The Role of Regional and Specialized Accreditation in Program Evaluation and the Impact of Online Education

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# Abstract

The paper investigates the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation. The paper will further investigate how the growth of distance education has impacted this role. The paper will identify criteria for program evaluation from the regional accreditation commissions. Accreditation assures quality in higher education. The program review process provides a means for institutions to assess quality. The complexity of delivery methods has presented a challenge for accreditors. The regional accrediting commissions have been placed under pressure by the federal government to assure the integrity, quality, and effectiveness of online coursework. The regional commissions have defined standards for distance education through guidelines, recommendations, and commitments.

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The Role of Regional and Specialized Accreditation in Program Evaluation and the Impact of Online Education

# Introduction

The practice of accreditation through regional and specialized accreditation provides a means to assess and ensure academic quality. The system allows independent associations to develop criteria in which to measure quality. A peer review process evaluates institutions by comparing them to the quality standards. In the past, the focus has been the evaluation of brick and mortar institutions. As the education landscape has changed with the rapid growth of online education, regional and specialized accreditation organizations must now consider online education.

Academic quality is of utmost concern as institutions of higher education seek to improve student learning. Accrediting bodies require institutions to demonstrate the use of an effective assessment plan which provides information leading to continuous improvement of teaching and learning. The mission of these organizations is to promote quality in higher education. One such accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, requires schools to show evidence of evaluation and assessment by asking “Does the institution have well-defined procedures for continuously evaluating the quality of online programs and courses, and are these integrated into the institution’s mechanisms for documenting continuous self-improvement?” (Dayton & Vaughn, 2007, p. 478).

# Statement of the Problem

How has the growth of online education influenced the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation? Many educators doubt the quality, effectiveness and means of assessment for online courses. Dayton & Vaughn (2007) found countless resources which offer opinions on the characteristics of effective online courses, but few provided a comprehensive framework for defining quality. The resources were not authoritative, simple to understand, or comprehensive in defining quality. This study sought to explain the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation, specifically, to see how the role has changed with the growth of online programs.

# Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation. The focus was on understanding how this role has changed with the evolution of online education. According to Dayton and Vaughn (2007), many colleges and universities have “failed to adopt quality standards and assessment practices for online instructional design and delivery” (p.475). Accreditation is beneficial to many stakeholders interested in a program’s quality including students, faculty, administration, employers, and alumni (Boraiko, Zey, and Greife, 2010).

# Questions

The paper addressed the following questions:

1. What is the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation?
2. Do regional and specialized accrediting agencies have specific criteria for program evaluation?
3. How has online education impacted the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation?

# Delimitations

Only literature published within the past five years was included in the literature review for online learning in order to be responsive to current trends. Research focused on the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation.

# Significance of Study

This study is significant as the findings will help explain the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation. The study will further describe the impact of the rapid growth of online education on accreditation and program evaluation. The study adds to the scholarly research and literature in the field by examining the relationship between program evaluation and accreditation.

# Methods

The literature review was compiled after an extensive review of literature available through the Marshall University library and the University of Charleston library. The Marshall University library, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and the U. S. Department of Education were utilized by selecting “article databases” and “education” from the search resources screen. Various terms were entered individually and in pairs. Search criteria included “program review”, “accreditation”, and “online learning”. A similar process was utilized to review information available through the University of Charleston. Articles which were not available through Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) were located by Google search and through the library at University of Charleston.

# Review of the Literature

The literature review explores the three themes identified in the research questions: accreditation, online learning, and program review. The relationship between accreditation and program review and the impact of online education is illustrated in the literature.

## Accreditation

Accreditation “is a means to assure and improve higher education quality” (CHEA, 2008, p. 1) serving two basic functions: quality assurance and quality improvement (Brittingham, O’Brien, & Alig, 2008). Institutions receiving accreditation exhibit instructional, student support, and services which ensure student success. Accreditation “establishes the external validation of quality that external constituents demand” (Gunderson et al., 2010, p. 45). Eaton (2012) describes accreditation as “a form of self-regulation—professionals reviewing professionals and academics reviewing academics” (p. 8). “Accreditation provides assurance of the institutional integrity, quality, and effectiveness. . .More importantly, accreditation is the system by which the internal community of an institution evaluates itself and plans for improvement in quality and effectiveness” (ACCJC/WASC, 1990, p. 1). The process of accreditation is one of reflective review which includes self-study and peer review (Ruben, 2007).

