Higher Education Accountability and the CSHSE Accreditation Process

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Abstract

Assessment of student learning based on government regulations, generally tied to standardized exit examinations, may not be a sufficient gauge of program efficacy. Self-regulation through accrediting bodies is system of accountability based on peer review. It requires (a) compliance with national standards, (b) assessment plans tied to learning outcomes, and (c) continuous program improvement. As a result of this rigor, accreditation is more likely to strengthen and support a diversity of programs and make recommendations tied to the unique mission of each institution. The accreditation policies and procedures of the CSHSE are congruent with the literature. The self-study accreditation process of the CSHSE is outlined and benefits to accreditation through CSHSE are highlighted.

Introduction

The Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE) is the accrediting body for human services degree programs. The CSHSE was formed in 1975 at about the same time as the National Organization for Human Services, originally called the National Organization for Human Services Education. The founders of both organizations wanted a separation between the professional membership group and the accrediting body to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

In the United States, higher education participates in voluntary self-regulation through the accreditation process. There are regional bodies that accredit colleges and universities, both private and public. "In 2005, regional commissions accredited 3,000 institutions using 3,500 volunteers in a system overseen by 105 fulltime staff' (Brittngham, 2008, p. 33). In addition, there are accrediting bodies that accredit programs specific to various disciplines of study. Organizations exist that recognize accrediting bodies. An example is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Some state legislatures require discipline accreditation if there is a CHEA-recognized accrediting body for that discipline. The CSHSE is currently in the final phase of the CHEA recognition process.

In this article, the authors will discuss accreditation, regulation and assessment, providing some historical and current context of the tensions surrounding accreditation. The discussion will be followed by an introduction to the CSHSE accreditation process, advantages of CSHSE accreditation, basic accreditation information, preparatory work, and a summary.

Accreditation, Regulation, and Assessment

Perhaps accreditation has never been more important or more hotly debated than it has been in the last decade. It began as an attempt to self-regulate the quality of higher education through national standards and a peer review process that was recognized by the government as a reliable quality control source beginning in the 1950s (Brittingham, 2006). In the 1980s there was a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction (Banta & Associates, 2002; Huba & Freed, 2000) spawning the Assessment Movement.

The Assessment Movement resulted in greater scrutiny and requirements by the government of educational institutions. This trend has continued to the present time. In the face

of shrinking resources, a desire for public accountability, and greater transparency, the government moved toward increased control through the No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2002. In addition, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 reauthorized the Higher Education Act of 1965. It includes "approximately 100 new reporting and record keeping requirements for colleges and universities" (Brittingham, 2008, p. 36). Response to these governmental controls has been mixed regarding their outcomes as compared to those of self-regulatory accrediting boards.

Government control is based on standardized assessments, generally through standardized exit testing. In addition to the documented problems with standardized testing in general (Perley & Tanguay, 2008), some schools simply made their state exit exam an entrance exam in response to No Child Left Behind criteria (Murray, 2009). That is not to say that standardized tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) do not have merit as a tool for continuous improvement. The CLA "presents students with engaging tasks that measure higher-order thinking and offers institutions the ability to compare how much their students have learned with the gains of students at other similar institutions" (Brittingham, 2008, p. 35).

Additionally, in a capitalist system with very few limits, the relationship between government and big business calls the role of government in education into close scrutiny. The increase in private colleges and universities and the decrease in public funding may be leading to the privatization of higher education as we have seen with other services.

Perhaps the most significant and controversial development in American higher education in the past two decades has been the rise of the for-profit college and university. Approximately 10 percent of post-secondary students now attend a for-profit institution in what has become a $48 billion a year industry (Blumenstyk, 2005b). The U.S. Department of Education now lists over 800 for-profits that have received state, regional, or professional accreditation and many grant degrees from the associate to the doctoral level. Although the degree granting/accredited sector is still small accounting for about 2.5 percent of the total college enrollments, its growth rate has been impressive -- approximately 8 percent a year compared to 2 percent for higher education as a whole (Blumenstyk, 2005a). In addition, they are beginning to provide competition for the traditional non-profit sector in certain student niches. The best known of the for-profits is the University of Phoenix, which claims to be the largest private university in the country with nearly 300,000 students enrolled. (Beaver, 2009, p. 53)

Lastly, government regulation through standardized tests works against institutional diversity. Currently there are private, public, liberal arts, technical, science, arts, and many other types of institutions. Students choose colleges and universities because of the unique traits of a program (Brittingham, 2008). The uniqueness of their education is carried with them into the workplace and larger society. Standardization through government regulation may limit the ability of an institution to vary from the norm.

