

Accreditation on the Edge: An Overview

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Sharing thoughts on accreditation is akin to trying to hit a moving target. Accreditation and accreditors are indispensable to the current way schools operate, but responsibilities and accountability seem to differ based on administration, discipline, and day.

While there may not be a shortage of books on accreditation being published these days, there is a dearth of good ones. *Accreditation on the Edge* fits into the rare category of providing something for everyone—those new to the subject as well as those who have been working with it for years. Edited by Susan Phillips (a professor of educational leadership and policy and of counseling psychology at the University at Albany) and Kevin Kinser (a professor of and

the head of Education Policy Studies at Pennsylvania State University), this collection of views represents a well-rounded treatise on the topic.

Phillips (who previously led the American Psychological Association Committee on Accreditation and the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity) and Kinser (a senior scientist at the Center for the Study of Higher Education) divide the contributions into four parts. The following table lists those parts, the articles beneath each, and—most importantly—the authors in order to give you an understanding of the perspectives of, and level of expertise held by, the contributors making this book what it is.

Part	Article	Author	Credentials
One: Perspectives of Accreditors	“Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement: Why and How Accreditation Works”	Sylvia Manning	President of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools from 2008 to 2014
	“Change in Higher Education Accreditation: The Perspectives of a National Accreditor”	Leah K. Matthews	Executive director of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission
	“The Evolving Context of Quality Assurance: A Perspective from Specialized and Professional Accreditation”	Joseph Vibert	Executive director of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA)
Two: Perspectives of Institutions	“Fixing a Broken Accreditation System: How to Bring Quality Assurance into the Twenty-First Century”	Annie D. Neal and Armand Alcabay	Neal is past president and cofounder of the Association of College Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) Alcabay is the vice president of trustee and legislative affairs at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni

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	“Innovation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education”	Michael B. Horn and Alana Dunagan	Horn is the cofounder of the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation Dunagan leads the Christensen Institute’s higher education research
	“Regulatory Experimentation, Accreditation, and Innovation: EQUIP as a Blueprint for the Future of Higher Education”	Paul J. LeBlanc	President of Southern New Hampshire University
Three: Perspectives of Policymakers	“Tensions in the Triad: The Evolution of Institutional Quality Assurance Policy”	Peter T. Ewell	President emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems
	“Managing Risk to Students and Taxpayers in Federal Financial Aid”	David A. Bergeron	Senior fellow for postsecondary education at American Progress (previously, 35 years at the U.S. Department of Education)
	“Accreditors as Policy Leaders: Promoting Transparency, Judgement, and Culture Change”	Jamienne S. Studley	Served as deputy undersecretary of the US Department of Education
	“Crossing Borders: Accreditation and Quality Assurance in a Globalized World”	Madeleine F. Green	Independent consultant and senior fellow at the International Association of Universities and NAFFSA: Association of International Educators
Four: Perspectives of Consumers	“The Employer Quest for the Quality College Graduate Recruit”	Edwin W. Koe	Director of research, public policy, and legislative affairs at the National Association of Colleges and Employers
	“Accreditation and Return on Investment”	Mark Schneider and Audrey Peek	Schneider is vice president and an institute fellow at American Institutes for Research Peek is a researcher at the American Institutes for Research
	“Does Accreditation Protect Students Effectively?”	Barmak Nassirian and Thomas L. Harnisch	Nassirian is director of federal policy with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities Harnisch is the director of state relations and policy analysis with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CO-EDITORS AND ANDREW KREIGHBAUM

(source: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/09/05/qa-uncertain-future-accreditation>)

Q: You write that the role of accreditors in higher ed has been debated for close to a century. What’s new about the latest controversies over the role of these organizations and how is the conversation being shaped by concerns over student loan debt and job outcomes for college graduates?

A: Yes, debates about accreditation are perennial. But in the past concerns about accreditation were mostly “inside baseball”—conversations about obscure points comprehensible only [to] those immersed in the weeds of accreditation policy. Now, however, we see accreditation wrapped up in a perfect storm of issues that go to the heart of the higher education enterprise, starting with the emergence of new providers and alternative delivery mechanisms, adding in the recent scandals in the for-profit sector and the increasing focus on consumer protection for students. Long-term trends in higher education finance also play a part, with a

reduction in public subsidies and increase in student debt transferring more responsibility and risk to students.

