

Remarks of Gordon K. Davies, Luncheon Plenary  
Council for Higher Education Accreditation Annual Conference  
Washington, D.C.  
30 January 2007

### **Five Simple Questions: Accreditation as if People Matter**

Accreditation in the United States has proven itself flexible and responsive over the time I have known it – the past thirty years and more. It remains a model that is relevant worldwide: not the only model, but a good one that is watched and often discussed.

It's not too surprising that there is a flurry of conversation about accreditation these days, most of it emanating from the work of Secretary Spelling's Commission on the Future of Higher Education and from the Department's forum on accreditation. With negotiated rule-making coming soon, accreditation attracts considerable attention.

Would-be reformers are likely to pick an easy target – one with no major donors and alumni, few strong political ties – not even a football or a basketball team. And certainly one with no Political Action Committee. If the reform can be accomplished without spending any federal money, it becomes all the more attractive.

“The only college or university that I'll ever recommend closing,” said a former state coordinator of a higher education system, “is one that's in a different state than I'm in.”

Still, there is interesting work that could be done, and the attention being paid to accreditation might offer an opportunity to make some helpful changes.

Those responsible for accreditation – most of the people at this annual CHEA conference – might try to help colleges and universities – and state-supported systems of them – become better-suited to today and tomorrow than they are. We have an excellent set of colleges and universities, and an excellent set of public higher education systems, for the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. But this is not 1960, 1970, or even 1980.

You have done good work. Accreditation ought not be the prime quarry for the hounds but it is, for perfectly understandable reasons. Please don't let this distract you. For the good of the nation and its people, there is work to be done. We have not just with the research performance of major universities, important as it is. We also have to deal more effectively with growing income inequality and with educational policies that make college-going highly unlikely for the poorest Americans.

We have to deal more effectively with stagnant earnings in much of our economy, with rising prices and unchecked expenditures in higher education, and with a system of rewards that encourages institutions to behave as if people do not matter. We get the behavior we reward.

In 1938, as the world lurched toward war, Virginia Woolf wrote “Three Guineas.” She imagined receiving three appeals for financial support: to end war, to advance women in the workplace, and to support a women’s college at Cambridge. After reflecting on the purpose and curriculum of the women’s college, she decides to send a guinea earmarked “Rags. Petrol. Matches.” And a note is attached. “Take this guinea,” she writes, “and with it burn the college to the ground.”

And in its place, Woolf suggests, build a new college, a “poor college,” that will help to produce the “kind of society, the kind of people that will help prevent war.” Teach not the “arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital,” Woolf writes. “They require too many overhead expenses.”

“The poor college,” she goes on, “must teach only the arts that can be ... practiced by poor people....It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people’s lives and minds....The teachers should be drawn from the good livers as well as from the good thinkers.”

Woolf knew that her “new college, the poor college,” was not realistic. Students, especially young women, had to be “taught to earn their livings.” But she also knew for a certainty that the English educational establishment no longer was suited for the time, and she was right. There is a time to buy rags, petrol, and matches, a time to stop doing what has been done successfully for generations, and to begin doing something new.

In 2005, a faculty member of Adelphi University organized a conference, in conjunction with a colleague at Sweden’s Stockholm University, on “Social Policy as if People Matter.”

The title struck me. “Of course people matter,” I thought. “Why else would we be doing all this work?”

But in fact we tend to formulate policy, including educational policy, around institutions, not people. The CEO who famously was reported to have said that what was good for General Motors was good for the nation merely stated a common assumption: what is good for institutions is good for people.

Implicit in the way accreditation works, and the way in which we treat it, is the assumption that it now primarily serves institutions or professions. Perhaps it is possible to shift its purposes – at least in part – to a public good – accreditation as if people matter.

It is easy to talk about the “public good” or the “public interest,” but equally easy to turn these phrases into euphemisms. The people of Detroit and its suburbs certainly know that what was good for General Motors turned out not to be good for them – more than 60,000 auto workers took buyouts from Ford and GM in 2006 – and so, I imagine, do many people who watch their flagship universities and other universities cut them out as they scramble upward in the USN&WR rankings.

“Trust us. What’s good for this institution will be good for you.” Not likely!

There are several possible users of accreditation. The institutions themselves, of course, use reports to correct or strengthen their programs and activities. The professions use it and licensing examinations to determine membership. Funders can use it to determine who gets what, who gets nothing, or at which institutions they will support students. Governments can use it to try to ensure quality when more direct measures are politically unacceptable.

All of this can be said, with some justification, to be in the “public interest.”

