When Things Fall Apart: Before and After the Loss of Accreditation

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Abstract: Case study research shows historically Black colleges, religious institutions, rural colleges, community colleges, and for-profit institutions are most likely to lose institutional or professional accreditation. Students affected are typically those who struggle the most to stay in school. The poster session profiles the serious challenges involved with keeping accreditation and offers suggestions of best practices to help institutions stay out of danger.

Accreditation and Why It Matters

Accreditation helps assure students, educators and the community at large that an institution maintains rigorous programs that result in relevant student learning. It also makes a determination about whether the institution’s strategic plan will allow for continued success. Accreditation involves a review of a large body of evidence; typically, there is peer review of curriculum, teacher qualifications, student experiences, institutional organizational structure and finances, leadership, community engagement and other facts. The most important outcome of the process is a determination of whether an institution’s graduates have gained sufficient knowledge and skills to enter their chosen professions (Murray, 2012).

In the ideal, accreditation is helpful and not punitive. It helps educators build on institutional and programmatic strengths and minimize weaknesses. Accreditation helps address barriers to success faced by students. Low-income, first-generation and minority group students are among the most at risk who must be forefront in the minds of accreditors as they do their work (Barber & McNair, 2017).

Title IV of the Higher Education Act prevents students from obtaining federal student loans and grants through a college or university that lacks regional or national accreditation (Solnik, 2016). In this role, accreditation helps prevent students from being ripped off by institutions that would seek only to collect tuition and not deliver educational value. Trump University, for example, was a well-publicized but non-accredited institution that used the word ‘university’ as a euphemism (Anderson, 2016). There have been many other such institutions; on a regular basis, news organizations report on non-accredited educational institutions that fail, leaving students and their communities in the lurch.

Institutional Accreditation

The underlying assumption of institutional accreditation is that the educational institution actually has education as its first priority, with strong leadership, financial stability, relevant curriculum, and adequate services to help students complete their academic programs and transition to the workplace. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes 21 regional and nine national accrediting agencies that may accredit the totality of an institution’s academic programs (Database of accredited postsecondary institutions and programs, 2017).

Despite the best intentions of these agencies and the Department of Education, the accreditation process is not objective. The process is carried out at the campus level by reviewers who bring their own preconceptions and biases to the review. The findings of the site visit committee are upheld or turned down by a higher-level panel that did not participate in the site visit and may have its own agenda and concerns.

Even the clearest set of standards cannot be applied uniformly because every institution, its student
population and community of service is unique. There are many opportunities for misinterpretation, conflict of interest and lack of transparency of processes (Murray, 2012).

**Professional Accreditation**

Professional accreditation occurs at the program level. It allows an academic program to demonstrate curricular and instructional excellence and professional relevancy. Professional accreditation is common among schools of architecture, business, communication, engineering, health professions and theology. As many as 50% of teacher preparation programs use accreditation to demonstrate “evidence of the rigor and quality of their programs” (Hasbun & Rudolph, 2016).

Professional accreditation requirements are “burdensome” both in terms of costs and personnel resources required to carry out accrediting agency expectations (Coupland, 2011, p. 211). The burden is especially heavy for small programs that lack financial or personnel resources to commit to preparing a lengthy written self-study and requisite site visit every few years.

**Absence of Research and Scholarship**

The body of research on educational accreditation is small. Much of what exists is research on the history and development of accreditation, ‘how to’ articles and policy reports. Very little of the published research focuses on current issues with accreditation itself (Fester, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2012). Accreditation is rarely the focus of scholarly research, and articles in trade publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* often polarize the discussion by taking viewpoint that is either that of Pollyanna or Chicken Little.

Institutional self-study reports, accreditation team visit reports and other documentation is rarely available online. Making this information freely available would build transparency. But at the same time, many administrators and faculty would view the public sharing of their organizational weaknesses and limitations as an airing of dirty laundry.

There is no body of scholarship that demonstrates professional accreditation makes for a stronger program, or that students are better prepared for the workplace by earning a degree in a professionally accredited program (Swanson, 2017).

**Institutions at Risk – and Risk Factors**

*Unfortunately, many minority-serving institutions are crippled with a lack of financial resources and weak administrative infrastructures and are inundated with students requiring remedial education. In other words, minority-serving institutions are tasked with educating the most underserved students and are required to produce better results with less resources, and still they are evaluated using the same accreditation standards as prestigious public flagship and private institutions* (Fester, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2012, p. 816).

