Community College Accreditation: The Bittersweet Challenge

Heather Rae Hodgeson

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It seems everyone and everything has something to prove these days. Independent governments are accountable to their citizens and to the global society, companies and organizations must prove their potential to customers and stockholders, even a business as innocuous as a small-town candy store has vigorous standards to uphold. And it is sometimes bittersweet. The concept of accountability in higher education has grown more complex with changes in society, broader access to college, rising public expectations, and the emergence of competition, and marketing among postsecondary institutions (Keeling, 2008). With this in mind, the importance of new, improved, and continual means of achieving such accountability is paramount. However, it is not without challenge. One of the means by which higher education institutions are measured is through accreditation. In the north central region of America, community colleges face various challenges in maintaining accreditation under the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) criteria during a time of increasing federal regulation of higher education, elevated demands for accountability and transparency by policymakers and the general public, and a critical student outlook on the value of a degree. In order to understand the challenges associated with accreditation, we must first understand what it is, and why it has increased over the years.

The assessment culminating in accredited status is a reliable indication of the value and quality of educational institutions and programs to students and the public (CHEA, 2010). This external standard is what gives the process credit to begin with. The external standards represent a consensus of educators on generally accepted practices in areas such as governance, finance, curriculum, (including admission and graduation requirements), faculty and staff qualifications, student support services, buildings and equipment, library holdings, and community services

(Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). By measuring itself against a set of external criteria or markers, the community college appraises the quality of its programs, services, and resources, recognizes areas where it either meets or exceeds standards, and those areas in need of improvement or remediation (Guerriero, 2014). The status of accreditation also qualifies the college to for federal financial aid. An increasing amount of federal monies being allocated for education is one of the causes for the increase in accreditation standards. Such achievement of accreditation status is done through the employment of accrediting agencies, and may fall under the responsibility of Administrative services or executive governance, depending on the auspices of the institution. Regardless of which area of community college organization accreditation is assigned, it certainly affects all four; executive, administrative, student affairs, and academic affairs. The HLC's standards for accreditation extend to every facet of community college, as is evidenced by their core competency standards.

The HLC is one of six regional associations in the US and is, like all accrediting agencies, a non-governmental entity made up of commissioners elected from member educational institutions and at-large commissioners appointed to represent the general public (Guerriero, 2014). According to the US Department of Education (2014), accrediting agencies establish operating standards for educational and professional institutions and programs, determine the extent to which the standards are met, and publically announce their findings. The HLC has established five areas of criteria for accreditation as follows; the institution's mission, integrity— ethical and responsible conduct, teaching and learning—quality, resources, and support, teaching and learning—evaluation and improvement, and resources, planning, and institutional effectiveness.

The community college's mission must be clearly stated, have evidence to suggest it is understood and supported by employees, should address the importance of diversity, and must be implemented by a governance structure that embraces collaboration among administrators, faculty, staff, and students. This may present challenges to executive and governing bodies that may be charged with changing (possibly long-standing) missions to adapt to accreditation needs and standards. The proof of integrity extends itself to all four categories of community college governance. The institution must be clear, transparent, and accurate in all its communication with students and the public, particularly when disclosing information about the cost of attendance and the programs and services offered (Guerriero, 2014). This falls on academic affairs, in maintaining honest data and records pertaining to performance and program completion; on student affairs in correctly conveying the costs of attendance and individual program accreditation; executive or governance in proper transmittal of data and transparency to the public; and administrative services in monitoring faculty outcomes and programs for integrity.

Criteria three of HLC's standards revolves around teaching and learning, specifically the quality, resources, and support, thereof, and therefore heavily concerns the area of academic affairs. Component 3.B states that the institution must demonstrate the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills that are integral to its educational programs (HLC, 2014) which falls on the charge of faculty maintaining appropriate learning outcomes. Criterion 3.D applies to student support services in the demand to provide adequate support to address students' needs.

The fourth core component, similar to the third, addresses teaching and learning, but to the extent that they are evaluated and improved upon. Institutions must demonstrate responsibility for the quality of their programs, learning environments, and effectiveness for

student learning in a way that promotes continuous improvement (HLC, 2014). Components 4.A and 4.B address the responsibility and assessment of learning outcomes, which may be delegated to each department or program, but competency 4.C could pose particular challenge to the community college as a whole. Component 4.C requires institutions to demonstrate a commitment to improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in degree and certificate programs (HLC, 2014). This last component may prove especially challenging due to the extreme variance and inaccuracies associated with using retention, persistence, and completion rates as measuring sticks for success. Retention and persistence rates may be unduly altered by students transferring or completing a single course for application elsewhere, while completion rates may be negatively affected by students who decide to drop a course without officially doing so.

