ASPA Chair’s Remarks

Next Executive Director Search Is Underway

Peter H. Vlasses, Executive Director, ACPE: Pharmacy

ASPA’s founding Executive Director Cynthia Davenport will retire from her position as of January 1, 2011. The Board received Cynthia’s retirement notice on May 3, 2010 with mixed emotions. In her 15 years of meritorious service as ASPA’s first Executive Director, Cynthia has helped lead ASPA to the important organization it has become for its members. She helped develop the ASPA Principles (http://www.aspa-usa.org/principles_aspa.asp) and has been a staunch advocate in having others, inside and outside the organization, understand the national-level importance of upholding these principles. ASPA members will be forever appreciative of her many and varied accomplishments on our behalf.

Knowing the importance of planning ahead, over the last two years the ASPA Board developed a succession and transition plan including, with member approval, the establishment of a special fund to be used for the implementation of the plan. Although having a physical presence in the Washington, DC area is one option, the ASPA Board believes the task at hand is to find the best qualified person to lead ASPA and has decided not to be overly restricted by geographic considerations.

Notices regarding the availability of the position were sent starting in early May to the ASPA membership and were published in a variety of higher education and non-profit organization venues. Over 60 applications have been received as of the writing of this column. Review of applications began on June 30th but applications will continue to be accepted until the position is filled. All applications are being initially screened using a rubric built around the requirements of the position. The ASPA Executive Committee will interview top candidates by telephone starting in late July to early August. The succession and transition plan calls for the identification of a select group of applicants who will be invited to interview with the whole ASPA Board prior to the start of the Fall 2010 ASPA meeting on September 12-14, 2010 in Cincinnati, OH. If recruitment proceeds according to plan, the Board looks forward to hiring the next ASPA Executive Director in the fall of this year. Cynthia will assist in the orientation of the new Executive Director to the extent that the Board wishes and her future plans allow.

The world of U.S. higher education has undergone unprecedented scrutiny in recent years, by a variety of stakeholders. The system of peer-based, non-governmental accreditation for quality assurance of educational programs has been unique to the U.S. and has contributed substantially to the long and illustrious history of U.S. higher education. Yet, based on little evidence, accreditation organizations in general, including those who comprise the ASPA membership, are being questioned as to their effectiveness. Ideas being proposed to “fix” the situation challenge the ASPA Principles that have served members so well. The ASPA Board is committed to the ASPA Principles and will be searching for a similar commitment by the next Executive Director of ASPA. Continued strong leadership with a committed and engaged membership will enable ASPA to move forward in the coming years in addressing our motto: “Enhancing quality in higher education through specialized and professional accreditation.” ■

Fall 2010 -ASPA in Cincinnati
Sunday Focus on Members Continues

ASPA members requested more “just us” time during meetings and the Board responded by adjusting the meeting format. The Spring 2010 meeting allocated more time to the Members Only meeting and the Member Business meeting was held late afternoon on Sunday. The new schedule was successful and will continue this fall.

The Fall 2010 meeting at the Westin Cincinnati will convene for members at 1:00pm on Sunday, September 12. Other attendees are invited to register for and attend the meeting starting at 3:30pm on Sunday. All Monday sessions are open to all attendees and the meeting will adjourn at noon on Tuesday, September 14. A preliminary “overview schedule” is enclosed with this mailing and is posted to the meetings section of the ASPA website - www.aspa-usa.org. Meeting registration forms are also posted and enclosed.

If you have questions about the meeting, please contact the ASPA Office for assistance. An “early bird” discount is available to those who register no later than August 16. ■
Further Discussions on the Value of Accreditation

By Leslie Higham, PMI Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC: Project Management)

The theme of the Spring 2010 ASPA Professional Development Session in Chicago was “Demonstrating the Value of Accreditation in Dynamic Economic Times.” Our meeting facilitator helped us explore several aspects of this topic by engaging meeting attendees in several interactive sessions. The impact of recent economic events on all of our accrediting agencies and related programs was well covered. However, the value of accreditation needs — and will continue to need — further discussion. Accreditation has value to a range of stakeholders which includes accredited programs, institutions where the programs are housed, parents, prospective students and the general public. Part of this ongoing discussion includes the actions that we, as accrediting bodies, can take to spread awareness of this crucial quality assurance activity.

John Lloyd, CAHME: Healthcare Management, was interviewed on this subject, during the Spring session. John spoke with great enthusiasm about how his organization promotes accreditation to its programs and how they and their students have benefited as a result. My accrediting body, the GAC: Project Management, has also begun to address the Value question in a number of ways. For example, we have developed a website (www.pmiteach.org) for both institutions and students. This site promotes the need for, and value of, project management in the curriculum, and also serves as a marketing portal for our accredited programs, so they too can speak to the value of accreditation.

