

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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Accreditation's role is changing in ways that will affect governing boards, as the institutions they oversee face new types of campus reviews. Accreditation will take more time and attention in the future [and] it will be more demanding.

- Judith S. Eaton

Without accreditation, higher education institutions would be compelled to examine their operations anyway by a force much more powerful than accreditation - the force of competition.

- George Leef

## Community College Accreditation: The Shifting National Landscape

**Gary Wheeler, PhD**

President Emeritus  
Glen Oaks Community College  
Centreville, Michigan

The increasing complexity of higher education makes all processes that examine its quality and value more challenging. In 1895, a year when the two largest regional accreditors, the Higher Learning Commission (then the North Central Association, NCA) and the Southern Association of Colleges, were established, fewer than 18,000 bachelor's degrees were awarded nationwide by a little more than 900 colleges and universities enrolling more than 100,000 students. In its first years, the NCA had fewer than 70 colleges and universities on its list of accredited institutions. By 2015, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded nationwide had grown to more than 2.5 million from more than 4,000 colleges and universities, enrolling approximately 20 million students.

Where in 1895 most undergraduate students were enrolled in a baccalaureate degree where the course of study varied little across the country, today's

undergraduate students are enrolled in a dizzying array of certificate programs, associate degrees, and baccalaureates where the common factor among them all appears to be a shrinking core of general education courses.

Who is paying attention? Colleges and universities operate with considerable independence and autonomy. Unlike other countries, in the U.S. there is no Ministry of Education or other centralized federal authority exercising control over the quality of postsecondary educational institutions, and the states assume varying degrees of control over education. Regional accreditors (and to a certain extent, national, and professional or specialized accreditors too) oversee collegiate operations using mostly volunteer labor, drawing from the faculty and staff of the institutions themselves. This peer review model is similar to that of a variety of professional organizations that police themselves, such as scientific research groups, medical professions and organizations, the legal community, and many others. The result is that American educational institutions can vary widely in the character and quality of their programs.

Before the 1950s, almost no one raised concerns about the ways in which colleges and universities organized themselves and how they operated. The 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act (aka the "GI Bill") for military personnel returning to civilian life, providing education support benefits among other things, began to change that hands-off environment. When a similar bill was passed by Congress following the Korean War, the

educational benefits for returning veterans were restricted to education provided by institutions recognized by the federal government's Commissioner of Education—in other words, the funding available to returning GIs was restricted to programs offered by approved colleges and universities, typically those recognized as accredited by one of the regional accreditors. Higher education accreditors were established in this legislation as gatekeepers for federal education funding support. Congress did this, in part, to combat perceived fraud and abuse of federal funding for veteran's educational support. Over time, as more federal funding (Title IV, e.g.) went into higher education, access to educational support for a variety of populations increased as did public interest in higher education as the pathway to good employment. Today, there are few sectors more scrutinized than education. Not surprising perhaps, given that in 2017 about 3% of the entire federal budget is spent on education at all levels, with less than a third of that, about \$37B, spent on higher education.

The future of accreditation is one of continuing challenge and careful examination by the public and Congress. These

challenges can be grouped into three categories: peer review, accountability, and innovation.

**Peer Review.** Peer review is often seen by critics of higher education (and by some members of Congress) as being inherently biased. These critics believe that having employees of colleges evaluate the operations and outcomes of other colleges is a form of logrolling, whereby judgements are tainted by affiliation. Even some colleges and universities are challenging elements of accreditor peer review models, saying that the diversity of institutional size, quality, and type should result in more targeted teams of peer reviewers ("who is an appropriate peer for my peerless institution?"). These critics point out that the U.S. stands alone in the world as relying on volunteer, non-professional evaluators for quality assurance and performance appraisals in higher education. Among the bills that aim to upend the current model is one by Senator Lee (R-UT): "The Higher Education Reform and Opportunity Act would give states the power to create their own, alternative systems of accrediting Title IV-eligible higher education providers. State participation would be totally voluntary, and would in no way interfere with the current system. State-based accreditation would augment, not replace, the current regime."

**Accountability.** With a significant amount of public money going into higher education it seems reasonable that the public would want an accounting of where the

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## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

According to the AACC, "the current landscape for accreditation continues to shift in ways that could challenge community colleges." Accreditation is required to ensure the community college degree and education received will be recognized by other schools and professional industries. Yet today, accreditation is being challenged to respond to enormous change and urgency in higher education as the ongoing HEA reorganization process drives an intensified scrutiny of accreditation processes. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Tracy Labadie, MS

Assistant Dean of  
Assessment and Academic Services  
Glen Oaks Community College  
Centreville, Michigan

Accreditation of higher education institutions continues to be a hot topic among legislators. With some legislators arguing that more accountability is necessary while others are arguing that a reduction of restrictions is necessary, it is difficult to predict what the accreditation landscape will look like in the future. Community college leaders need to remain focused on the primary purpose of accreditation - to provide quality education that is recognized as both valid and valuable. Regardless of what changes may come, this will always remain a core component of the community college mission.

