Accreditation’s Critics: Taking Them Seriously

Because accreditors can exert considerable influence in higher education, it’s easy to hold us accountable for almost everything that goes on in a college or university. Depending on the voices one hears, we’ve been tasked with lowering the costs of earning a degree, with reducing the aggregate debt burden of America’s students, with telling college boards how to balance their budgets, and with monitoring the financial impact of intercollegiate athletics. We’ve been charged with making sure that no school ever closes, or – if it does – that we’re drawn into its inner workings far enough in advance to make sure no student is harmed in the process. Some students have even wished we could improve cafeteria food or fix the lighting in the parking lots.

It’s about managing expectations. But accreditation can be intricate and esoteric stuff and we’re not always out ahead of the narrative. So, there is almost a cottage industry of critics who can garner media attention by proposing remedies for what they are sure is a broken system. Often being unaware of how self-critical accrediting agencies already are, some of the critics are happy to point out quick fixes they are sure we have been too self-protective to see.

Case in point: One critic is quite sure that all institutional accreditors, nation-wide, should have identical standards, identical definitions and criteria for their sanctions, and nearly identical review processes. “It’s confusing to colleges when accreditors have different standards,” she claims. I would simply note that no college has to relate to other than its own institutional accreditor. The proposed remedy, however, has a certain appeal to those who are already suspicious that accreditors are watchdogs that don’t bark.

A critique that continues to gain traction is the “bright line” standard in which accreditors are chastised for awarding accredited status to schools with graduation rates that drop below the bright line set by the critic. (See my analysis of that critique in my February 2019 essay.)

This is not to say that critics of accreditation have not added value to the process over the years. There was a time when accreditors were seen as doing their work in a secretive black box, then issuing consequential actions without apparent regard for stakeholder understanding. Partly in response to appeals from critics for greater transparency, it is now standard practice for accreditors to disclose key information, such as peer review team reports and commission action letters, either on their websites or those of member institutions.

For several decades, accreditors have been shifting their focus from inputs (how many books in your library?) to processes (how is the library’s collection determined?) and on to outcomes (what are students learning from the library?). A focus on outcomes – disaggregated data on student learning and achievement – is now a central evaluative focus for every accreditor. Critics may well deserve some credit for this refined attention.

There is also an increasing call for accreditors more carefully to attend to student/consumer protection. Charges of fraudulent advertising and the collapse of major institutional chains have left some to wonder if accreditors might do more to ensure the integrity and stability of their member institutions and thus to protect the investments of students and taxpayers. As a result, accreditors are drilling down in greater detail into the promotional and marketing practices of colleges, especially in the for-profit sector, to ensure an accurately informed consumer.
Partly through the efforts of some critics, the public has become more aware of the esoteric notions of teach-out plans and agreements. These are normally the negotiations struck between similar institutions when one institution that is closing or discontinuing a program makes orderly arrangements to have its enrolled students taken care of by the other institution. Accreditors have long insisted that such arrangements must gain their prior approval. The concern now, however, is about an accreditor’s role when an institution closes precipitously – when no institution remains to negotiate and implement a teach-out plan. Could the accreditor have more frequently, or in greater detail, monitored key risk factors such as fiscal conditions or enrollment trends? Accreditors haven’t waited to hear the critics before attending to this perplexing issue.

The critics of accreditation play an important role in voicing the concerns, and often the considerable confusion, of the public about the work of our agencies. As such, I seldom hear an accreditor wishing to quell such input. It has the effect of sharpening the practices and the communication strategies of our agencies – something we clearly owe to our many stakeholders. At the same time, I’ve sometimes wished the critique would show evidence of a greater understanding of the work we are in fact doing.