

Favored Accreditation Process and Comparison to Current

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### **Introduction**

This paper discusses some issues related to the national stage of higher education accreditation systems. There are 18 institutional accreditors and 68 programmatic accreditors (Eaton, J. S., 2018, March, p. 4). A visit to the Higher Learning Commission (2018, May) (HLC) website produced a document titled: Resource Guide 2018 (HLC, 2018, March), providing the latest insight to the accreditation pathways such as the Academic Quality Improvement Plan (AQIP); the Program to Evaluation, and the Advance Quality (PEAQ); and Pathways - Standard and Open (p. 19-27). A review, comparison, and preference is presented.

### **The national accreditation issue.**

Nationally, problems with accreditation body corruption, consistency, and overreach have called to question the value, purpose and function of these bodies. Even in 2010, the President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), Eaton, J. S. (2010, October), claimed, Accreditation is being transformed from a valued private-sector process—over which the federal government historically has exercised limited control—to a process that is subject to more and more federal involvement. The implications of this shift, profound for faculty members, can include the erosion of academic freedom and the loss of appropriate authority and responsibility for the key academic decisions that have defined the faculty role for centuries—that is, judgments about curriculum, academic standards, and general education. The core academic values on which accreditation is built and in which faculty members invest are currently at risk as the government role expands. (para. 2)

Today in 2018, the national landscape continues to be littered with accreditation body problems. For example, Reddin, E. (2018, May) states, accreditation is to assure minimum

standards but the American College of Commerce and Technology (ACCT) is now defunct. Authorities started shutting down the college only one year after accreditation was provided by the ACICS body. Recently, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos restored ACICS's federal recognition after a court order (para. 1, 4). The problem is so rampant the U.S. Department of Education states, "Diploma mills are schools that are more interested in taking your money than providing you with a quality education. You need to know how to protect yourself as a consumer." "Important: The Better Business Bureau suggests you watch for the following features and regard them as red flags when considering whether or not to enroll in a school" (para. 6, 7). Given these are not uncommon issues in the news, is there any wonder the entire accreditation process and higher education system is being called into question.

### **Accreditation paths and their characteristics**

The responsibility for quality higher education rests first with each institution is the basis for defining the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC's) purpose. Per the HLC Resource Guide 2018, quality higher education must include focus on student learning with a public purpose focused on a diverse technological globally connected world, with a culture of continuous improvement, integrity, transparency, ethics, governed for the wellbeing of the institution. Planning and management of resources must guarantee sustainability while being mission centered and peer reviewed (p. 4-6).

Information on the different accreditation pathways is provided in the Resource Guide Mention earlier including: the Program to Evaluation, and the Advance Quality (PEAQ); the Academic Quality Improvement Plan (AQIP); Pathways - Standard and Open (HLC, p. 19-27).

The Program to Evaluation, and the Advance Quality (PEAQ) pathway was phased out starting in 2012 and completed in 2015. PEAQ was replaced by the Standard and Open pathways

which were also introduced in 2012. During that same timeframe, AQIP was changed from a 7 year to an 8-year cycle. Evaluation of these changes will be reported later this year (p. 19).

The Academic Quality Improvement Plan (AQIP) pathway functions on an 8-year cycle to reaffirm accredited status and assists institutions in achieving sustainable quality improvement. This pathway includes:

- 1.) Creation of multiple action projects that are reviewed annually.
- 2.) Attendance of strategy forums in year 1 or 2 and in year 5 or 6 to review appraisal feedback and birth a subsequent action project,
- 3.) Preparation of system portfolios and entertain systems appraisals in year 3 and 7 respectively.
- 4.) Finally, in year 8 a comprehensive evaluation is performed called a Comprehensive Quality Review (including a Systems Appraisal and Quality highlights report), and a review of Federal Compliance Requirements (p. 22-24).

The Standard pathway is on a 10 year cycle including quality assurance, institutional improvements, comprehensive evaluations, with monitoring. This pathway includes:

- 1.) Years 1-3 – Preparation of assurance filing. Evidence and arguments are prepared.
- 2.) Year 4 – Perform a comprehensive evaluation including a visit with actions defined.
- 3.) Years 5-9 – Prepare final assurance filing with arguments in preparation for a year 10 comprehensive evaluation.
- 4.) Year 10 – Perform a comprehensive evaluation with peer review and a decision by the HLC (p. 19-21).

The Open pathway also follows a 10-year cycle, similar to the standard pathway.

However, the open pathway includes a Quality Initiative that affords the institution to pursue

improvements that meet their current needs. So, in years 5-7 a Quality Initiative proposal is created and a report is created in years 7-9 followed by a comprehensive evaluation in year 10 (p. 25-27).

**Favored accreditation path and comparison.**

I absolutely favor the AQIP pathway as it affords multiple action projects with yearly reviews through the 8-year cycle. These action projects promote structured initiatives of continuous improvement while reaffirming accredited status. Given the changing landscape in both technology and higher education, this structure appropriately encourages higher education institutions to meet the changing expectations of students. In my current position as VP & CIO, I have participated in several action projects. A Complete overhaul of Schoolcraft College information technology infrastructure was one that I headed myself. It took nearly 3 years but met with high praise from the Higher Learning Commission and positioned our institution to be more competitive by enhancing the technological resources provided to our students.

Some of the challenges of the AQIP pathway, in my experience, were the changing reporting requirements from the HLC at each touch point during the Action Project process. In addition, we experienced wide variability in the interpretation of process guidelines by different reviewers/assessors.

Overall, it was a valuable process for me personally and for our institution.

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