Community college leaders may need to consider thinking outside of the box to provide assurances that the educational services and credentials offered are recognized by peer institutions and professional industries. One consideration may be to implement quality processes that would meet any standards that the institution faces and would hold up to the rigor of accreditation requirements. Some higher educational institutions are beginning to pursue this option by adopting private industry standards, such as six sigma lean processes. The Ohio State University, University of California Berkley, University of Notre Dame, and Baylor College of Medicine are just a few. John Hopkins University has created a Lean Sigma Quality and Innovation Coach position. This position emphasizes their commitment to drive continuous process improvement across their campus using methodologies incorporated in six sigma.

In a way, moving in this direction makes sense for community colleges. Six sigma is a systematic, data-driven approach to addressing and eliminating "defects" in any business process. What may seem like an abstract quality management tool used in manufacturing is actually quite adaptable to the service and public sector industries. Manufacturing businesses utilize six sigma lean processes to identify weaknesses in their supply chain. Consider community colleges as the supplier in the overall value stream for four-year institutions and professional industry. Six Sigma processes would provide a disciplined approach for evaluating processes, identifying weak areas within the institution, and providing a methodology for continuous improvement. This is exactly what higher education accreditation processes are meant to support.

By maintaining that focus on continuous quality improvement that has been embedded in our accreditation standards, community college leaders will help their institutions navigate the evolving accreditation landscape while remaining focused on supporting the college mission. Even if accreditation were to be entirely eliminated, quality will remain as a priority for institutions. Adopting a quality management process that is industry recognized is one way that institutions could be on the forefront of the quality control revolution.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community college leaders help advance and protect their institutions as the shifting environment impacts traditional accreditation?**

### Khayree O. Williams, MEd

Assistant Dean of  
Multicultural Student Development  
Calvin College  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Famous civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, once stated, "Intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education." As community college leaders, we know the vital importance our institutions

signify for our communities, students, and industry, as well as our role in equipping students to be globally minded citizens and productive members of our society. However, the shifting landscape of accreditation is now, more than ever, threatening our important charge.

Accreditation is an essential standard that we must all meet and sustain to preserve our abilities to serve. But it's no longer enough to just maintain our respective institution's accreditation so we can continue business as usual. The looming threats to accreditation can and will have a collective impact on how we move forward.

Accreditation scrutiny is not new. However, the discussion has renewed vigor as there are real and relevant matters spurred by congressional interests and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act as it relates to concerns around completion, quality educational offerings, student debt ratios, and likely to some degree, legislators who lack some of the understanding of the unique challenges we face as community college leaders. Regardless, this is not a time to point fingers. The national trend of declining student enrollment often necessitates a competitive nature in our industry, but on this issue, we cannot be divided because we all stand to lose.

What's at risk? Corinthian College and ITT, two for-profit institutions, are no longer in existence due to similar issues. How, for example, would a quicker path to loss of accreditation due to failure to meet completion benchmarks impact your college?

Now is the time for us to remain diligent in moving the conversation forward by both educating all stakeholders of the unique challenges we face in supporting and educating the community college student of today, while also being steadfast in continuing to seek quality improvements around our delivery of education.

- ▲ Community College Leaders should remain aware of the new accreditation developments.
- ▲ Community College leaders must continue to ensure their colleges are good stewards of their student's financial resources.
- ▲ Community College leaders must continue to work to improve their college's ability to equip students with a quality education that leads to completion.
- ▲ Community College leaders must continue to be united in working with legislators to have a firm understanding of the important role community colleges plays and the challenges that impact our work.

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## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

According to the AACC, “the current landscape for accreditation continues to shift in ways that could challenge community colleges.” Accreditation is required to ensure the community college degree and education received will be recognized by other schools and professional industries. Yet today, accreditation is being challenged to respond to enormous change and urgency in higher education as the ongoing HEA reorganization process drives an intensified scrutiny of accreditation processes. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Core Accreditation Concepts for Community College Leaders

**Amber R. Holloway, EdD**

Associate Vice Chancellor  
Student Engagement and Success  
Houston Community College  
Houston, Texas

The most basic purpose of accreditation is to assure higher education stakeholders that the credential earned meets acceptable levels of quality. Accreditation can also serve as a catalyst for institutional improvement and innovation through the facilitation of reflective and evaluative cycles.

