

Recent Trends and Practices in Accreditation: Implications for the Development of Standards for Council for the Accreditation of Education Programs (CAEP)

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Draft 2

The Council for the Accreditation of Education Programs (CAEP)—the professional accreditation organization for teacher education programs in the U.S.—has charged a high level Commission with the development of new standards for accreditation to govern the programs that it accredits. CAEP is the product of an amalgamation of two earlier accrediting organizations—the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). To support the process developing new standards, CAEP has asked Dr. Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to prepare this background paper on recent trends and promising practices in accreditation.

Background. The last two decades has seen a good deal of change in the environmental conditions surrounding higher education in the U.S., and with it accreditation. These changes have affected both institutional (regional) and specialized (professional) accreditation (Ewell, 2008). Among the most prominent have been:

- Increased Accountability. Accreditors have always claimed the dual mission of providing quality assurance to the public through the provision of publicly-reported evidence about the condition and results of educational programs and generating information through systematic evaluation and review that can help educational programs improve. Although the balance between these two has always been more tilted toward the former than the latter for the accreditors of licensed professions like teacher education than for regional accreditors, growing public concerns about the global competitiveness of U.S. higher education and the quality of its graduates—especially with respect to student learning outcomes—have affected everybody. In particular, they have led to increased aggressiveness on the part of the federal government and the states to regulate institutional and program quality through inspection. This, in turn, has led to a greater sense of urgency on the part of accreditors—and the academy more generally—to act promptly to address growing accountability concerns directly through their review processes before these external actors act first.
- Growing Centrality of Student Learning Outcomes. At the same time, the evidential basis for sustaining claims for quality has moved inexorably away from the resources invested in an educational program (such as dollars, faculty, and facilities) and the processes that it employs (such as curriculum and pedagogies)—though these remain important—toward direct evidence of student learning. There are several reasons for this. One is the fact that changes in instructional delivery including on-line, mastery-based, and asynchronous methods render approaches to “inspecting” them increasingly impracticable. In a rapidly diversifying instructional world, sound evidence of student learning outcomes becomes one of the only

common “coins of the realm” available. Second, guarantees regarding high quality learning outcomes are important in their own right for professional training on which the public depends. Growing numbers of studies now support the claim that variations in the quality of classroom teachers are responsible for much of the variations in learning performance among K-12 students. Together, these developments suggest that accreditation standards and review processes focused ever more aggressively on the quality of student learning outcomes will be increasingly required for teacher education programs. They are reinforced by the fact that asking for evidence of “student academic achievement” leads the list of the federal government’s recognition requirements for accreditors.

- Improvements in Data Quality. Finally, the data resources needed to support more evidential and outcomes-focused reviews are growing rapidly in extent and sophistication. With respect to student assessment, “value-added” techniques are enabling more precise estimates to be made of how much learning students have gained through instruction. This is true for both K-12 and higher education. The parallel development of student “unit record” databases, funded in part by federal State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) grants, can track school graduates into college, the graduates of both into the workplace, and can identify the teachers of record for any elementary or secondary class. This, in turn, makes it possible to develop data systems that can enable the classroom performance of K-12 students to be documented, and broken down by the teacher education programs that trained their teachers.

Responding to these conditions effectively, requires systematic discussion of a “new ecology” for teacher education similar to that produced for some regional accreditors to inform the development of their new standards (Ewell, 2010). Changed accreditation practices that respond to these conditions—as well as fundamental choices that accreditors need to make—are discussed in subsequent sections.

Standards. All accrediting organizations have standards which, in essence, are normative statements according to which program condition and performance can be reviewed. This process of review against defined standards constitutes the core of any accreditation process. But both the construction of standards and their particular role in guiding quality review have changed over the years. When they were first evolved almost a century ago, accreditation standards represented specific benchmarks or criteria that all institutions or programs were expected to meet. Most standards, moreover, referenced resources or processes that could be counted or observed in a relatively straightforward fashion. Examples included minimum numbers of faculty with defined credentials or particular curricular features and/or learning experiences.