Growing public concerns with the global competiveness of higher education and the quality of college graduates has caused the federal and state governments to regulate institutional and program quality. Accreditors address accountability concerns through inspection of an institution’s review processes (Ewell, 2012). Through the review process, accreditation provides quality assurance to the public and provides information to institutions which will aid in the improvement of educational programs.

Accreditation provides great benefits to stakeholders including students, faculty, and administrators. The specialized business accreditation, AACSB, The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, is a prestigious distinction awarded to top business schools. Graduates of AACSB schools receive a leading education and are more competitive in the marketplace. Faculty are regarded as leaders in their field and make more money at AACSB institutions. Business schools with AACSB accreditation are marketed as the highest quality which attract more students and those of higher quality. Therefore, institutions see higher enrollments and increased endowments (Gunderson et. al., 2010).

Neither the federal or state government grant accreditation to schools and colleges. The process of accreditation is managed by nongovernmental organizations. Accrediting bodies fall into the following categories, regional associations authorized to accredit entire institutions, national associations which accredit entire institutions based upon curricular, religious, vocation, or method of instructional delivery, and specialized associations which accredit specific programs or disciplines (Pina, 2010).

Rather than overseeing higher education, the federal government entered into a public-private partnership with accrediting organizations to oversee academic quality (Eaton, 2012). The 1965 Higher Education Act made accreditation a requirement for eligibility of financial aid (Kelderman, 2011). As non-governmental bodies, accrediting agencies accept some federal oversight (Easton, 2012). Accrediting agencies function as the federal government’s regulators and are the “gatekeepers” and “keymasters” to federal funding (Graca, 2009, p. 647). Nearly 90 billion is invested annually in federal financial aid (Brittingham, 2009). Eaton (2012) proclaims “accreditation in the United States is one of the most powerful examples of successful nongovernmental oversight of a major social institution in any society” (p. 9).

Accrediting agencies use specific standards to review faculty, student support services, finance and facilities, curricula, and student learning outcomes (CHEA, 2008, p. 1). Institutions successfully meeting or exceeding the standards are awarded the “accredited status”. The status encourages confidence, permits mobility for students seeking transferability from school to school, demonstrates the program meets widely accepted standards and provides access to financial assistance (CHEA, 2008, p. 1). Accreditation teams are comprised of volunteers from peer institutions (Kelderman, 2011).

Head and Johnson (2011) advise institutions to consider accreditation standards as a series of good practice statements. If institutions conduct audits or reviews relative to the accreditation standards, institutional effectiveness will become part of a natural process.

Guidelines have been developed by higher education organizations to serve as a resource to guide distance education initiatives. The regional commissions have defined standards for distance education through guidelines, recommendations, and commitments (Seok, 2007). The commissions created the following three general requirements for distance education. Distance education must be part of the educational system curriculum, be designed to meet the institution’s academic responsibilities and standardized based on existing general accreditation standards, and be evaluated for accreditation in the same manner as any other part of the learning experience (Seok, 2007).

## Online Learning

As the online learning modality gains popularity, Chapman and Henderson (2010) declare institutions must demonstrate evidence of quality instruction and successful learning in the online classroom. Integrating effective assessment methods and strategies into online curricula will present a challenge to educators. Despite the rapid growth of online education, a consistent minority of academic leaders believe the quality of online instruction is not equal to courses delivered face-to-face with nearly one-third believing student learning outcomes for online classes are inferior to classroom courses. There has not been a substantial change in the opinions of academic leaders on academic quality and student learning outcomes over the past nine years.

Oliver (as cited in Ireland, Correia, & Griffin, 2009) states:

As more and more universities seek to use e-learning as a mode of delivery for their units and courses, and as more and more they are being held accountable for the quality of the services they provide, the need grows for accepted standards and benchmarks against which performance can be judged. (p. 250)

Online education has become a priority for colleges and universities across the country with 6.1 million students taking at least one online class during fall 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2011). According to a study conducted by Allen and Seaman sponsored by The Sloan Consortium (2011), online enrollment is growing ten times that of the rate in all higher education (p. 11). According to the study, 65% of all chief academic officers see online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy.

This new learning environment allows institutions of higher education to reach students anytime and anywhere. Learning is convenient and accessible. Online learning makes educational opportunities available regardless of geographic, time, or other constraints. With a growing number of institutions choosing on-line as an instructional delivery method, “inspecting” resources invested and processes employed alone is no longer practical. Accreditors now focus on direct evidence of student learning (Ewell, 2012).

The Department of Education (2009) reports classes with online learning on average produce stronger student learning outcomes than do classes with solely face-to-face instruction. However, a majority of college faculty rated online learning as inferior to classroom learning in a recent large poll (Pina, 2010).

