



OP-ED



THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20TH YEAR OPINION SERIES

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The Future of Specialized and Professional Accreditation

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Specialized and professional accreditation has a proud history of sustaining good accreditation practice and enforcing standards so that academic programs produce effective and safe practitioners who serve the public good. These programs range from architecture to veterinary medicine, engineering to respiratory care and counseling to project management. Recently publicized misperceptions that demonize peer review and limit the definition of good outcomes to graduation and retention rates, debt, repayment and default rates and earnings and job placement rates are woefully short-sighted. Is it more important to the public what the graduation rates of architects and engineers are, or that they build safe buildings and bridges? Is it more important how much dental school costs or that the dentists are skilled and competent in performing dental work? While those indicators are important to monitor in conjunction with others, they do not measure the kinds of outcomes the public expects of its physicians, nurses, engineers and educators. Determination of whether graduates of professional programs are competent to practice is the focus of specialized and professional accreditors – and the future of accreditation depends on this concept.



The foundation of professional and specialized accreditation (also called programmatic accreditation) is the inclusive process wherein subject matter experts set national accreditation standards and determine competencies. For any given profession, these content experts (peers) include practitioners, employers and industry, educators, professional associations and other communities of interest. Competencies are the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for safe and effective practice in a profession. Competencies encompass critical thinking and the ability to adapt and to create knowledge that is essential for the evolution of professional practice in response to a changing environment. Programmatic accreditors focus on assessment methods that enable faculty and other stakeholders to determine that the student has reached a level of performance for competent practice in the profession. Peer review is an essential element in judging such outcomes.

Peer review is negatively perceived by lawmakers and others who characterize accreditors as membership organizations whose accreditation reviews are performed by sympathetic friends and colleagues. The peer review process in programmatic accreditation contains rigorous systems of checks and balances to ensure objectivity and avoid conflicts of interest or any type of collusion between accreditors and the programs under review. While some institutional accreditors may call their accredited institutions “members,” the vast majority of specialized and professional accreditors do not. The term “member” erroneously implies to the public that an institution can simply pay or sign up to join the group. In programmatic accreditation, accredited programs are considered just that – accredited programs – not members.