Additionally, those who attended the Spring meeting were made aware of a video that ASPA is producing for distribution on YouTube and other outlets, on just this subject. Some accreditors participated in the initial video shoot that took place in conjunction with the meeting. The second video shoot on a university campus has been completed and, if all goes well in the next steps, the video should be ready to show at the fast-approaching Fall meeting in Cincinnati. The primary audience for the video is students who are in the process of deciding where to receive specialized education, as well as their parents and spouses or significant others. The video addresses what questions they should be asking about specialized and professional accreditation and where they can find reliable information.

As accreditors, it is our role to help ensure that appropriate and quality education is available to students. However, all of our stakeholders need to know the importance of the service that accreditation provides to the educational system. The examples above are just the beginning of the conversation. Hopefully, in a future professional development session, we can continue the discussion and come up with an action plan for moving forward.

“Legal Issues in Accreditation”
Interesting – and Frustrating

The Spring 2010 ASPA meeting featured a panel on legal issues composed of three attorneys who are among the most knowledgeable in this highly specialized field of accreditation and higher education law.

Lucien (Skip) Capone, University Counsel at the University of North Carolina Asheville; Doug Carlson, Wildman, Harrold, Allen & Dixon LLP; and John Przypyszny, Drinker, Biddle & Reath, addressed a series of questions about legal issues that are of concern to ASPA members. Being the good attorneys that they are, there were lots of thoughts and ideas but, to the frustration of some in the audience — no clearcut answers. Nonetheless, the discussion was interesting and the conference evaluation forms indicate that most attendees found it valuable.

Much of the time was spent on three topics: student complaints, issues around public disclosure, and questions about appeals policies. Of particular concern to many ASPA members was the question of whether we can or should follow-up on anonymous complaints. Many organizations have a policy that says only signed complaints will be accepted. But what about those anonymous complaints that allege serious issues that could end up on the front page of The Chronicle of Higher Education? There were no easy answers as the panel explored the pros and cons of such policies but the “take away” message was that we may all need to look at the way we've always done things and consider how that may need to change in this era of increased litigation.

Changes in the Department of Education's regulations concerning Appeals bodies also raised lots of questions. Some accrediting bodies have already rewritten their processes to adapt to the new rules while others believe their existing policies are sufficient. Here again, there was a rich discussion but few clear answers. One issue that tied in with both appeals and public disclosure was the question of whether accreditors should require programs that are in the appeals process to inform potential students of that fact.

As is often true for legal issues in accreditation, the major principle seems to be “follow your published policies.” There can be lots of disagreement about the specifics of how policies and procedures are worded but on that point all three attorneys had the same clear-cut answer!
What might Specialized Accreditation look like in the Future?

Summary of an ASPA Spring 2010 meeting discussion

Paulette Brown Bracy, faculty member, ASPA Board of Directors, and Director, Office of University Accreditation, North Carolina Central University

Comparable in mission, yet distinctive in their specific disciplines, ASPA member accreditors shared some of their opinions about the changing landscape of accreditation. At the Spring 2010 ASPA meeting, members of the ASPA Board of Directors facilitated roundtable discussions, challenging participants to “think forward.” The session, “Specialized Accreditation: Looking to the Future NOW,” focused on the following questions:

- How will accrediting organizations “do business” in the future?
- What will self-studies or site visits look like?
- How will accreditation standards be developed?
- What will be the appropriate balance between quality assurance (achievement of standards) and quality advancement (improvement)?

In addressing these and other questions, participants – not all of whom were members of ASPA – suggested many ideas and possibilities. Although no one can predict the future, this article summarizes some of that rich discussion.

Initial reflection on the exercise revealed two clear outcomes of the insightful table talk. First, concerns and observations can be captured in a set of buzz words which emerged from the reports submitted by the table leaders. The following terms were repeated throughout the discussions: mission, standardization, consistency, technology, expenses (for programs and accreditation), avatars, transparency, evidence-based, institutions, fairness, and costs. Second, a common theme of technology was pervasive and emerged in each set of responses to the four questions. It is important to remember that attendees were talking about a hypothetical future, not making recommendations and that buzz words can have either a positive or negative spin.

