Accreditation:
A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

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I have been an accreditation aficionado for some 25 years. Because this uniquely American process of voluntary self-regulation currently is in such serious trouble, I have determined to share with you some personal and overall positive experiences with the process in the hope of reminding others of the value of accreditation. Unless the higher education community responds to this "call to arms," accreditation likely will be replaced by something far less acceptable to us all. This is not merely a call to circle the wagons to maintain the status quo, rather it is a request to protect the accreditation process by helping reform it.

The early years: specialized accreditation
As with many others, my early years at the university were focused primarily at the department level. I first became involved with my own discipline's special-ized accreditation activities as a newly appointed department chair. After observing the positive impact the process had on my own department, I became convinced that accreditation was a powerful and important tool for effecting change.

This experience with my own department led naturally to my becoming a site visitor and eventually to my serving on the accrediting board. In the latter role, I saw repeated evidence that programmatic accreditation did, in fact, provide quality assurance. A rigorous, periodic self-study utilizing national standards, followed by an intensive site visit conducted by well-schooled peers, never failed to produce positive change—even when accreditation was not granted. (Yes, despite rumors to the contrary, not every applicant was accredited.) Those programs that were granted accreditation were required to provide annual documentation that the standards were being met throughout the period of accreditation. When programs failed to provide such proof, sanctions were both stiff and immediate.

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The middle years: regional accreditation
Upon returning to the university, this time as an administrator, I began to rely on regional accreditation as a tool for effecting positive institutional change. Again, I wasn’t disappointed. Although obviously more complex than programmatic accreditation, regional accreditation also served to improve the enterprise.

The accreditation process we utilized was a variation of the traditional regional model. While the process was both more costly and intrusive, it was tailor made to meet the needs of my institution. With the exception of a shaky first year, the five-year process, which involved annual mini self-studies tied to tightly focused site visits, had an exceptionally positive impact on the university.

With this campus experience, combined with the positive evidence I had gathered during various site visits in the region, my support for accreditation continued unabated.

The mid-life crisis: COPA
As the reader will recall, I had believed that COPA was the place to be for someone interested in the improvement of the academy. Thus, despite myriad warnings relative to the failing health of the organization, in 1991, I accepted an invitation to head the “beleaguered” council. I was convinced that the national importance of accreditation would enable COPA to transcend whatever minor problems plagued it.

How wrong I was! My friends’ warnings clearly were understated. I arrived in Washington, DC, only to find a house divided. Internecine warfare was literally the order of the day.

Deep resentment and suspicion separated the various “assemblies” of regional, national, and specialized accrediting bodies. Collegiality rarely was evidenced among the majority of individuals who represented their accrediting commissions to COPA. In most instances, these individuals were the agencies’ paid professional staff, rather than the volunteers who are the heart of the accrediting process.

Some of the staff of the specialized accreditation agencies directed considerable animosity toward college and university presidents, as well as toward the associations that represented them in COPA. These feelings resulted in many cases from a belief (in some instances correct) that presidents were negatively disposed toward specialized accreditation. Even my former position as a university...
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President caused some to suspect my motives, despite my earlier positive history with specialized accreditation.

As to the regional accrediting bodies, they essentially had written off COPA by the time I arrived on the scene. A white paper threatening secession from the community (if ever there was one) had been circulated, and it only added to the crisis. In sum, COPA was in a truly sorry state.

Against this backdrop of political turmoil, a small group of dedicated volunteers continued working with COPA’s recognition process. Committed to improving accreditation—and, hence, higher education—by “accrediting the accreditors,” these academic and lay volunteers approached their task in the same professional manner that had so impressed me over the years. Despite the strife, this group never lost faith in the importance of the process.

All the chaos within COPA provided the perfect opportunity for an external assault on accreditation. Most individuals associated with accreditation were so focused on the internal strife that they essentially were caught off guard by the rising tide of negativity that rapidly eroded confidence in the process. Although the problems initially were identified as involving the proprietary sector, they were quickly generalized to all sectors and, consequently, to all of accreditation. Both Congress and the executive branch were openly contemptuous of the self-regulation process. The controversy surrounding the diversity standard of the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities served merely to exacerbate the problem.

The net result of all this negativity was that Congress seriously contemplated striking any reference to accreditation in its 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Although accreditation was spared this ultimate insult, thanks in large measure to the efforts of college and university presidents and the national higher education associations, accreditation essentially was marginalized.

Unfortunately, rather than closing ranks to address the concerns raised by Congress and others relative to the accreditation process, COPA self-destructed. This unalmented last act merely reinforced the perception that those involved most directly with accreditation realized the utter hopelessness of the situation.

Recently, Robert Arwell, president of the American Council on Education, listed the four circumstances he believed caused accreditation’s “fall from grace.” These are:

- congressional dissatisfaction with accreditation’s role in monitoring student aid;
- the 1992 amendments to the Higher Education Act and the regulations to implement them;
- college and university presidents’ increasing concern about specialized accreditation; and
- questions about the rigor and consistency of the current structure of regional accreditation.
I would add a fifth circumstance to this list—a circumstance that Robert Clodus, past president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), commented on several years ago. Clodus suggested that accreditation’s problems were much like those associated with athletics: “Presidents lost control.” While some college and university presidents did, in fact, participate fully in COPA, their numbers were quite small. Had more presidents had time to join this minority, I believe the current crisis surrounding accreditation might well have been averted.

The future

I now have returned to a university in a different accrediting region and have been required to adjust to yet another set of accrediting standards. Is it any wonder that it is so difficult to explain the process to policymakers?

Coincidently with my returning to campus, a group of well-intentioned individuals came together at the national level in an effort to restore confidence in accreditation. The National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPB) now is calling for a significant reform of the process. Obviously, it will take more than the good work of NPB to make this reform reality. The entire higher education community must assist with this important task if we are to retain at least some control over our own destiny. If this reform is to have credibility, I would suggest that at least the following questions be addressed:

- Should the linkage between accreditation and student aid be maintained?
- How can the process be refined to reduce the time and expense associated with it?
- Should a national accrediting body with a universal set of standards and procedures be established to replace regional commissions?
- Should several sets of standards (national or regional) be developed to reflect the various types of institutions that constitute our community?
- How can the process be made more accountable to its various publics, and at the same time be of maximal assistance to our institutions?
- How can specialized accreditation be made more acceptable to college and university administrators, yet still have a positive impact at the programmatic level?

Working with NPB on these and other issues in the coming months should enable us to restore public confidence in the process. If we don’t, I truly fear that another American institution, one that overall has had a positive impact on higher education, will be delegitimized. In that event, we all will lose.