The few studies that have focused on accreditation and institutional risk have found historically Black colleges and universities (HCBUs), religious institutions, rural colleges, community colleges, and for-profit institutions are among the most likely to struggle to earn and then maintain institutional or professional accreditation.

HBCUs, in particular, are in “a fight for survival,” according to Dr. John Rudley, President Emeritus of Southern University (Rudley, 2017). Revolving-door leadership, poor organizational structures and lack of financial support have resulted in a long history of dysfunction. Even though HBCU presidents tend to see accreditation in a more favorable light than presidents of White institutions, HBCUs “receive harsher sanctions from regional accreditors than do other institutions” (Fester, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2012, p. 813). HCBUs comprise 13% of the membership of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, but they represent half of the SACS members that have lost accreditation in recent years.
Religious institutions also face a heavy burden. In 2008, Donahoo and Lee reviewed information on 284 accreditation decisions involving religious colleges and universities. The authors found that accreditation agency reviews were inconsistent. Religious institutions were consistently evaluated more harshly; they were more than twice as likely to receive a harsher penalty and three times as likely to lose accreditation than a similar nonsectarian institution. The authors concluded that “simply having a religious affiliation does increase the likelihood that an institution will receive a negative outcome as the result of an accreditation review” (2008, p. 334).

Colleges and universities found in compliant with accreditation guidelines can close without any warning, such as in the case of for-profit Sage College that shut its doors two weeks before final exams in 2017 (McDonald, 2017).

Some other recent examples of ‘when things fell apart’ include:

- Corinthian Colleges, a for-profit institution with more than a hundred campuses throughout the U.S. and Canada closed in 2015 after its license to operate was suspended by the Ontario provincial government. Corinthian was accused of charging exorbitant tuition and falsifying its job placement rates (Corinthian Shutdown, 2015).

- Paul Quinn College, the only HCBU in Texas, shut down in 2009 amidst financial problems and “unsanitary, hazardous conditions” that included a lack of hot water in dormitories (Baylor, 2010, p. 32).

- Barber-Scotia College in North Carolina lost its institutional accreditation because it failed to provide accurate information to its accrediting agency. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools found that more than two-dozen Barber-Scotia students were allowed to receive degrees without completing all academic requirements (Barber-Scotia decides not to appeal lost accreditation, 2004).

- Morris Brown College, Atlanta-based HCBU, lost accreditation in 2003 after its president was found guilty of embezzling federal student loan dollars (Savage, 2017). Morris Brown kept its doors open, though it has done so with fewer than half a dozen faculty members. Students’ inability to apply for federal financial aid prevents the institution from growing, even though “recent alumni say that they have not had any securing opportunities once they graduate from the college” (Savage, 2017, p. 16).

When Things Fall Apart

[Colleges under the most pressure tend to be saddled with a mix of problems like financial issues, academic programs that don’t stand out, declining enrollment and difficulty fund-raising (Selzner, 2017, November, para. 20)]

There is no national tracking system to identify colleges and universities that run into accreditation problems and close their doors – or close their doors because their administrators saw no potential for surviving a future accreditation review. At least four prominent small colleges, two of which were religious institutions, announced their closings in 2017 alone (Selzner, 2017, November). In 2011, Harvard Business School professor Clay Christensen predicted half of all U.S. universities would close or go bankrupt by 2026, and he recently reinforced that prediction (Lederman, 2017).

Disproportionately, the students hurt the most when an institution loses its accreditation are Black, rural, poor, or all three. These students tend to be the most disenfranchised learners who were already the most at risk for completing a college degree (Barber & McNair, 2017).
Just as there is no nationwide tracking system for college closures, there is no system to track what happens to the abandoned students. At least one news account suggested “thousands may be giving up on college altogether, exactly when the country is falling behind on its goal to increase the proportion of the population with degrees” (Krupnick, 2016, para. 5). Krupnick claimed almost half of federal student loan recipients whose colleges closed between 2008 and 2011 received no loan forgiveness and didn’t take out any further loans within at least the next three years. He concluded that “those students have been left in debt with little or nothing to show for it” (Krupnick, 2016, para. 7).