Business in the future is likely to include greater dependence on technology in processes such as site visits, submission of electronic reports, and development of standards. Self-studies and site visits could include avatar reviewers, virtual interviews, virtual site visits, and electronically submitted exhibits. In the development of standards, technology could make it easier to collect comments, create web-based surveys, increase inclusiveness in the process, or make use of virtual worlds in a variety of creative ways.

Many attendees expect to see the expansion of two phenomena. They think more accreditors will be engaged in global education and distance education. More efficient means of assessing both could offer new opportunities to ensure quality programs.

Will self-studies go paperless? They are likely to be submitted online and, according to some, instead of including narratives, may only contain exhibits related to the standards. Although this is highly controversial, some believe that these online reports could be made open to the public. Some felt this would be well received by students in choosing their educational program. But others felt strongly that, in the name of being helpful to students, harm could result. For example, increased transparency could compromise the integrity of the accreditation process, as programs might tend to be less honest.

If reports were to be further supported by technology and if avatars were used for reviewers during virtual visits, there are likely to be implications for the review process. Should questions be asked differently? What datasets would be available?

Such a “new” self-study could focus more on documenting improvement than reporting of the status quo. This could impact accreditation practices in two ways: first, a shift from verification to planning and advancement and second, a greater consultative role for accreditors. Related to this notion, it was suggested that the use of prerequisite off-site reviews might shorten the on-site visit and consequently might also require more engagement and advisement by the accreditor throughout the process.

Even with technological infusion, site visits will most likely be conducted in a combination of both virtual and face-to-face modes with a cautionary reminder that “The core of the visit is still more important than the modality.” Nonetheless, training to enhance the technical skills of evaluators and new equipment will be necessary in any change along these lines.

In terms of protocol, some thought that the possibility of eliminating the exit conference could result in greater candor during the visit. The notion offered was that team members would not have to make tough decisions with their peers during site visits. But this might fly in the face of the buzz related to openness and transparency and institutions may not want to wait to receive the post-visit written report.

External forces are going to continue to impact accreditation processes. With demands of ever-increasing assessment requirements, the visit cycles could expand to a greater number of years between self studies – or with calls for ever-increasing monitoring, they could shrink to shorter amounts of time. The USDE and CHEA involvement in accreditation will continue to shape some aspects of specialized accreditation as will other initiatives. Whether good or bad or somewhere in between, the higher education “report card” is likely to have implications for ensuring quality educational programs.
The discussion included observations about effective working relationships between specialized and regional accreditors. A “mega” collaboration in which the institution would submit one self-study and host a visit for all accreditors – regional and specialized – was suggested as was the alternative that either could visit first in an arrangement of follow-up and confirmation. This effort, ideally structured to avoid the pitfalls that strangled earlier coordinated mega-visits, would involve several accreditors and foster improved communication about processes for all. Of course, this may still be impractical for large institutions with multiple accreditations.

Standards will be developed or revised using technology to achieve even greater input from stakeholders. Opportunities for face-to-face comments are not likely to be abandoned, but instead used as a complement to innovative practices. Second Life or other virtual world technology could be useful for dialogue in the comment periods. GoToMeeting® and webinars could also be useful options in the development process.

For those with current or future international aspirations, standards may look different as they become “borderless.” If desired, distinct sets of standards for licensure here and in another country could be designed to enhance reciprocity within professions or disciplines.

The process of developing standards can, some believed, be enriched by a set of principles that guides and grounds the process; others spoke about the value of working with experienced psychometricians. Although some see value in the development of national standards in certain educational arenas, ASPA's position has been a commitment to diversity and preservation of the freedom of institutions and accreditors to work together in ways that best serve them both within the context of their broad-based community of interest. While student learning would almost certainly remain at the forefront of the ways both accreditors and institutions are accountable, the future might see greater attention to the multivariate ways in which students learn.

Achieving balance was mentioned in previous sections in the context of shifting more toward quality improvement. At the same time, specialized accreditors will continue to resist any inappropriate pressure to meet the needs of the profession at the expense of staying centered on what programs must do to improve in the areas designated in the standards. If accreditors are “allowed” by USDE and CHEA to focus more on improvement and less on compliance, the norms are likely to be less prescriptive standards and greater recognition of innovative and successful approaches. Accreditors have the responsibility to provide training for team members to ensure consistency and objectivity. Above all, quality improvement processes must be clearly separated from quality assurance processes while both exist in a viable balance.

Perhaps balance of quality assurance and quality advancement could be better fostered through annual and midterm reports. Some think that the new look of accreditation will have greater emphasis on continuous improvement with focus on identified issues and progress toward their resolution. With this approach, it is possible that the site visit cycle could be altered or, for those not recognized by USDE, possibly eliminated. Alternately, the use of triggers in annual reports could result in even more frequent site visits. These or any other shifts in emphasis will almost certainly require increased education and training through webinars and other media.