The fifth of HLC's criterion has much to do with the executive branch of community college as it demands the allocation of resources to support current educational programs and plans for future strengthening, as well as promoting effective leadership to support institutional missions, and mandates systematic planning to improve future performance (HLC, 2014). Community colleges and universities that have been accredited for at least ten years and have not had a change of control, structure, or organization in less than two years have opportunity for the "Open Pathway" model (HLC, 2014). This methodology may help appease some of the challenge to administration in achieve accreditation by providing a regular submission of in what is called an Evidence File. Because information is submitted on a regular, ongoing basis, it might alleviate some of the urgency sometimes associated with assessment during an accreditation year. However, institutions must additionally garner the HLC's approval of a Quality Initiative. This is

a development project geared toward demonstrating dedication to achieving excellence in

teaching, learning, or service (Guerriero, 2014).

Because accreditation is such a complex and comprehensive activity that is also

mandatory for all community colleges to participate in, community colleges employ faculty and

staff or sometimes even entire departments to the collection, analyzation, and publication of

information pertaining to maintaining accreditation. Depending on how an institution delegates

those responsibilities, more pressure may fall on executive governance or administrative services

to head up the initiative. Either way, accreditation is not without cost either, as it requires not

only time and attention, but substantial financial contribution as well. Accredited colleges pay

annual membership dues to their accrediting agencies based on size of enrollment and

institutional budget. The institution also must submit detailed yearly reports on top of creating

and organizing the comprehensive self-study every 7-10 years (Guerriero, 2014). This can

present a major challenge to many colleges that are already experiencing heavy fiscal cuts and

roadblocks.

In addition to the cost, Nunley, Bers, and Manning (2011) outline several more challenges

unique to community colleges in the possible presence of multiple missions, varying student

characteristics, absence of programs in baccalaureate majors, alternative learning venues, limited

professional support, low faculty interest and engagement, and large numbers of adjunct faculty.

Multiple missions of a college make it difficult to appease the first of HLC's guidelines referring

to an articulated mission statement. This presents administration with the tasks of narrowing and

refining multiple missions across a college to align with those purposes of the HLC. Student

characteristics play an important role in the challenge of community colleges to maintain

accreditation because the demographics are so varied. Not only is there an increasingly diverse

population of students from various backgrounds and circumstances, many of them are attempting to juggle work, family, and prior life commitments with going to college. In addition, students may transfer to a larger university without completing a degree, leave after completing a certificate or program without achieving a degree, or may be attending community college solely for continuing education or non-degree course interests. All these things affect the data that a colleges and their administration must produce in proving their institutional effectiveness. Because there is such variety involved with how, when, and by what means students attend community colleges, deciding on and tracking what constitutes institutional success can be a challenge.

Nunley, et al. (2011), make some recommendations to address these specific issues, such as focusing on the purpose of accreditation, creating a meaningful process to achieve assessment, asses with the goal to learn not simply fulfill a requirement, be realistic about faculty involvement, keep things simple, supply professional and logistical support, provide recurring professional development, and celebrate successes. These recommendations bring to light one of the major challenges in maintaining accreditation; faculty.

Many faculty members may not fully understand the value of accreditation or resent feeling perpetually "under the microscope" when they are already strained for time and money and doing their best to fulfill their multiple roles as educators at a community college. This presents a significant obstacle for administration in dealing with disgruntled faculty, those who do not comply well, or are not truly vested. There is also a large demographic of community college instructors (as well as administrators) who are on the cusp of retirement, and may view increasing accreditation standards as additional tedium that they simply need to endure for a few more years at a minimal involvement before retiring. This attitude, while it may skim by on

meeting accreditation requirements, will by no stretch achieve meaningful assessment or perpetuate the goal of student learning and improvement over time. This attitude of disengagement trickles down to the students as well.

Students and the public are increasingly demanding proof that higher education will deliver results in the form of a well-paying job (or any at all, for that matter), rather than just the transmission of knowledge. In light of an escalating number of free online courses, online training opportunities, and increasing competition among those in the job market who already have degrees, students may be more disinclined not only to stay in school, but to accurately and fully participate in assessment activities for accreditation. Student services face many challenges in meeting the needs of such a demographic. As mentioned above, the advent of online courses (and the increasing demand for them) adds yet another layer onto the challenge of maintaining HLC accreditation. Core component 3.A.3 specifically stresses that program quality and learning goals remain consistent across *all* modes of delivery and all locations, including distance delivery, online, etc. (HLC, 2014). Without face-to-face interaction with students, it may be difficult for faculty to ascertain certain direct methods of assessment and evaluation contributing to this core competency.

While the main charge of accreditation may lie with administrative affairs or even executive governance, it is plain to see that it affects the entire system. With an increasing amount of federal money at stake, the escalating price of higher education, the expectation of universal access, the press for greater public accountability, the nationalizing of public policy, and the demand created by electronic technology have all played a part in expanding the governmental role in accreditation (Eaton, 2012). In order to further address some of these issues, colleges would be well advised to strive for cost-effective means of assessment through

intentional design, using existing data if at all possible, and by assuring that the value of assessment is understood by every facet of organization (Swing & Coogan, 2010). With so much emphasis in today's society being placed on the verification of worth, it may seem as though the challenge of achieving accreditation is too high. But with the future of America's minds at stake, we must rise to the occasion, pushing past the perceived bitterness and hardship, to achieve sweet success of improved learning outcomes. And perhaps someday, it will prove much less of a challenge…like taking candy from a baby.

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