Best Practice Recommendations

Because there is no one size fits all standard to guide academic programs through the accreditation process, “[M]any look to the literature or to the accreditation experience provided by other institutions as a means to assist their own accreditation journey” (Hasbun & Rudolph, 2016).

A review of the literature and the case studies of colleges and universities challenged by accreditation reveals six areas of concern that should be foremost in the minds of administrators:

✔ Leadership

To be strong enough to earn and retain accreditation, colleges and universities need solid institutional leadership. Stable leadership is challenged by tight budgets, interference from government regulators, “over-reaching boards and even well-meaning but meddling community members” (Rudley, 2017, para. 6). Selzner (2017, June) reported that a 2016 study showed the average tenure of a university president was 6.5 years, and that length of time has been in decline for the past decade. Presidents and other top administrators must be chosen carefully and given the resources to work effectively in a difficult environment.

✔ Financial Efficiency

Colleges and universities that survive are those that have a financial strategic plan that allows for efficiency through strong endowments, sufficient revenue to meet current and future expenses, and reasonable tuition. One or more academic programs shouldn’t be “cash cows” to support other programs that, on their own, would struggle (Coupland, 2011). There might be a good argument that institutions financially sound enough to be accredited also are financially sound enough to provide the resources essential to the success of all students. A recent study, for example, found students attending unaccredited law schools in California were three times more likely to drop out than students attending California State Bar accredited programs (Song, Kim, & Poindexter, 2015).

✔ Financial Accountability

Institutions that cannot document where the money is being spent are on a slippery slope, not only with their own stakeholders but with the Department of Education and accreditation bodies. At least anecdotally, it seems more often than not – institutions that lose accreditation do so in part because of financial mismanagement, theft, or excessive debts (McDonald, 2017; Savage, 2017; Seltzer, 2017, November; Solnik, 2016). Rhonda Baylor recommends colleges and universities establish “monthly audits prior to the reaccreditation process” so that if problems come up, there will be sufficient early warning to make corrections (Baylor, 2010, p. 37).

✔ Appropriate Tuition

Students, prospective students and their families are more concerned than ever with high tuition. Americans owe almost $1.5 trillion in student loan debt, and the average 2016 graduate has $37,172 in student loan debt (U.S. student loan debt statistics, 2018). Accreditation agencies are concerned with costs as they relate to student recruitment and retention; likewise, accreditation agencies want to make sure students aren’t bearing an unfair proportion of the financial support for the institution itself.
Stated another way: “The role of accreditation is to assure that the standards that uniquely define institutions and programs are adhered to so that their increasingly high costs produce solid value” (Murray, 2012, p. 53).

**Partnership with Neighboring Institutions**

In today’s competitive higher education marketplace, colleges and universities may be more inclined to complete with neighboring institutions than to partner with them. This could be a mistake. Common academic and non-academic issues have the potential to be resolved more easily and at less cost if institutions are willing to strategically map out cooperative relationships. Ultimately, “there could be less duplication of efforts for humans to perform and [less] overuse of financial resources in order to carry out the vision and mission of the institutions or universities,” according to Hillard (2012, p. 64). If the goal is to efficiently turn out well educated graduates who can work effectively individually and in teams, it would seem appropriate to partner thoughtfully with other institutions as needed.

**Consultation with Experienced Businesspeople**

University administrators can easily develop tunnel vision about campus opportunities and challenges. Governing boards may not understand accreditation issues or be able to ensure accountability (Schexnider, 2012). For that reason, experts recommend that institutional administrators regularly seek the guidance of business experts. The president needs to know how to surround him/herself with good outside counselors and an atmosphere of sharing where strong, relevant ideas are recognized, brought to the table and acted upon (Bankewitz, 2016).

**Conclusion**

There are many challenges involved with pursuing and retaining accreditation. In most cases, a college or university cannot be recognized by government authorities without holding regional or national institutional accreditation – even though some institutions that lose accreditation still manage to stay in business (Savage, 2017; Edward Waters loses accreditation after plagiarism scandal, 2004). While professional accreditation is not a requirement in most subject areas, it is in many. There are other fields in which it is not needed, but is recognized as a point of pride for the academic program that holds it.

Whether or not a college and its programs are accredited, the institution and its programs should act as if they are accredited (Swanson, 2017). Administrators should be attentive to the six areas of concern that have tripped up many colleges and universities and learn from the mistakes of others for whom things fell apart.

**References**