In summary, some views of the future would have implications for ASPA. One is the suggestion to develop additional generic training programs for on-site evaluators. To enhance consistency, those developing the training coordinated by ASPA might need to observe site visits of a representative sample of members. Another idea is a compilation of sample annual accreditation reports into an “Idea Book” or some other report of use to members.

This “looking toward the future” exercise allowed ASPA members and other attendees to put forth “over the horizon” ideas in a non-threatening atmosphere. It is this kind of exploration, combined with on-going discussions about good practice in specialized and professional accreditation that helps ASPA best work on behalf of its members. ASPA, like each member, must keep abreast, foster dialogue and manage with an eye toward an even better future.

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Fall 2010 Professional Development Program - September 13-14, 2010

Challenges in Multi-Campus Accreditation and Distance Education

Explore accreditation in distance education and multi-campus environments this fall in Cincinnati at the Monday afternoon/Tuesday morning ASPA Fall Meeting professional development program.

Our guide for this exploration is the very dynamic Robert “Pete” Bill, Professor of Veterinary Pharmacology and Director of Veterinary Technology at Purdue University. He'll share his experiences working with our colleagues in veterinary medicine to implement changes in standards, policies, and procedures in response to how programs operate in multi-campus and distance learning environments. He’ll be working with us throughout the program, including facilitating a closing session on conflict resolution Why are you such a pain?? Recognizing and defusing potential personality conflicts on accreditation visits to provide insight on how individual qualities impact the way people deal with conflict. During the session, a modified Myers Briggs inventory will be used to help attendees better understand the relationship between personality types and conflict.

Throughout the program we'll hear from six of our colleagues about their approaches to this expanding environment and have a chance to ask questions. We'll work scenarios and share “take home” insights. For more detail, see the enclosed agenda. Hope to see you at the meeting!
For Profit Higher Education in the News

Kathleen Megivern, vice-chair, ASPA Board, and Executive Director, CAAHEP: Allied Health

It would be fair to say that for-profit higher education has been under siege for several months now, and the battles have spilled over from business publications like *Bloomberg News* and the *Wall Street Journal* to genuinely mainstream media like *Good Housekeeping* magazine! Stories abound of students who have borrowed huge amounts of money in order to enroll in a for-profit institution only to learn that their employment prospects upon graduation are slim to none.

The Department of Education had been talking about issuing regulations on the topic of “gainful employment” - somehow trying to get at a relationship between how much money a student spends on an education and the prospects for “gainful employment” that such an education gives to the student. But it’s a complicated issue. The recent Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) by the Department includes new reporting requirements intended to enable the Department to have data related to “gainful employment.” The next NPRM will include additional regulations they say.

In the meantime, Congress has also taken notice and there is activity on several fronts. On June 21st, five members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct “a review of the for-profit or ‘proprietary’ postsecondary education sector and the sector’s share of revenue derived from Federal student aid funding.” All five are Democrats and they include Senator Tom Harkin and Congressman George Miller, chairs of the Senate and House education committees. Issues of particular concern include the rapid growth in for-profit higher education, questions about the quality of educational programs offered by for-profits and the outcomes for students, and how much of the revenue comes from various federal funding sources, including Title IV.

Three days after sending that letter to the GAO, Senator Tom Harkin was again focused on the subject of for profit higher education with what he characterized as the first in a series of hearings.

“The lunatics are running the asylum.”

That was the startling accusation from Wall Street hedge fund manager Steven Eisman in his testimony at the first hearing held by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP).

There's no question that the problems in the for-profit sector of higher education are very real. But the hearing had the feel of a “witch hunt” with the witness list stacked heavily with outspoken critics.

Clearly the most critical of the critics was Mr. Eisman and that statement about who's running the asylum was his assessment of the national accrediting agencies that accredit for-profit institutions. He makes that statement because the boards of those agencies include people from the very for-profits they accredit. But alas, that is the very nature of “peer review” and much the same thing could be said about the board composition of any accrediting agency.

Although there was very little mention of specialized or programmatic accreditation, what little was said showed that there is lots of confusion about it – and that certainly contributes to the problems.

One of the witnesses was a single mother who borrowed heavily to go to a diagnostic medical sonography program which turned out not to be accredited (she was also featured in the *Good Housekeeping* article). She has been trying for over two years to find a job but because she cannot get certified she is unemployable. She did not allege that anyone lied to her about the accreditation of the DMS program; they just failed to mention it and she never asked.

