

The Changing Context for Institutional Accreditation

Accreditation stands as a distinctive American innovation to assure quality in higher education. It was founded more than 100 years ago on the principle of peer review, meaning that those within the academy are best able to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions. In the past decades, however, both institutions and the challenges of defining and evaluating quality have become significantly more complex and come under increasing scrutiny. Some of the changes that affect our ability to define and evaluate quality in the accrediting process include:

- ✓ Increasing diversity of institutional types, with significant changes occurring within traditional institutions; the development of single-purpose institutions in a wide range of disciplines; and the expansion of profit-centered enterprises into higher education.
- ✓ Development and growth of online and distributed learning within traditional institutions and the development of institutions wholly or primarily organized to provide educational services in a distributed environment.
- ✓ Increased scale and complexity of institutions, where the majority of students served in higher education attend large, complex, multipurpose universities. The focus of accreditation review grows more critical at these institutions, but traditional frameworks of accreditation have become more cumbersome and less effective at these institutions.
- ✓ A shift toward effectiveness and performance indicators beyond inputs and resources as the organizing basis for defining and evaluating quality.
- ✓ Higher expectations for the performance of graduates, leading to calls for increased attention to evidence of student learning.
- ✓ A burgeoning focus on the diversity of learners and learning needs in American higher education, along with the increased globalization of curricula, programs, and student populations.
- ✓ Higher mobility of students between institutions, changing patterns of institutional attendance, and the de-institutionalization of learning settings leading to a decline in institutional impact and control over the educational experience and curricula of students.
- ✓ Concern over the rising costs of higher education and recognition that higher education is a major factor in economic growth and productivity, resulting in an emphasis on the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in institutional performance.
- ✓ The increased impact and workload caused by federal regulations that affect accreditation processes and all institutions of higher education.