But what do people want to know as they decide where to spend their money on tuition and other fees? What do a growing number of women and men need to know, many having no higher education experience in their families and inadequate preparation themselves, and struggling against formidable odds to gain the skills and knowledge they need in order to live decent, healthy, and productive lives?

Not much, probably. They probably don’t need open access to accreditation reports as they now are written. Whatever they need to know, it is not that the faculty on this or that branch campus feel cut off from their colleagues on the main campus. That may be important to the provost, but not to a single mom trying to earn an LPN so she can rent a doublewide in Kentucky for herself and her kids.

That is why the current discussion of “transparency” is a bit off the mark. Giving people open access to information that they don’t need is not going to help.

On balance, the single mom or returning vet – or even the new high school graduate – doesn’t need to know much of what’s in accreditation reports.

Institutions may be more comfortable with simple information – you are accredited or you aren’t – because it avoids contentious and possibly damaging comparisons. But ordinary people have to decide whether a certificate from ECPI will be as useful to them as a degree from Northern Virginia Community College and whether that, in turn, will be as useful as a degree from George Washington University. It’s not easy.

What would people want to know? In an entirely non-scientific survey that was not approved by an Institutional Review Board, I asked a few. Here are five questions they suggested.

**Question One: Do they really take people like me?**

(A 45-year old? A single mom without money? A returning Iraq veteran diagnosed with PTSD?)

**Question Two: Do I have a fair chance of getting a degree or certificate?**

(How long might it take?)

**Question Three: How much will it cost?**

(Can I get help with expenses? How much will I owe when I finish?)

**Question Four: Will they take the credits I've earned from other colleges and universities?**

**Question Five: Who will hire me?**

(At what kind of wage or salary?)

The answers to questions like these need to be in the public domain. Probably, rather than providing the answers, accreditors should assess whether institutions answer them and, if they do, how well. As Paul Lingenfelter said earlier today, this is a partnership among all the players, including accreditation.

Giving people a profile of the students enrolled might be helpful in answering questions like the ones my non-random sample suggested. For instance,

- “We have 24 veterans enrolled and they have formed a mutual support group.”
- “Students older than 40 years actually have a better chance of finishing their programs of study than younger ones; over the past three years, 60 percent of those who started finished within three years.”
- “Single students in their 20s who work part-time while in school leave with debt between 15 and 25 thousand dollars.”
- “Every person who studied Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning this year had at least one job offer before finishing the program, at hourly rates above \$12.”

Woolf's new college, the poor college, was not realistic in 1938 as the world hovered on the brink of war. But perhaps now, with the growing gap between rich and poor in this country, it is time to create a new kind of college. Perhaps we could borrow from the pioneering microcredit work of the Grameen Bank, whose small loans help impoverished women in Bangladesh start small businesses.

We might use a similar approach to finance colleges for poor people of all ages: youth finishing high school and adults who have landed in the workplace with no useful skills. The guineas could come from individuals, foundations, state legislatures, and others. The institutions could be public or perhaps for-profit. They could guarantee advanced education for the poor, and provide start-up loans with which college completers could begin new businesses. All the recipients of advanced education would be asked to pledge that they will help those who come behind them.

The new college, the poor college, would answer the five questions directly:

- 1. Yes, we take people like you. In fact, we were created for people like you.**
- 2. Yes, we'll stick with you and do all we can to ensure that you finish. If you fail, we fail, because we count on you to keep the college going.**
- 3. It will cost only what you can afford. It won't be fancy, but it will be adequate.**

**4. We will take credits from other institutions. We also will give credit for demonstrated competence.**

**5. We'll help you get a job if that's what you want. Or we'll make you a loan to start your own business. Either way, we'll need your financial support for the next cohort that comes to your college.**

We need no rags, petrol, and matches. We need only selective investment in new colleges, or in existing colleges that are willing to take on a new mission: that are willing to define "excellence" as meeting the needs of the most needy. We need to invest our money where the needs are. We need to define quality and make educational policy as if people matter.

Narrowly construed, this is not accreditation's responsibility. But broadly construed, it is everyone's responsibility.

Since accreditation now is under scrutiny, its actions will attract attention. It may be time to take the lead in building higher education systems that respond to the social and economic realities of globalization: colleges and universities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I hope you do not negotiate with the Department of Education on its terms. Change the terms – raise the stakes. Respond to the condition of millions.

As Albert Camus said a generation ago, "Perhaps we cannot make this a world in which children do not suffer. But we can lessen the number of suffering children. And if you and I do not do this, who will?"

I wish you well. Thank you.