Mr. Eisman had another example of a medical assisting program in California that did not have the necessary program accreditation and as a result the graduates could not get certified.

The Department of Education’s NPRM contains some “beefed up” language about misrepresentation, but so many of the cases are not outright misrepresentation but rather are “sins of omission.”

The worry for those of us in accreditation is that any effort by Congress to get at the problem will end up hurting all of higher education. The ranking Republican on the Committee, Senator Michael Enzi (R, WY) may have stated it best:

*Unfortunately, as in other industries, there are bad actors in the for-profit sector. Some for-profit schools have attempted to game the system in order to gain access to more federal aid dollars ... That is unacceptable ... However, in combating this behavior, it is essential that we use a scalpel and not a machete. Whatever protections are put in place must eliminate bad actors and ensure that we do not unintentionally harm students in legitimate programs.*

Senator Harkin (D, IA) has promised more hearings to come so stay tuned...
Plan to attend...

Cincinnati Highlights

♦ Accreditation - Why Should I Care?
   Don’t miss the preview of ASPA’s first YouTube video production. This short video is intended to help prospective students understand the importance of specialized accreditation. It gives them tips on what questions to ask and where to find reliable information as they make decisions about where to go for specialized and professional education. Some of you participated in the video shoot held last spring. Did your footage make it into the final product? You’ll find out at the screening.

♦ ASPA Showcase - Meet the Members
   Are ASPA meetings warm and welcoming or distant and intimidating? Probably that depends on who you ask and how new they are to ASPA. Especially as meetings have more than doubled in size over the years, we can all use a bit of help in connecting names and faces and in learning what we might have in common with someone who usually sits across the room. The ASPA Board plans to host a series of “showcase” sessions. We hope you will say yes when asked to be a showcase participant.

♦ Accreditation: Cops, Coaches, or Both?
   This session will continue themes from the Spring 2010 meeting. A combination of outside experts and inside experts, i.e., those with day-to-day experience in accreditation, will set the stage for a facilitated discussion of the extent to which accreditors can or should “walk the line” between the roles of cop and coach. What existing mandates limit one or both of these roles? Do the three accreditation perspectives (national, regional and specialized) see these roles in similar ways? Who are “they” and when “they” are quoted, should we listen? What emerging factors could tip the balance in one direction or the other? Bring your own views and help make this session informative, challenging, and thought-provoking.

♦ Accreditation Policy Briefing
   ASPA is fortunate to have a committee of accreditation professionals who have extensive experience working in the policy arena. Some have decades of experience, having gone through three or more reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act. Others are new to this committee but bring a fresh perspective and ask questions that help the committee craft a clearer message. This committee, the External Recognition Issues Committee (ERIC), has started a series of policy briefings for members. The next briefing will continue during the Fall members only meeting.

   Sometimes the conversation starts with Congress, the US Department of Education (USDE) or some aspect of the federal process by which programmatic and institutional accreditors are recognized. At other times, the conversation starts with recognition or other policy initiatives of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). While the impact is not always immediately evident, there is an interconnectedness between the policy actions of CHEA and USDE that requires analysis, attention and action. ERIC briefings help us learn (or remember) what is at stake for programs and institutions, for accreditors, for the broad higher education community, and for our nation. The closing slides from the Spring 2010 briefing may say it best:

   A look forward ..... is a look backward.
   Although the laws protecting higher education from federal control have continued to be in effect, the principles underlying them are now at risk.

Join your ERIC colleagues in Cincinnati to find out where the conversation will start this fall.

Save the Date

Spring 2011 ASPA Professional Development Session
April 4-5, 2011 at the Sax Chicago – A Thompson Hotel

- Have programs ever questioned the consistency of your agency's accreditation decisions?
- Is your staff and volunteer training really helping to achieve the reliability that you desire?
- Do you wonder about best practices for monitoring the effectiveness of your board's actions?
- Is anyone telling you that outcome benchmarks will improve the quality of your programs?
- Do you know how you'll document consistency for your next CHEA or USDE recognition?

If you're wondering what these questions have in common, then please join us for the Spring 2011 ASPA Professional Development Session, on April 4-5 at the Sax Chicago, for a discussion and exploration of consistency in accreditation. The program will cover training, decision-making, resources to strengthen accreditation's value in the community and much more. We look forward to seeing you!

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Applications for membership in ASPA may be submitted on February 15, April 15, August 1 or October 1. See “MEMBER INFO” on the ASPA website or contact the ASPA office for advice.