Increased stakeholder interest in the value of a college credential has led in turn to increased demands for accreditors to do more to assure not just acceptable levels of quality, but also better student success outcomes.

As accreditation itself is challenged and scrutinized, it follows that the quality and student success outcomes of community colleges will also be questioned. Community college leaders can help advance and protect their institutions by renewing their focus on a few core concepts. Regardless of what changes may come, if these are attended to, an institution will have no need to teach to the accreditation test – the commitment to quality will speak for itself.

**Stay laser-focused on the mission, and on the goal of helping students achieve their desired educational outcome.** It may be tempting to respond to external pressures by quickly expanding programs, building new locations, or adding new grants, but these responses may dilute the institution’s ability to assess and understand the challenges facing existing programs and student populations. All accrediting bodies will consider the mission at some point in the evaluative cycle; when the institution is living its mission, it will fulfill its vision.

**Determine where retention and completion intervention efforts and dollars can have the most impact.** The implementation of high-impact, engaging, and promising practices such as mandatory orientation, accelerated developmental education, early alert systems, and supplemental instruction undoubtedly provides benefit to targeted groups and individual students (CCCSE, 2013; NSSE, 2013). Yet there remains a lack of significant progress in increasing national and collegiate aggregate rates of retention or credential attainment (ACT, 2015; IHEP, 2016). Rather than approaching these practices as a shopping list or grab bag from which to choose, or as a checklist, institutions should carefully analyze the needs and size of the targeted student population.

**Invest in the resources – people and tools – needed to perform those complex analyses of student populations.** Despite decades of research, an answer to the “departure puzzle” (Braxton, 2002) remains elusive. There is no specific position, program, practice, or software tool that can be called on to solve the problem of student attrition. But it is becoming clearer that disaggregating and drilling below surface-level data assumptions can provide informed courses of action. The specific combination of people and tools needed may be unique to each institution, but some kind of investment will be needed. Merely tacking on retention to an existing full-time job will not be sufficient.

**Evaluate the extent to which the institution’s own policies, practices,**

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community college leaders help advance and protect their institutions as the shifting environment impacts traditional accreditation?**

**Higher education accreditation faces tough questions of accountability, and tough questions for institutions are sure to follow.**

**and procedures may create barriers to student progress and persistence.** Although much of what is widely accepted and believed about student attrition focuses on student behaviors or lack of college preparedness, institutions can also contribute to the problem through the creation of rules and requirements that are well-intentioned but have unintended consequences. Examples include fines and fees that result in registration holds which may lead students to take classes elsewhere, or additional graduation

requirements such as portfolios. Community college leaders can engage their institutions in a combination of self-audit, facilitated discussions, and focus groups with students to understand the extent of such barriers and begin to mitigate.

**Assess what matters, and link assessment to institutional effectiveness and strategic planning.** While expectations may vary to some extent from

region to region, assessment is a key component of the evaluation cycle for all accreditors. Too often institutions still treat assessment as merely an accreditation requirement, asking stakeholders to fill out reports and submit data that appear to go nowhere and inform nothing. When institutions are assessing institutional effectiveness, both inside and outside the classroom, to inform


strategic planning and communicating the results to stakeholders, the effect can be a true commitment to continuous quality improvement, rather than just completing an accreditation requirement with little meaning.

Higher education accreditation faces tough questions of accountability, and tough questions for institutions are sure to follow. By staying focused on the mission, evaluating potential impact before implementing programs, investing in necessary data analysis capabilities, determining and addressing institutional barriers to student success, and assessing what matters, community colleges leaders will be prepared to protect their institutions with answers to those tough questions, and will continue to advance the community college mission.

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**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Thinking about accreditation in a rapidly changing world**

by Paul J. LeBlanc

*Profound change is taking place in higher education, revolving around a combination of factors including cost, access, quality, funding, technological innovation, opportunity, the influence of for-profit providers, and workforce development needs in a global and technological context. This article addresses the new reality that accreditors now must wrestle with all of these various forces across a broad landscape of change and urgency and provides a case for accreditors to help redesign the existing pathways to accreditation.*

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/2re9Cts>

**The changing role of accreditation: Should it matter to governing boards?**

by Judith S. Eaton

*As president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), Eaton stresses that the role of accreditation is changing. New and emerging demands on higher education will require boards to develop a deeper understanding of accreditation issues related to their particular institutions. CHEA will be helping make the case for preserving the essential aspects of traditional accreditation as vital to the future of academic quality, while sustaining a commitment to public accountability.*