Accreditation, on the other hand, is not intended to measure the learning of individual students (Murray, 2009). Rather, accreditation is intended to determine that (a) the validity of

programs in the context of similar higher education programs, (b) national standards are met in the curriculum, and (c) policies and procedures exist to assure continuity of curriculum delivery, consistency with other institutions of higher education, and continuous improvement. In other words, the program, not the individual student, is the unit of analysis (Murray 2009). National standards exist as a minimum for the curriculum to which greater depth, breadth, and unique characteristics may be added. Additionally, accreditors are more likely to ask questions that allow a unique response from the institution/program based on its distinctive mission and goals. This recursive process of question and response may actually promote and strengthen diversity as opposed to mandates for specific changes (Boyer, 1990; Prøitz, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2004; Stensaker, 2000). The remaining issue, of course, is the assessment of learning of individual students. In general, accreditors require assessment plans tied to both learning outcomes and policies and procedures for continuous improvement.

It is within this context of competing government regulation, accreditation, and assessment that both the Council for Standards in Human Service Education and the diverse human services programs throughout the U.S. exist. The CSHSE has a longstanding tradition of coming alongside program faculty as colleagues in the profession, valuing the unique perspectives of an interdisciplinary faculty, and honoring the missions of programs and the institutions in which they are housed. Congruent with the literature, accreditation by the CSHSE strengthens and supports diversity of programs that exist to ultimately serve diverse populations, is faculty driven, and requires assessment and continuous improvement.

Introduction to the CSHSE Accreditation Process

Human services program accreditation is a process with specific and sequential stages. It begins with membership and an application to the CSHSE for initial program accreditation. Once permission to proceed is provided by the Vice President of Accreditation (VPA), a self-study must be written and submitted to a group of readers who independently read and evaluate it for compliance with the CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education. Assuming an acceptable self-study, the next step is a site visit by two site visitors. Finally, the CSHSE Board of Directors takes action on a combined report of the readers and site visitors to accredit or not accredit the program, and the VPA informs the program of the Board's decision.

Documentation is the bedrock of accreditation. The self-study includes narrative that describes adherence to the CSHSE National Standards and the appendices provide evidence that support the narrative. A site visit is conducted to verify, clarify, and amplify the program's compliance.

Three key resources are available to programs seeking CSHSE accreditation; a regional director, a member handbook, and the CSHSE website. A **Regional Director** in each of the eight regions is available for consultation throughout the accreditation process. The *Member Handbook: Accreditation and Self-Study Guide* (CSHSE, 2009) is downloadable from the website and provides detailed information on the complete process, including accreditation policies, guidelines for preparing for and writing self-studies, timelines and submittal deadlines,

and guidelines for the site visit. ***The CSHSE Website*** (http://www.cshse.org) includes contact information for Regional Directors and Executive Board Members, list of accredited and other members, application forms, curriculum matrix templates, and other documents.

Advantages of CSHSE Accreditation

There are distinct advantages associated with CSHSE program accreditation. The self-study process highlights strengths of the program and requires review by an academic officer within the institution, calling positive attention to the program. The self-study process itself provides an opportunity for programmatic benchmarking. The peer-review process verifies that the program meets national standards for human services education. Additionally, there are expected to be benefits for students in accredited programs when they apply for the Human Services Board Certified Practitioner (HS-BCP) credential. It has been tentatively agreed that students in CSHSE-accredited programs will be able to sit for the credentialing examination in the last semester or quarter of their program, and they will receive a discount on the application fee. Graduates of CSHSE-accredited programs will not need to complete the *Verification of Experience Form* that is usually required when applying for the HS-BCP credential (http://www.cce-global.org/credentials-offered/hsbcp).

