

CHEA Talk – January 30, 2006

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Also presenting: Robert Gidden (moderator), Charlene Nunley

Title: Presidents and Accreditation: The Need for Leadership and the Importance of Engagement.

Program Description: Accreditation has emerged as a major policy issue at the federal and state levels, this time driven by current attention to accountability and transparency. Presidential leadership and engagement is essential to sustaining the role of accreditation in assuring academic quality at a time of significant government challenge. What are effective and valuable means by which presidents exercise this leadership?

Good morning. I'm happy to speak about the president's role in accreditation. North Central's accrediting team visited my institution last week, so my experience is fresh.

I start in a place of gratitude for the work that all of you do on our behalf. If accreditation did not exist, then either the government would have to take your place, or we'd have reinvent you.

- The first possibility is frightening to me, since it combines “elected officials who want to appear interested in education without actually supporting it” with the broader mindset that nearly everyone who ever received a college degree considers themselves to be experts on higher education. That's a perfect storm I have no interest in navigating.
- The idea that we would have to reinvent peer accreditation is obvious to me, since we already do it at DePaul regularly. Each year, we invite ad hoc teams of deans and other experts to visit the colleges and departments of DePaul that we want to assess, but for which there are not national specialized accreditation processes.

I've been asked to speak today about how I see the role of the president in the accreditation process, and how this might be improved. Let me take each one in turn.

First, as a president, why is this process useful to me? It's simple. Accreditation is one of a president's tools to shape an institution. Let me explain.

- The self-study is a great motivator, akin to cleaning the house before the company arrives. Faculty take outside evaluators seriously, often more seriously than insiders such as a president, provost, dean or chairperson. A president can use that.

- The self-study also creates an institution-wide conversation. There aren't many of these in the life of an institution. Strategic planning is one. The change of a core curriculum is another. At its best, accreditation can become a conversation about what really needs attention at our institution. Accreditation convenes a discussion that draws faculty attention, something a president under her own steam cannot always easily accomplish.
- It also helps an institution become more honest. A data- and evidence-based evaluation is extremely helpful in seeing ourselves more clearly.
- The process offers a president some ability to shape the direction of conversation. The questions I pose to the university community, the data I request, the committees I assemble, and the people I invite or approve for leadership and participation in this process, all shape the discussion, the findings and thus, the items we will work on in the years ahead.
- Even the tedious process of writing the report can be useful, in that it helps key ideas eventually become an inevitability. If we choose to focus and write about student composition at the university, for example, chances are greatly improved that we will actually do something about it. *It's in the report*, and that takes on a stronger life than simply being *in the wind of campus conversation*.
- Even the visit and the subsequent publication of findings can shape an institution. There's a role for self-congratulation in the life of an organization. The findings can create pride inside the institution and build energy for more. That pride translates into energy to continue to improve and move the organization forward.
- Specialized accreditations can also help break down unhelpful department dynamics and focus the group on a great goal. Again, it's the power of outside recognition that is so much stronger than simple presidential encouragement. At one institution where I worked, I watched one of our deans hold out the possibility of AACSB accreditation to break the hold of a faculty that had not extensively intellectually engaged with their professional peers outside the institution. Accreditation created a task that in turn created community, raised standards, created new initiatives and higher standards, and literally refashioned the school into something that was quite extraordinary. It took seven years, and has been a real blessing for students, faculty and the university.
- Accreditation is also very helpful to me as we place DePaul's degree programs around the world. DePaul's name is already well known and respected in the Midwest, so I have little need to advertise that DePaul is "an accredited institution." Frankly, we never mention our NCA accreditation to prospective students. It's not a selling point. But overseas, DePaul's name is not well known, and our accreditation is extremely important as I negotiate with foreign governments, corporations and institutions of higher learning to deliver DePaul's degrees in their country. I need this accreditation — this quality indicator — and I rely on it.

Without question, accreditation offers a president some powerful tools to shape an institution.

That said, accreditation was a real pain for me as a president. DePaul's provost was new in his position at DePaul when this process was beginning and quite fairly asked for my assistance in guiding the team that was writing the report. I read the self-study in depth twice and send it back for re-writing each time. It was an imposition on a presidential life that already has early mornings and late evenings. Yet I judged it to be the best use of my time. Why?