Taken together, this perfect storm of issues places accreditation on the front burner unlike any time since it first took on a major public policy role after World War II. There are now issues on the table that everyone can relate to. And they raise questions from stakeholders ranging from students to parents to lawmakers. How much higher ed do we want to pay for? Is it a good investment? Will graduates get good jobs? Will taxpayer dollars be safe? Is accreditation working as a guarantor of quality? Can it identify bad actors and take action against them? Does it have too much authority, or not enough?

Q: How have accreditors traditionally pushed for improvement at colleges and how has that work changed in response to demands for a bigger focus on student outcomes?

A: As you know, improvement has long been a sine qua non goal of accreditation—institutions strive to do better, and the self-study and peer-review process helps them do that. And, over the last two decades, there has been a significant push for institutions to assess (and improve) student learning outcomes. Now, however, the outcomes that are under discussion are less about student learning, per se. Now, they are more about things like graduation and default rates, or post graduation employment, and are applied in an evaluative and punitive manner. Poorer outcomes are now seen more as a sign of failure than as a baseline from which the institution should improve. In responding to these kinds of outcome accountability metrics, accreditors vary considerably: Some point out that they have already been using such post graduation indicators for years, while others try to place performance on those metrics in the larger context of what they know about a given institution, and yet others—the regionals, in particular—have begun to systematically study what level and combination of those metrics should serve as a trigger for closer review.

Q: Many accreditors have complained about new responsibilities being foisted upon them that are not part of their core mission. The Trump administration appears to agree with many of those complaints. If accreditors are not the right entities to handle that oversight of colleges, who is?

A: There are many points made in the book that echo these concerns and questions! The system of oversight of U.S. higher education has traditionally been framed as threefold, referred to as the “triad.” In the triad—at least in theory—the federal government watches over issues of financial support and access, the states attend to matters of

consumer protection, and accreditors guard the educational quality. This three-legged stool, however, turns out to be quite wobbly, with the federal leg requiring accreditation agencies to handle an increasing number of responsibilities and—given that states vary widely in their interest and capacity—accreditors are also pressured to pick up many consumer protection functions as well.

Although this has made for a larger (some would say too large) role for accreditors, we offer a paraphrase of Churchill: U.S. accreditation as it exists now is the worst form of oversight in higher education, except for anything else we have come up with. But if not this, then what? It would take a massive government bureaucracy to do what accreditation does now. As [Education Secretary Betsy] DeVos takes on this challenge, she seems to be echoing one theme from our book: accreditation has taken on many responsibilities that may not make sense. The question, however, that we need to consider is the extent of our willingness to take the risks that go with reducing oversight—and the recognition that the students are ultimately the ones who face the consequences of that risk taking.

Q: This administration is clearly more open to the concerns of accreditors. But what do they risk in the future if they don’t take steps now to placate their biggest critics?

A: It would probably be smart to view the administration’s sympathy with the concerns of accreditors as being a reflection of its commitment to deregulation. Indeed, moving toward less regulation would seem like common ground for the administration, accreditors, institutions and policy makers, where the weight and intrusion of the regulatory hand in the affairs of higher education is a significant criticism. Further, there are many points where those thinking about deregulation in accreditation need to take a close look and ask, “Does this make sense?” Much of what accreditation is being asked to do in the name of Title IV access may not stand up under that scrutiny.

That said, like most issues raised in our book, there are more facets to the puzzle: In this case, one also needs to consider that less regulation invariably means taking on greater risk, and in the case of quality in higher education, the student is where that risk most likely falls. This, in turn, leads us back to another quarter of criticism about accreditors—that they are not sufficiently protective of consumers. With the triple expectation that accreditors assure compliance, prompt improvement, and protect consumers, a shift in one area (say, regulatory compliance) likely just increases the expectations in another (say, consumer protection). The challenge, really, is to figure out ways to be responsive to each of those three expectations.

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