What’s the Alternative to Regional Accreditation?

A recent article in Inside Higher Ed summed up the national debate about accreditation with the catchy title, “No Love, but No Alternative.” The article summarized what the critics had been saying about the assumed failings of the accreditation systems in higher education. But when pressed for a viable alternative, these same critics often lacked a clear and plausible proposal.

This silence, I believe, is instructive. Trying to imagine the possible other ways to assure and improve educational quality and effectiveness actually casts into bas relief some of the best features of the current system of regional accreditation. But first, some terminology.

The word “regional” sharpens this analysis. It reminds us that accreditation in higher education evolved across regions of the country as institutions within clusters of contiguous states got together and formed associations to validate the effectiveness of the schools within their regions. As a movement that crept unevenly from the East to the West, from the 1890s to the 1950s, it eventually provided every sector of the nation with their own regional accreditor. As I have noted in earlier comments, accreditation rose up from within the academy; it did not descend from the government – a perspective that too often gets lost in the current discussion.

Regional accreditors are “institutional” accreditors; they review the entire institution – its inputs, processes, and outputs – in order to ensure that all the parts work together to achieve its mission.

With these terms in mind, consider some alternatives that have been proposed to regional accreditation:

**Regional vs. National.** A regional agency draws its legitimacy from its local constituencies. It exercises local control. It is grounded in its region’s needs and aligned closely to the communities its members serve. A regional agency is committed to building shared understanding of the standards and practice that have been defined by their members. The agency organizes the work of peer reviewers who are familiar with the culture, systems, and history of the institutions in their region. People from within the region serve as Commissioners to set the agency’s standards, policies, and practices and then make judgments about their deployment among the member institutions they represent.

Some have proposed that the regional agencies be dissolved into a single nation-wide entity in order to achieve a homogeneous set of standards. Why this might be a desirable move eludes me since, no matter where a college is located geographically, it currently must respond to only one agency’s set of standards. Whether a regional accreditor in a neighboring state expresses its standards differently is a matter of no consequence since the college needs to address only the standards deployed in its region.

I have also heard a proposal that peer reviewers from other regions should be required to cross over and serve on teams in each other’s regions. Other than being a novel idea, I see little value in the considerable task of orienting a team member to institutions, values, standards, and review processes outside their home region. When a learning community becomes geographically diffuse, the benefits can diminish.
Peers vs. Bureaucrats. Some critics who get excited by calling accrediting agencies “cabals that stifle innovation” would rather see the evaluative role ceded to government ministries as is the case in most other countries in the developed world. Suspicious that accreditation teams are involved in some sort of mutual back-scratching, these critics seem to believe that self-dealing would be stifled if conducted by government employees.

Wishing not to impugn the motives and abilities of government employees, I have doubts about the currency and depth of a non-educator in evaluating an educational enterprise. As I have accompanied peer teams to a campus and observed their interactions with the college community, I have been moved at both the precision of the questions they ask and the levels of discernment they bring to valuing the answers. “Please describe the process, information sources, participants, and outcomes in your most recent program review,” they would inquire, “and give some examples of how the results have been used to make changes in the upper-division curriculum.” Even a brilliant political scientist from Washington who has not been at the delivery end of a classroom for decades is not going to be able to ask questions – much less discern meaningful answers – regarding key college operations. Accreditation in their hands would be reduced to checking boxes.

Self-Monitoring vs. Government Ministry. Education is one of the few sectors in American society that has developed a strong tradition of self-monitoring and self-governance. Education is so complex, nuanced, fluid, and diverse that only its current practitioners are qualified to accurately assess its effectiveness. While employers evaluate education’s effectiveness as its graduates demonstrate their learning on the job, they must rely on educators to discern and implement required changes.

To the critics who believe they have unearthed some shielded evidence that accreditation teams are busy giving each other a free pass, I would invite them to observe a review team in action. Educators are fiercely jealous of their profession. They know that a poor performer pulls down the credibility of the entire sector. They have ample reason to trust that their fellow educators at the college being reviewed are as committed to improvement as they are and welcome an informed and candid critique. Furthermore, the review process is structured so that a team’s findings flow from a group consensus; any member seeking to go slack is held accountable by the others on the team.

I am satisfied that a major reason why American higher education maintains the global admiration that it does is because it has committed itself to the wise keeping of those who care the most about its effectiveness, who bring the most current insights to bear, and who keep improving the caretaking processes.