Humphreys College.

This brings us to the question of credits adding up to programs and programs adding up to degrees. Much has been written about so-called degree inflation: associate degree programs transforming themselves into applied baccalaureates; baccalaureate programs morphing into master's degrees; and master's degrees becoming applied or clinical doctorates. According to the Community College Baccalaureate Association, 17 states have community colleges offering bachelor's degrees; and this trend is certainly continuing. It clearly is time for a rethinking of the appropriate level of various program offerings and the degrees and degree titles associated with them. Accrediting agencies must take the lead in this discussion. [See Crow, pp. 92-93, and also Floyd et. al.] And WASC is doing just that. It is convening meetings to discuss and agree on the common meaning of the baccalaureate and higher degrees. A central focus of these discussions may well involve defining outcomes and performances standards for different degree levels.

It is also time to tackle how institutions operating in multiple states get accredited. Is subjecting them to the requirements of one regional accrediting agency appropriate or does there need to be a new inter-regional approach to their accreditation? [See Crow, p. 89 and p. 95.] Similarly, how does one accredit institutions offering joint or dual degrees with other institutions in other states or other countries? And should American accrediting agencies begin accrediting foreign higher education institutions, especially those seeking to model American higher education?

A final issue to mention here is that of the tremendous growth in the for-profit higher education industry and the fact that, while the industry has approximately 10% of enrolled students, it claims approximately 25% of federal student loans and grant disbursements. And not only is the for-profit industry gobbling up federal dollars. It is also gobbling up higher education institutions themselves, turning small, financially-distressed, non-profit institutions into for-profit, mega-student, on-line schools, while attempting to keep the regional accreditation the schools brought with them. [See Eisman.] The meteoric rise in for-profits poses a daunting challenge to accrediting agencies, both in regard to assuring continuing academic quality and in regard to meeting increasingly onerous Department of Education demands for oversight and accountability.

In Conclusion

We can be sure that accrediting agencies are not going to stand pat waving the flag that they are the last best hope for holding the higher education fortress against further federal regulatory intervention. They recognize that the choices are not between assessing student learning for program and institutional improvement and assessing such learning for accountability. It is clear that there will have to be both evidence-based continuous improvement and public performance reporting [Ewell, p. 20]. "Colleges and universities will not only have to demonstrate sincere efforts to improve student learning but will also have to prove that their students are achieving at adequate levels in the first place" [Ewell, p. 15]. As Wolff has stated [p. 31]: "To maintain vitality and credibility, accrediting agencies [will] need to communicate more effectively to the academic community about the need to respond to accountability concerns and to the policy making community [about] how accrediting reforms respond to their concerns."

With the Spellings Commission and the 2008 Higher Education Act behind us, we've been given a brief reprieve and, in a very important sense, a new lease on life and a new opportunity to wave the flag for the continued relevance, appropriateness, and indeed necessity for the system of meaningful self-regulation that American higher education accreditation has come to epitomize. But, as should be the case with all flags, those waving them will need to be prepared to stand for and to give evidence of what they symbolize. Given what we have recently seen, we can be sure that the Department of Education, the United States Congress, and the American public will demand no less.

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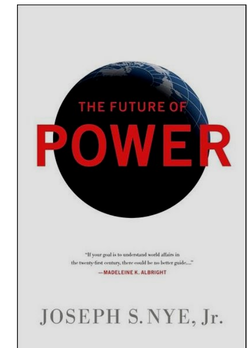
NEW BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY

GLOBAL ISSUES IN RETROSPECTIVE AND PERSPECTIVE

Joseph S. Nye Jr. *The Future of Power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011



The author is a former Dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and, currently, University Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard University. In the 1970s, he gained recognition for the development of his concepts of asymmetrical and complex interdependence in international relations. Since the late 1980s, he has been focused on the theory of soft (or "smart") power"; in 2004 he published his bestselling book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. For years, Nye has been considered a counterpart to the renowned Harvard conservative, the late Samuel P. Huntington. The 2011 Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey of over 1,700 international relations scholars ranked Nye as the sixth most influential scholar in the field of international relations in the past twenty years.

