What Students Need to Know about Accreditation

From the perspective of 15 years in higher education accreditation, I find students to be asking much smarter questions about accreditation. Beyond knowing that it matters, they’re savvier about why it matters. There are newcomers to the scene, however, who might be surprised at the range of reasons why accreditation is such an essential – and value-adding – undertaking. Here are some questions these students may ask that can be addressed by accreditation:

Is my college stable? One responsibility of accreditors is to assure students who enroll in an academic program that their college will still be there – and strong – until they graduate. Few traumas can be greater than for an institution to close precipitously while a student has earned some credits, and has often incurred debt, but is not able to receive the credential. Accreditors monitor an institution’s fiscal adequacy and integrity on an annual basis and require immediate steps when it appears to be slipping toward the edge.

What is my credential worth? Higher education calls for a major investment of a person’s resources and time, lending urgency to the question, “Is it worth it?” Accreditors seek to ensure that any academic program offered by a member institution has relevance, integrity, currency, and quality, and that it is delivered effectively by qualified faculty. These assurances matter hugely to future employers and to other academic institutions to which the student may apply, including to graduate programs. Mostly they matter to the students themselves as they seek to become informed and effective members of our society.

Are there degrees of accreditation? Essentially, no. An institution is either accredited or it’s not. Nor do accreditors engage in any kind of ranking, since accreditors don’t grade on the curve. Each accreditation decision is specific to the status of the individual institution at the time of its review. Even if an institution has been given a severe sanction, its accredited status remains until any reviews or appeals have been exhausted.

What if an accreditor sanctions my college? A sanction is a formal and public notice that an institution is slipping (or has slipped) into a state of non-compliance with important criteria set by the agency. It is intended as a call for serious attention to matters of quality, integrity, or sustainability of the college. A sanction typically galvanizes new commitments of attention, collaboration, and resources, often serving as a turning point in the institution’s trajectory. While the accreditor’s commitment to transparency requires a public notice of a sanction, it is seldom a cause for students to abandon their confidence in that institution. In almost every case, a sanctioned college becomes stronger, often very quickly.

Why are there different kinds of accreditors? They serve different purposes. ACCJC and other regional accreditors review the entire institution, ensuring that all the pieces fit together effectively on behalf of their students. We don’t evaluate the content of specific academic programs; that belongs to the more than 60 programmatic accreditors who bring to their review the expectations of their professions or areas of employment practice to ensure alignment of the curriculum with these needs. Then there are the national accreditors who work with institutions, without regard to geographical location, who serve specific types of educational goals – such as faith-based or career-oriented schools.
What’s the future of accreditation? Largely because the federal government looks to accreditors to verify an institution’s quality and integrity as a “gatekeeper” for the release of federal financial aid, and because the sheer dollar amount of that aid now approaches $170 billion per year, there is understandable interest in Washington about how we do our work. The resulting conversations are intense, complex, and informed by varying levels of understanding of the work accreditors actually do. My estimation is that there will be continuing interest in improving both the effectiveness and the understanding of accreditors’ work, but that there is little interest in scrapping America’s proven and valuable commitment to peer review in higher education. So far, no one has put forward a plausible alternative.

*Can my accreditor help me change my grade?* In a word: No.