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/2rWqyHN>



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**Community College Accreditation: The Shifting National Landscape** *(continued from page 1)*

money goes, for what value, and resulting in what kinds of outcomes that benefit the public. This critique points out that much of higher education seems inscrutable to many, that accreditor’s evaluative reports mostly are not made public, and that the results of higher education can be difficult to measure. Too many students graduate without marketable skills, these critics say, and too many degree programs are not aligned with the jobs market. These critics want accreditors to include the cost of higher education as an accountability measure, want public access to all evaluative reports by peer reviewers, and want colleges and universities to do more to align their academic programs with the broader marketplace. The leading legislative bill on this comes via Senators Bennet (D-CO) and Rubio (R-FL): “The Higher Education Innovation Act creates a five-year pilot program for an alternative, outcomes-based process to access federal student financial aid. Through this process, students would have the ability to use federal student aid funds to attend institutions that offer high-quality, innovative, and effective programs and have a proven track record of successful student outcomes.”

**Does a model that intends to provide oversight of colleges and universities, a model from the 19th century, still function today while still encouraging the development of new kinds of institutions?**

**Innovation.** Does a model that intends to provide oversight of colleges and universities, a model from the 19th century, still function today while still encouraging the development of new kinds of institutions? The critics in this camp suggest that regional accreditors are inherently conservative, keeping new models for delivering higher education from gaining traction. This group wants differing standards that might better support new ideas and provide space for new kinds of higher education to flourish. This critique is rooted in a belief that the current accreditation model is holding back innovation. The previously noted legislation by Senators Lee, Bennet, and Rubio intends to bring competition into the accrediting space, hopefully ensuring that this encourages more innovative approaches without a corresponding increase in waste, fraud, or abuse of federal dollars.

But the criticism in this category is not all one-sided. Some complain that accreditors haven’t done enough to make the playing field safe when innovative models are involved. These critics point to the support accreditors have given to the for-profit sector over the last forty years. Senators Warren (D-MA), Durbin (D-IL), and Schatz (D-HI) introduced a bill in the last session of Congress, the Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act of 2016 (AREAA): “The legislation would take steps to reduce student debt and to protect students and taxpayers by reforming higher education accreditation and strengthening the Education Department’s ability to hold accreditors accountable.” This bill would enable the Secretary of Education to establish brightline standards for a number of outcomes and accountability measures, including retention, graduation and course completion rates, cohort default and loan re-payment rate, transfer rate, student earnings after graduation, job placement, professional and vocational certification, and licensing

examination pass rate, among other measures. The bill also would prohibit peer review within the same region of the accreditor and place additional burdens on for-profit institutions.

With this as background, what is the likely future for accreditation, especially for regional accreditation? Projecting out past the current level of political chaos that is Washington, DC these days is difficult. Nevertheless, certain elements appear possible. More critiques and challenges to accreditation are likely, even beyond the current level and type of criticism. A couple of examples come to mind:

- ▲ The increasing complexity of higher education operations and academic programs appear to need both support and close examination. Do current accrediting models adequately support the level of innovation needed in this complex environment?
- ▲ The current regional accrediting models were created with a certain amount of ‘in real life’ geographic proximity in mind, rather than by institutional type, size, or mission. While there may be something to be said for honoring historic models, existing and future educational delivery modalities do not depend on geographic proximity. Certain of the regional accreditors spend significant amount of effort on accrediting institutions outside the U.S., including both outreach efforts by U.S. institutions and other higher education institutions wholly operated in other countries. These two elements are likely targets for further scrutiny about how the regional accreditors operate.
- ▲ As evaluations are made about the operations and outcomes of institutions of higher learning, the demands for making these evaluations fully public will continue. It is likely that regional accreditors will find ways to accede to this demand. Access to accrediting decision-making documents is likely to be a future challenge with the extremes of providing summaries on the one hand or warehouses of dense documents on the other, both likely being rejected as unresponsive to public need.

Each of these likely areas for further challenge to regional accreditation suggests that this is a great time to be involved with your regional accreditor. Learn what drives decision-making and understand how your voice can affect legislation in this area.



An educator for more than 40 years, **Dr. Gary Wheeler** began his higher education career as a faculty member at Miami University where he also served as chief academic officer of the Miami Middletown regional campus and as scholar-in-residence for Miami’s Center on American and World Cultures. He served as the president at Michigan’s Gogebic Community College and Glen Oaks Community College. Dr. Wheeler is the author of nine books and more than 30 professional papers, book chapters, and book reviews. He is active in higher education accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission, where he has served as a peer reviewer, team chair, and on several key commission taskforces. He currently serves as a member of the HLC Board of Trustees. He also has been active as a consultant for strategic planning, change management, leadership, and the effective uses of technology in higher learning. Dr. Wheeler received his undergraduate degree from the University of Connecticut, master’s degree from Arizona State University, and doctoral degree from the Union Institute and University.