Basic Accreditation Information: Application and Timeframes

Currently, CSHSE accreditation is voluntary. A Human services education program can become a CSHSE member without applying for accreditation. Membership in the CSHSE is required if a program decides to seek and maintain accreditation. Member programs seeking accreditation must apply for accreditation and pay a fee (currently $400.00). Application forms are located on the CSHSE website.

There are three kinds of accreditation applications:
1. Initial Accreditation; Site visit is required
2. Interim Report and Review: Required at five years and every ten years thereafter for reaccreditation; no site visit
3. Reaccreditation: Site visit is required; occurs initially ten years after Initial Accreditation and every ten years thereafter (*CSHSE Member Handbook,2009,* pp. 2-4)

For an Initial Accreditation, a program has two years from the date of the VPA *approval to proceed* to complete the self-study and site visit process. If not completed within two years, the program must reapply. If a program is applying for reaccreditation and there are extenuating circumstances that preclude it from meeting the deadlines indicated in the *Member Handbook*, a one-year extension may be granted (*CSHSE Member Handbook,* 2009, pp. 4, 9, 10).

Preparatory Work

The specific steps in the self-study process are found on pages 6-8 in the *Member Handbook* (CSHSE, 2009). Given the length of time required to effect curriculum revisions

within various institutions, it is strongly suggested that prior to applying for accreditation, a curriculum map of courses to standards be completed to identify any Standards or Specifications that have not been met (see Matrix on pp. 18-19 of *CSHSE Member Handbook*, 2009). What follows is a summary of some of the key steps.

Consult with Regional Director

Contacting the appropriate Regional Director and informing her or him that the program is either ready to apply or has applied for Initial Accreditation or Reaccreditation is an essential first step. The CSHSE provides outreach through Regional Directors who work in specific geographic regions. The name and contact information for each Regional Director is on the website. The Regional Director consults with the program throughout the process in two major ways: (a) responding to questions regarding the process, requirements for self-studies, and National Standards and (b) reviewing written sections of the self-study and providing feedback. (*CSHSE Member Handbook*, 2009, p.6)

Prepare to Write the Self-Study

The self-study with its narrative and appendices describes and documents compliance with the CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education. The CSHSE accredits human services programs at three degree levels: associate, baccalaureate, and master's. There are distinct Standards for each degree level, divided into two sections: (a) General Program Characteristics that address the administrative structure of the program and (b) Curriculum that includes both the required content and the field experience component. Each of the Standards has Specifications that further define the content expectations.

When preparing to write a self-study, it is recommended that the program create a self-study committee with a commitment to meet on a consistent basis during the process. Its composition may include teaching faculty, advisory committee members, field placement supervisors, alumnae, and current students. Initially the work of the committee members is to familiarize themselves with the Standards and Specification in preparation for assessing the program's current compliance and determining what actions are needed to achieve compliance. It helps immensely to prepare a folder for each Standard and place in it the documentation that verifies the Standard is met.

Write the Self-Study

Although detailed and specific guidelines for writing the self-study are detailed in the *Member Handbook (*CSHSE, 2009*)*, here are three essential ingredients for a successful self-study:

1. The **Matrix** (Curriculum Map of Courses to Standards) provides a visual of which required courses in the curriculum meet each of the Curriculum Standards and its respective Specifications.
2. The **self-study narrative** describes program compliance with all the Standards. In

particular, it describes *how,* through descriptions of specific assignments, class exercises, and activities, each of the required courses identified on the Matrix contributes to meeting the Curriculum Standards.

3. The **self-study appendices,** including course syllabi, *provide evidence* of the compliance statements in the narrative.

The Matrix. The Matrix or Curriculum Map of Courses to Standards is explained in the *Member Handbook* (CSHSE, 2009, pp. 18-19), and the Matrix specific to each degree level can be downloaded from the CSHSE website. It is a graphic index that illustrates where in the curriculum and to what degree the Specifications for each Curriculum Standard are met. It is a particularly helpful tool for programs during the self-study process, and reflects any changes made to bring the curriculum into compliance. In its final form, it is a *required* component of the self-study.