According to Mayadas, Bourne, and Bacsich (2009), online learning has drawn the attention of state and federal governments and accreditors. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 contained several provisions addressing the role of online learning within the U.S. higher education landscape. According to Mayadas, Bourne, and Bacsich (2009), the latest amendment to the HEA shows there is residual discomfort with asynchronous learning. One provision requires institutions to have a process in place to ensure the student registered for the course is the student completing the course and receiving the academic credit. Accrediting bodies have been charged to enforce this requirement by Congress. The emergence of online education has affected accreditors as they must show a difficult balance between protecting consumers from diploma mills and adapting to the needs of this growing market which has successfully met the needs of millions of adults (2009).

The six regional accrediting bodies adopted in 2001, and later revised in 2006, a common set of broad standards which would determine if a college is well suited to offer online courses. The standards would identify best practices for online education (Kelderman, 2011).

With the growth of online education, the amount of federal aid used to pay for distance education through grants and the G. I. Bill dramatically increased. The amount of federal money paying for online education caused concern for Congress. Congress began to place pressure on accreditors to make certain schools were not placing profit ahead of education quality (2011).

Bowen, Chingos, Lack, and Nygren (2013) found little evidence on learning outcomes for students receiving instruction online. The team used random assignment to isolate the effect of learning online from other factors. The study found online course delivery cannot deliver improved educational outcomes across the board.

## Program Review

As institutions seek accreditation, “program reviews have proved useful for decades in assuring the quality of academic programs, and demonstrating accountability” (Pitter, 2007, p. 5). Conducting a program review is a “critical element in the way a college prepares for an accreditation visit” (ASCCC, 2009, p. 34). Program reviews provide a means of assessing accountability, institutional effectiveness. A study on the purpose of program reviews in 39 states by Moon-Hee Lee (1991) found program reviews allowed institutions to assess and enhance program quality.

Bresciani (2006) describes program review as a self-reflective process where institutions must answer the question, “how does this program contribute to student learning in this institution?” (p. 10). Program reviews are “intentionally reflective and purposefully planned” (p. 23).

Bers (2011) defines program review as “a type of evaluation of an instructional, institutional support, student service, or administrative program, department, or unit” (p. 63-64). Program review may be conducted by academic or nonacademic departments within an institution. Beckwith, Silverstone, and Bean (2010) believe academic vice-presidents, deans, department chairs, program faculty, and students should be involved in a program review.

A program review includes a process and a product. The process involves how the review is conducted. The product includes the report and supporting evidence. According to Bers (2011) reviews support institutional planning and decision making by determining the need for academic programs. Program reviews maintain and enhance quality and assist with developing and administering budgets. Program reviews provide justification for the elimination of programs without sufficient demand or quality or are not cost-effective.

There is pressure for education institutions to demonstrate value and show improvement (Leimer, 2010). Program reviews allow institutions to “meet external requirements and demands for accountability” (p. 65). Reviews may be conducted on a regular schedule while specialized accreditation require institutions to conduct a self-study considering the accrediting agency’s criteria and guidelines. A program review allows institutions to evaluate institutional effectiveness. Institutional effectiveness allows institutions to measure and ensure the quality of academic and support programs and administrative functions (Bers, 2011).

Program review allows institutions to gather processes and information for accreditation teams (Gunderson et al., 2010). Accreditors expect institutions to consider program reviews when making budget allocations (Pitter, 2007).

A program review may include:

* Description of the program
* Mission statement and explanation
* Faculty, staff, and departmental information
* Budget data
* Curriculum (courses offered, enrollment and number of sections, student success)
* Facilities information
* Program activities
* Student demographics
* Student achievement data
* Student learning outcomes data
* Grades
* Withdrawal rates
* Needs assessment
* Requests for additional funding
* Assessment of present and projected staffing needs
* Equipment list(s)
* Program values and effectiveness information
* Student surveys
* Employer surveys (ASCCC, 2009).

A program review involves several stages including 1) planning and orientation, 2) self-study, 3) selecting evaluators, 4) site visits, 5) reports, 6) action plans and follow-up (Pitter, 2007). Bresciani (2006) advises institutions to incorporate flexibility in program review requirements to allow programs to incorporate sections to accommodate regional and specialized accreditation requirements.