- I needed to keep the document from becoming hostage to an individual's goals and advocacy.
- Group-think was bloating the document, and it needed crisp, focused answers. Groups often simply incorporate everyone's ideas rather than create a higher-level dialogue that would force them to choose among the best ideas, and challenge one another with data to support their conclusions.
- We needed to speak the truth about our warts, and some sectors tended to gloss over them.
- I wanted to be sure that the self-study was tightly tied to the strategic plan, and the process did not easily allow for that. The document had the potential of setting the institution's direction for the next several years, and I want it set on a certain course.
- This was a moment for "writing history" and the group's process of coming to a "shared story." This document will be a primary source for future historians of the institution. We needed to get it right. "Candor and Balance" were the two words I repeated to the university team throughout the process.

So, there's the role of the president: Using the process to move an institution forward and attending to damage control so that process doesn't get in the way of moving the institution forward.

Maybe a couple observations on the limitations of the process will also be helpful.

- The move to outcomes assessment has been a healthy one, I think. But here's the problem: It asks for proof of assessment activity throughout the organization and proof that the findings have been used in turn to lead change for improvement. That's still not actual "quality control." Since DePaul is aggressively raising its academic rigor at present, that's an opportunity lost to me as a president.

- The visiting team this past week left knowing that DePaul's students get hired by employers, are accepted to highly respected graduate schools, speak highly of their educational experience. But the visiting team doesn't know what level of proficiency our foreign language majors achieve; whether our computer science engineering students get jobs in actual computer science engineering firms or some other field (they do get hired by the top firms by the way!); how our nursing students are evaluated by their supervisors within their first six months on the job; or whether students in our distance learning classes are achieving the same level of education as our classroom-based courses.
- It still doesn't hold the department's feet to the fire for specific outcomes levels of achievement by the students. Perhaps AAC&U's new "Essential Outcomes" can be of assistance here....
- Nor do the visiting teams show equal levels of expertise in their various fields of knowledge. As we met with our team last week, we found many members who were outstanding, really knowledgeable about what they were inspecting. We also found others whom we had to spend great amounts of time teaching how higher education worked nationally, and how DePaul fit into that world. We also found some who used it more for their own ongoing education than to offer us informed comment.
- That's frustrating for a president, who is looking forward to receiving informed comment that he can then use in turn to strengthen the institution. I sometimes understand when I'm told that not all presidents engage the process or find it useful.

I was asked this morning to speak about how presidents could be better engaged in the process. My three suggestions all come from the comments I've already made.

1. Presidents turn over frequently, and there is no guarantee that they understand the power and potential of accreditation to assist their leadership. Accept it as part of your mission to help presidents see how the process can serve as a tool for their own leadership and desire to shape an institution. Perhaps you might consider partnering with the already existing presidential training programs at Harvard, CIC and other institutions.
2. Long in advance of the process, *ask the president* – "How can this process assist you with your goals to lead this institution forward?" Select the team accordingly.
3. In the days immediately following the visit, when the visit and team members are fresh in everyone's memories, ask presidents to assess the team members, so that you can glean information about them before assigning them to future teams and sending them to other institutions. This is a less immediate strategy, but over time, the sharper and more knowledgeable your team, the more respect presidents will accord the process.

In short, spend time helping presidents see how this process can serve their leadership goals, work with them in advance to shape the process so that it serves those goals, and take long-range steps to even further improve the quality of the team itself.

But I end where I began — with gratitude. The work that you do is important work for our institutions and for all those who look to higher education to serve their needs. I think it already serves us very well.

- You protect society from scurrilous institutions that would take students' tuition without worrying about their education.
- You protect colleges from the fad or political winds of the moment, by conducting a process that's balanced and knowledgeable.
- You gently but insistently push colleges to continuous improvement.
- You offer me as a president a process that I can use to move my own institution forward.

You do all this in a respectful, collegial manner of peers working with peers, even in the midst of a politically charged atmosphere. This is important and helpful work. If there's anything I most hoped to say to you today, it's "Thank you." You offer me a powerful tool to assist my organization, and I'm grateful for it.