Are Universities "Overrun" by Accreditors? A Look at the Data

by David Werner

Background

Accreditors, particularly accreditors of specialized and professional programs, have been criticized widely for various reasons including driving up cost, interfering with institutional autonomy, and stifling innovation. College and university presidents and provosts are frequently heard to say that their campuses are continually "overrun" with accreditors, and that they are constantly meeting with site visitors. Comments by Walter Eggers, former Provost of the University of New Hampshire, in the *Chronicle of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation* (Vol. 3, No. 1) illustrate this viewpoint. Reflecting upon his experiences as Provost, he states "…and that means that specialized accrediting teams march through regularly, two a week sometimes during the year." Undoubtedly that was his perception, a perception shared apparently by many. What is the reality?

"Overrun" is, of course, a matter of interpretation. Some might view a visit or two every year as being "overrun," while others might find that frequency barely noticeable. But, while "overrun" is a matter of judgment and interpretation, the actual experience of a campus is a matter subject to empirical investigation.

The purpose of this study was to assess the degree to which site visits burden institutions by determining

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the actual number of site visits from specialized and professional accreditors experienced by American colleges and universities. The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) conducted this study, and the results were shared with accreditors for their use in reviewing their practices and procedures. (Information about ASPA is available at *www.aspa-usa.org*.)

Methodology

ASPA collected data on site visits made by specialized and professional accrediting agencies in the United States for the four-year period from July 1, 1995 through June 30, 1999. Most data came from ASPA members. However, data were obtained from nonmember specialized accreditors as well.

Seventy-three accrediting agencies (15 of which can be viewed as one agency since all are part of CAAHEP, the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs) participated in the study. These agencies encompass nearly all the specialized accreditation visits made during this four-year period. Some agencies were not able to provide data for some years. However, the missing data primarily affected community colleges, not the large universities that are the focus of this study. Some agencies that provided data accredit only specialized institutions, (e.g., rabbinical studies, naturopathic medicine, and psychoanalysis) and, accordingly have no effect on the general purpose institutions discussed in this paper.

Most accrediting agencies periodi-

cally conduct a site visit using a team of evaluators with the period between visits typically ranging from five to ten years. However, in some cases there may be preliminary or follow-up visits by one person rather than a team. In submitting data, the participating agencies were asked to use judgment in determining whether such a follow-up constituted a "visit." However, since the intent of this study was to capture the extent to which agencies visited campuses, they were also asked to err on the side of inclusion of such visits.

Data collected for the 2001 edition of the *Higher Education Directory*, indicate that 1,478 of the 4,083 institutions in the nation have only single institutional accreditation. Of the 2,605 with multiple accreditation, 842 have two (one institutional and one programmatic), 451 have three, 933 have between four and nine, and 379 or only 9 percent of the institutions have 10 or more total accreditations. The concerns

about being "overrun" are most likely focused among the presidents and provosts of the institutions with many accredited programs.

Since 36 percent of higher education institutions have only institutional (regional or national) accreditation and another 32 percent have only have one or two specialized accreditors, statistics about the entire set of institutions would have little meaning. Accordingly, the focus in this report is on the experiences of a small group of complex universities with highly diverse curricular offerings.

Results

One hundred fifteen institutions had 10 or more specialized accreditation site visits during the four years covered by this study. Table 1 displays the distribution of visits experienced by these 115 institutions.

Table 1: Distribution of 115 Institutions with at Least 10 Accreditation Visits over 4 Years

Number of Visits During 4 Years	Number of Institutions
More than 25	1
21 – 25	3
16 – 20	19
13 – 15	36
10 – 12	56

One institution, a very large, very complex university, stood out with 29 site visits in the four-year period, or about seven visits per year. However, the average number of visits per year for these 115 universities was 3.8, or less than two visits per semester.

The 11 members of the Big Ten Athletic Conference, all large and complex institutions, also averaged 3.8 visits per year over the four-year period. Institutions in the Big Twelve Athletic Conference averaged 2.6 visits per year. The Pacific 10 Athletic Conference universities, similar in size and scope to the Big 12, averaged 2.8 visits per year. In contrast, the Ivy League universities averaged exactly one visit per year over the same period.