The Self-Study Narrative. The narrative takes the readers on a well-defined and documented journey through the details of the program. It must be clear, concise, complete, and correct (*CSHSE Member Handbook,* 2009, p. 16). It must describe *how* Standards are met, explain and clarify appendices relevant to a Standard, and *persuade* the reader that each Standard and its Specifications have been met (16).

There are a number of common errors in self-studies that may result in requests for additional information and/or documentation from the program before a site visit can be scheduled or the Board can vote on program accreditation. A list is in the *Member Handbook* (2009, p. 17). Some of the most frequent are:

1. Courses referenced in the narrative do not match courses identified on the Matrix or the syllabi in the appendices.
2. Specifications are not separately identified and addressed.
3. Required introductory information is not included.
4. Appendices are either not referenced in the narrative or they are used to *state* compliance rather than to *verify* compliance.
5. Compliance statements are insufficiently specific.

The Appendices/Attachments. The appendices are all those documents that *provide evidence* of compliance statements in the narrative. When a compliance statement is made in the narrative, the appropriate appendix/ices verifying the statement must be referenced. Appendices need to be placed in a logical order and tabbed (or linked) so the reader can easily locate them (*CSHSE Member Handbook,* 2009, p. 16).

Submit the Self-Study

As the self-study is nearing completion, the program needs to contact the Vice President of Accreditation to request readers. Timelines relative to when the initial submission will take

place are provided in the *Member Handbook (CSHSE 2009,* pp. 9-10). Three options are available for submitting self-studies: full paper copy in two three-ring binders (one for the narrative; one for appendices); a hybrid consisting of a paper copy of the narrative and an electronic copy of some or all of the appendices on a CD, DVD or Flash Drive; or a full electronic copy in which the narrative and appendices are submitted on a CD, DVD or Flash Drive (CSHSE Policy, May 19, 2010).

Arrange a Site Visit

The *Member Handbook* (CSHSE, 2009) contains detailed instructions related to the site visit process, including how to budget costs of the accreditation process (pp. 12, 21-25). A site visit is required for Initial Accreditation and for Reaccreditation every ten years thereafter. In either case, before a site visit can be scheduled, a majority of the readers must agree that the self-study is sufficiently complete to warrant a site visit. If it is not, the Vice President of Accreditation, working with the appropriate Regional Director, will inform the program of what additional information and/or documentation is needed.

Once a program is given permission to proceed with scheduling a site visit, communication will occur directly between the program and the two assigned site visitors to set dates and travel accommodations (pp. 10-11). Two full days are required onsite and up to two travel days, dependent on available transportation to the site. During the site visit, issues raised by the readers will be explored (p. 11). At the conclusion, site visitors will prepare a report that will be submitted to the CSHSE Board. Site visitors do not decide and are not allowed to communicate whether or not a program will be accredited. Accreditation is a Board action.

The CSHSE Board Takes Action

Currently the CSHSE Board meets three times a year to discuss and vote on program accreditation, interim review and report and reaccreditation. Action is taken based on reader reports, site visitor reports, and Board policies and procedures. There are four actions that can be taken by the Board (*CSHSE Member Handbook*, 2009, p.8):

1. Approval of accreditation with no conditions,
2. Approval of accreditation with specific provisions required for the next reaccreditation,
3. Tabling action because the self-study is incomplete, and there is not sufficient information to make a decision, or
4. Non-approval of accreditation.

The Vice President of Accreditation informs the program of the Board's decision and of any conditions related to the decision. An informal email telling the program of the Board's decision is sent by the VPA within 10 days of the Board action, and a letter outlining in detail any requirements or recommendations that must be addressed for the next accreditation is sent within 30 days of the Board action (CSHSE Reader and Site Visitor Policy and Procedure, October 2006).

Summary

There is currently national tension between accrediting bodies and government regulation as an issue of assessment of student learning. Research demonstrates that accreditation requires (a) compliance with national standards, (b) assessment plans tied to learning outcomes, and (c) continuous program improvement. The accreditation policies and procedures of the Council for Standards in Human Services Education are congruent with the literature. The CSHSE self-study process strengthens and supports diversity of programs, is faculty driven, and requires assessment and continuous improvement.

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