In a survey of members of the International Leadership Association, Ritch (2013) found participants supported formalized program review. Members felt formalized program review would have a positive impact on leadership programs by enhancing legitimacy and credibility. Members expressed concerns with formalized program review for decreasing program creativity and autonomy, skepticism for the ability of a program review to evaluate the leadership field, bureaucracy, and ethical concerns. Ritch (2012) believes institutions should be creative by developing unique programs which exhibit autonomy through institutional missions and resources. A program review model should be tested across various program contexts before it is formally applied. In a program review, realistic and relevant outcomes should be obvious and unnecessary outcomes and data collections should be eliminated.

During a program review, in preparation for a reaccreditation visit, California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) discovered there was no relationship between outcomes and the assessment of those outcomes. The knowledge prompted CSUMB to create guidelines to direct the revision of assessment plans. Further insight and training led faculty to “design meaningful, sustained, and systematic assessment of student learning that is analyzed and mobilized to enhance curriculum and pedagogy” (Tinsley et al., 2010, p. 24). The program review process prompted and guided efforts which helped CSUMB improve programs by creating a clear path to program assessment.

In preparation for a program review for recognition by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), The University of Arkansas at Little Rock found there were eight specific components and characteristics which foreign language teacher education programs must demonstrate and should be found within the narrative of the program review. In addition to these components and characteristics, there are six content standards with ACTFL/NCATE. The University of Arkansas found the following considerations essential to a successful program review process: 1) engaging all faculty in the process, 2) establishing a culture of oral proficiency, 3) educating faculty on standards, 4) revising curricula, 5) preparing the eight assessments for the ACTFL/NCATE program review, 6) utilizing technology to track data generated from the eight assessments (McAlpine & Dhonau, 2007).

# Conclusions

## Question 1

What is the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation?

Accreditation prompts program reviews by assisting institutions in the preparation for accreditation reviews.

According to Pitter (2007),

Program reviews serve an important function in assuring the quality and continuous improvement of academic programs. As such, they are now an expected component in demonstrating institutional effectiveness for regional accreditation. Many states mandate such reviews for their institutions of higher education (p. 1).

Accreditation assures quality in higher education. The program review process provides a means for institutions to assess quality. Program review provides an indicator of institutional effectiveness and integrity for accreditors (ASCCC, 2009). Ewell (2012) proclaims the “process of review against defined standards constitutes the core of any accreditation process” (p. 2).

While the purposes of program review and accreditation are similar, a difference is with the control of the standards and validation process. With accreditation, the accrediting body defines the standards while the college defines the standards for program review (ASCCC, 2009).

## Question 2

Do regional and specialized accrediting agencies have specific criteria for program evaluation?

Accrediting agencies use specific standards to review institutions and assess quality. As institutions define their own program review process, Bresciani (2006) recommends considering the key role of accreditation requirements. Bresciani describes the program review process as “a delicate balance between the accrediting agency’s expectations and the university’s adaptation to make the required process meaningful and manageable” with institutions “balancing the perceived ‘stick’ of accreditors and the ‘carrot’ of the value gained from doing the work well, where decisions actually inform decisions for improvement” (p. 17). While each regional accreditation agency identifies specific criterion, there is a relationship between institutional effectiveness and accreditation (Head & Johnson, 2011).

## Question 3

How has online education impacted the role of regional and specialized accreditation in program evaluation?

The complexity of delivery methods has presented a challenge for accreditors to measure quality with the ability to obtain quantitative standards based on resources and processes (Ewell, 2012). Specific provisions in the Higher Education Act (HEA) specifically address online learning. As the “gatekeepers” of quality education in the United States, accrediting bodies have been placed under pressure by the federal government to assure the integrity, quality, and effectiveness of online coursework. With the growth of online learning, Seok (2007) believes program evaluation will ensure high quality instruction in distance education.

# **Discussion and Implications**

The study clearly showed the relationship between program review and accreditation. The program review process is an integral part of the accreditation process. The explosion of online course delivery in higher education has caused accreditors to create policy to address online learning. Inconsistencies are present between faculty and student beliefs concerning the effectiveness of online course delivery.

Institutions should embrace program review as the primary method to assess and enhance program quality and institutional effectiveness. Program evaluations serve as an essential component in preparation for accreditation reviews. An intensive review of the standards identified by an institution’s accrediting organization, will allow the institution to be prepared to undergo evaluation. Institutions engaging in or planning to provide online learning must understand the specific provisions in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 which address online learning.

Implications for Further Research

As there was little research on the changing role of accreditation with the entry of online education, additional research should be done to further understand how regional and specialized accreditation have evolved to ensure quality in online education. Further research on the demands of accreditors in the evaluation of online learning and how these demands have prompted action on the part of institutions would provide valuable insight for institutions engaged in online learning. For future research, how have successful institutions demonstrated integrity, quality, and effectiveness in online learning?

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