The 59 member institutions of the Association of American Universities (AAU) averaged 2.3 visits per year over the four years studied. Two AAU institutions had no visits over the four years, and two others had only one visit. The nation's 99 Research I institutions averaged 2.6 visits per year, ranging from a high of 29 to a low of zero visits over the four-year period. The nation's 37 Research II institutions averaged 2.3 visits per year, ranging from a high of 17 to a low of zero over the four-year period.

The number of visits per year for the 115 institutions with the most visits in the four-year period varied widely, from a high of 12 in a single year for one university to zero in one year for another. The frequency of visits per year to these 115 institutions is displayed in Table 2. There was also considerable variation in the number of visits to the same institution over the four years. The institution that had 12 visits in one year also had a year with five visits. Another institution with a total of 20 visits in four years had one year with only one visit but another with nine.

Table 2: Distribution of Visits Per Year to Institutions with at Least 10 Visits in 4 Years

Visits Per Year	Number of Institutions
10 – 12	1
9	1
8	3
7	22
6	33
5	49
4	86
3	103
2	100
1	47
0	15

Discussion

Are institutions "overrun" by accreditors? With 29 visits in four years or an average of seven visits per year, the institution with the most visits would have had a team on campus an average of approximately 32 days per year during this period (assuming an average team visit of four days). With approximately 200 working days in an academic year, visitors would have been on this campus an average of 16 percent of the time. Some might well view this as being "overrun." But, the experience of this extraordinarily large and complex organization is not typical. Even among the 115 universities with more than 10 visits in four years, the average institution would have had visitors on-campus about 16 days per year.

What burden do these visits have on the time of a President or Chancellor? The 115 institutions with the most visits had an average of 3.8 visits per year. On average, a president who spent six hours reading in preparation for the visit, one hour in an introductory meeting with the visiting team, and an additional hour in an exit meeting with the team would have spent a total of about 30.5 hours per year on site visits. Assuming a 50-hour workweek at 48 weeks per year, the 30.5 hours devoted to accreditation would consume approximately 1.2 percent of the president's time. This scenario means that presidents of AAU member institutions would, on average, spend less than 1 percent of their time on accreditation. Is 1 percent an excessive amount of presidential time to devote to improving programs through accreditation? How does the time spent on reviewing academic quality through accreditation compare with that spent on intercollegiate athletics? Most likely, it is modest by comparison.

The Need for Presidential Leadership

The complaint from university presidents about being "overrun" by accreditors is probably a surrogate for a deeper concern about other accreditation matters, particularly concerns about the perceived resource demands of accreditation. Presidents and provosts who are concerned about the amount of accreditation and its associated time and resource requirements need to take a strong leadership role on their own campuses. And, they need to take a leadership role in accreditation off campus as well.

On campus, they need to take charge of accreditation. First, they need to place someone in the central university administration directly in charge of accreditation matters. That person needs to be thoroughly familiar with the standards of all the agencies that accredit

the institution, and should review all submissions of self-studies and reports to accrediting agencies. Without that responsibility, knowledge, and engagement vested in a university-level administrator, the institution leaves accreditation matters in the hands of deans and program directors who may have very narrow views of institutional priorities. But, while they need to have someone in charge, they can not totally delegate responsibility for accreditation. A substantial majority of presidents and provosts are drawn from disciplines that lack specialized accreditation, so many have no personal knowledge or experience in working with accreditors. Those who lack that background need to take the time to learn about accreditation. It is part of the job.

Second, the university, not a program administrator, should decide if the institution should pursue accreditation for a particular program, especially when the accreditation is purely voluntary. The number of accreditation visits experienced by a university is ultimately the choice of the institution. The institution voluntarily decides to offer programs and seek accreditation in a large or small number of fields. In addition, the way in which it decides to organize its programs partially determines the number of visits it receives. For example, the institution having 29 visits in the four-year period has three accredited programs in psychology housed in three separate units. Those programs chose to have three independent visits that are reflected in the data. Had those units chosen a combined visit (or had the university's administration required them to have a combined visit), which the accrediting agency would have provided, the total number of visits would have declined by two.