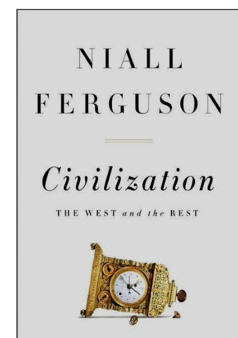
In his latest book, *The Future of Power*, Nye writes about the new type of leadership for the 21st century. The opening chapter recognizes three type of power: military, economic, and soft. The second chapter addresses the initial contours of a new power category—a cyberpower. The closing chapter analyzes the policy applications of soft power in the foreseeable future.

During the Cold War, international power was expressed in terms of nuclear missiles, industrial capacity, and the numbers of men under arms. By now, however, many aspects of international power play changed. Cyber threats, for example, are wielded by non-state actors. Power depends on shifts and innovations, technologies, and relationships. Many of Nye's ideas about the soft power have been at the heart of recent debates over the global role the United States.

According to Walter Isaacson, President of The Aspen Institute, “Power once came from controlling the sea lanes. In the future, Nye explains, it will come from the ability to navigate the information lanes of cyberspace and control the narrative that influences people. Sweeping in its themes but specific in its examples, this book is exciting to read and fascinating to contemplate.”

The latest Nye book might be relevant to Humphreys' students of International Relations, Modern World Issues, American Institutions, and several courses in the Criminal Justice Program.

Niall Ferguson. *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. New York: Penguin, 2011



Niall Ferguson, Professor of History and Business Administration at Harvard and a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, is a British historian specializing in economy and the history of colonialism. His books include *The World's Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild*, *The Cash Nexus: Money and Power in the Modern World, 1700-2000*, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of The American Empire*, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and The Lessons for Global Power*, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, and *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred*.

In his *Civilization*, Ferguson asks, "Why, beginning around 1500, did a few small polities on the western end of the Eurasian landmass come to dominate the rest of the world?" He sees the answer in the development of six salient features of Western civilization:

- COMPETITION: Western societies divided into competing factions, leading to progressive improvements.
- THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION: Breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology.
- THE RULE OF LAW: Representative government based on private-property rights and democratic elections.

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- MODERN MEDICINE: 19th- and 20th-century advances in germ theory, antibiotics, and anesthesia.
- THE CONSUMER SOCIETY: Leaps in productivity combined with widespread demand for more, better, and cheaper goods.
- THE WORK ETHIC: Combination of intensive labor with higher savings rates, permitting sustained capital accumulation.

Ferguson argues that "in1500 the average Chinese was richer than the average North American. By the late 1970s the American was more than 20 times richer than the Chinese. Westerners not only grew richer than 'Resterners.' They grew taller, healthier, and longer-lived. They also grew more powerful. By the early 20th century, just a dozen Western empires—-including the United States—controlled 58 percent of the world's land surface and population, and a staggering 74 percent of the global economy." Yet now, Ferguson predicts, the days of Western predominance may be numbered because the Rest has finally adopted the salient features of success, while the West is losing faith in itself. Ferguson foresees the West's decline arising from both self-inflicted wounds (such as self-indulgence and weakening educational systems) and the strengthening of nations, such as China, that are modernizing and improving the education of their young people.

"In my view," argued Ferguson last fall in *Newsweek*, "civilizations don't rise, fall, and then gently decline, as inevitably and predictably as the four seasons or the seven ages of man. History isn't one smooth, parabolic curve after another. Its shape is more like an exponentially steepening slope that quite suddenly drops off like a cliff."

Ferguson offers a multifaceted solution: "What we need to do is to delete the viruses that have crept into our system: the anticompetitive quasi monopolies that blight everything from banking to public education; the politically correct pseudo-sciences and soft subjects that deflect good students away from hard science; the lobbyists who subvert the rule of law for the sake of the special interests they represent—to say nothing of our crazily dysfunctional system of health care, our overleveraged personal finances, and our newfound unemployment ethic…. We need to reboot our whole system."

The book may be an invaluable supplementary reading to Humphreys' students interested in global issues, history, and political sciences, including Western and Asian civilizations.

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