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Comparing accreditation and compliance in higher education

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What is accreditation?

Before delving into a quick comparison between accreditation and compliance in the context of higher education, it is important to understand the concept of “accreditation.” An excellent resource to understand accreditation in the United States is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA’s “About Accreditation” website is filled with details about what accreditation is and how accreditation works.^[1]

A brief history of accreditation

Accreditation, in a higher education context, was developed in the late 1850s to standardize quality between and among institutions. It ensured that a baccalaureate degree earned at one institution would be similar to a baccalaureate degree earned from another institution. The system of accreditation was built on the concept of peer review—like-minded people from similar institutions working together to find a comfortable middle ground. Subject matter standards of particular fields are unique to the individual agencies; and accreditation agencies have multiplied as career, degree, and program clusters have morphed and grown throughout the decades. As such, it is common for institutions to have and maintain multiple grants of accreditation from one or more accreditation commissions.

Modern barriers of peer-review accreditation

If only accreditation were as simple as using an all-encompassing sole accreditor, many of the barriers of modern accrediting processes would be mitigated. Some state regulatory agencies have entered into the realm of accreditation and have conflated their regulated approval processes (compliance-oriented ways to license programs or institutions) with the peer-review processes of accreditation. As an example, the Kansas State Department of Education uses the term “accreditation” as required by the Kansas Administrative Regulations. Although K.A.R. 91-1-231 uses the term “accreditation,” the department’s website uses the terms “review,” “approval,” and “accreditation” interchangeably when discussing the approval of programs that train future educators in the state.^[2]

A requirement of the Higher Education Act of 1965 was the use of recognized accreditation agencies as the gatekeepers to federal financial aid—further exacerbating this ambiguity between accreditation agencies and compliance entities. The Code of Federal Regulations includes requirements for accreditation agencies, and this small change (to govern the allocation of federal money for higher education) moved the concept of accreditation into the realm of regulatory compliance.^[3] This change created regulatory uncertainty given the direction of regulations, uncertainty with responding to requirements, uncertainty with implementation and reporting requirements, and uncertainty regarding regulation interdependence with other regulations (e.g., banking regulations and healthcare regulations).^[4] Though uncertainty exists at the federal level in no small amount,

greater uncertainty exists with peers who come to review an institution.

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