Third, presidents and provosts need to work with deans and program directors to avoid either the reality or the perception of being "overrun" or overwhelmed by accreditors. The kind of experience Provost Egger's speaks of when he says "…specialized accrediting teams march through regularly, two a week sometimes during the year" can be avoided by better scheduling. While the initial and final weeks of the academic year are probably not available for visits,

a university should have at least 20 weeks in which visits could be scheduled. With some up-front planning and by working with the staffs of the multiple accrediting agencies involved, even those institutions with the largest number of visits should be able to avoid having two visits in the same week. In addition to better scheduling in a single year, a university could work with its accreditors to avoid years with too many visits. For example, during the period under study, one institution had eight visits in one year but only one in the next. That level of year-to-year fluctuation could be minimized, if not avoided, by appropriate planning.

Fourth, presidents and provosts need to monitor the role of their own deans and program directors in setting standards. Specialized accreditation standards are developed using a consensus process that involves educators, practitioners, and other interested communities. The educators involved are typically the deans and program directors in accredited institutions. More than likely, many presidents who are vocal about the burdens of specialized accreditation have deans and program directors heavily involved in setting the standards that result in the real or perceived burdens.

Fifth, presidents and provosts need to be engaged in accreditation nationally. Some accreditors have positions on their boards reserved for academic administrators, and those that do not should consider adding such positions. Presidents and provosts need to fill those positions, and take an active role in accreditation. Presidents and provosts are busy, and this engagement will take time. But, their involvement in setting standards and making accreditation decisions will also improve accreditation for the betterment of all concerned.

Finally, presidents and provosts need to be more actively involved with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. CHEA hosts two or more conferences each year that provide excellent opportunities for formal and informal interaction with accreditors. Accreditors continue to be well represented at these conferences; presidents and provosts do not.

Accreditors Need to Provide Leadership Too

Just as presidents and provosts need to assume strong leadership roles on and off campus, accrediting agencies and their staffs need to provide leadership as well. They can do so in several ways. First, they need to work diligently to reduce the burdens that their visits impose on campuses. Accreditors need to be flexible enough to schedule visits at times that minimize multiple reviews or on-site conflicts for the institutions. Likewise, they need to be responsive to requests for joint visits or other arrangements that reduce the burden on the institutions they accredit.

Second, each accrediting agency should review its accreditation cycle to see if the time between visits could be increased. Assuming a current average cycle of eight years, increasing the amount of time between visits by one year, on average, would reduce the number of visits to a single institution by about 12 percent. A longer cycle would seem particularly appropriate for institutions with long records of high quality. Is it really necessary to visit an institution with a long record of quality as frequently as every five years as some accreditors now do? Moreover, accreditors may be able to provide leadership by moving toward a longer schedule or relying on different information for a continuing accreditation review than for an initial accreditation review.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even if it means revising their current structures, accreditors need to include institutional representatives on the committees and councils that establish standards and make accrediting decisions. The institutional representatives need to be from an organizational level higher than the programs the agency accredits. For example, if the

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agency accredits schools, it should include presidents or provosts on its committees and councils. Likewise, if the agency accredits programs at the department level, the committees and councils should include deans of units to which such programs typically report.

Having these representatives involved in setting standards and making accrediting decisions is important for two reasons. First, they would bring a broader, institutional-level perspective to the table. Second, these engaged presidents and provosts would learn about accreditation first-hand and could act in a liaison role to other presidents and provosts. Few accreditors now formally engage higher level administrators in their decision-making structure. Restructuring to include this broader perspective might be a challenge since the composition of an accreditation council often reflects a carefully engineered balance of power among various communities of interest. But, the time has come to do so.

Looking to the Future

If institutional leaders and accrediting bodies both embrace their appropriate leadership responsibilities, each will understand the other better. That increased understanding should, over time, be in the best interest of all concerned—programs, institutions, professions, and, most important, students. ■

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  Nov. 27, 2001 • Washington, DC
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