As higher education became more complex, however, the ability of straightforward quantitative standards based on resources and processes to capture “quality” became increasingly problematic—especially for institutional accreditors. The result was “aspirational” standards, constructed to put forward an “ideal type” of institutional or program characteristics and performance that could guide a review more broadly. Because of a more narrowly constructed responsibility to professional standards, specialized accreditors properly did not give up prescriptive minimum standards, but they did move toward aspirational standards that could be broadly applied in the context of programmatic mission. So

a first choice that any accreditor must face when establishing new standards is how much prescription its standards should embody.

- Prescriptive Standards Grounded in Research. If a decision is made to adopt one or more prescriptive standards, the authority upon which they rest should be clear. Traditionally, such standards have been established on the basis of shared professional norms derived from accumulated experience. As the knowledge base created by educational research continues to expand, however, decisions to establish prescriptive standards should increasingly be based on features or practices that have been empirically proven to be effective. Fifteen years ago, for example, the Accrediting Board for Engineering Technologies (ABET) established a number of generic learner outcomes in addition to discipline-specific abilities (such as “an ability to communicate effectively”) and specified curricular features (such as a culminating design project) that research on outcomes in the discipline had previously shown to be effective. It then rigorously evaluated the resulting accreditation process—*ABET 2000*—over the subsequent ten year period to empirically confirm its value (ABET, 2004). For teacher education, the first step of empirically establishing the authority of particular practices appears to have been taken with the publication a year ago of reports of the National Research Council (NRC, 2010) and the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning (NCATE, 2010). Explicit prescriptive standards addressing specific features of learning experiences and clinical experiences in teacher education programs can now be considered.
- Aspirational Standards and Evidence. While prescriptive standards should be grounded in research-based knowledge, aspirational standards function more as a vehicle around which to structure submitted evidence. As an element of an “ideal type,” each standard thus invites the program’s faculty and staff to make a particular case for effectiveness grounded in a body of evidence of their own choosing. With this body of evidence on the table, the ensuing review process becomes, in a sense, a purposeful dialogue around the evidence presented. Absent evidence, in fact, the standard has little independent meaning. Like the application of an operational definition, the standard *is* the evidence.
- Integrative Standards. The traditional organization of accreditation standards for both institutional and specialized accreditors is topical. Separate standards are established to address specific areas or functions—mission/goals, curriculum and pedagogy, faculty and teaching resources, finances, etc. While easy to understand, this topical organization tends to generate somewhat formulaic reviews in which each area is pursued in isolation, frequently by a separate subgroup of each visiting team. More recently, some accreditors have established broad integrative standards—generally fewer in number and focused on a more holistic view of effectiveness. For example, the Senior Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) has only four standards. The last of these is directed at “institutional learning,” combining planning, institutional research and analysis, program review and assessment

practices, and all the organizational mechanisms required to undertake evidence-based and continuous improvement.

- The Format of Standards. Accreditation standards are typically constructed as declarative statements describing particular program features and practices. As such statements evolved from numeric lists of requirements to more general statements of condition or performance, they became progressively less decisive in grounding the judgments made about a given program—especially in the context of a high-stakes decision. The result has been an ongoing effort to increase linguistic precision while preserving flexibility of application. In pursuit of this goal, many accreditors have identified specific “guidelines” that exemplify what constitutes sufficient evidence. For example, an external financial audit report is frequently deemed acceptable as evidence of sound fiscal condition. On the opposite front, to emphasize the belief that accreditation should involve an active *inquiry* into the program and how it operates, other accreditors have construed their standards as questions for review, to be used creatively in seeking and constructing evidence for both self-studies and team reports.

Cultures of Evidence. “Culture of evidence” has become a term of art for accreditation practice since it was first advanced as a goal by WASC some twenty years ago (WASC, 2002). But while a compelling phrase, what does a culture of evidence really imply? At the most basic level, it suggests that all of the actions of an organization are grounded in verified knowledge and guided by a commitment to ongoing inquiry. Neither belief nor anecdote is sufficient grounds for action or assertion unless sustained by appropriate bodies of evidence. Good evidence has a number of properties that ought to fundamentally ground its use in an accreditation context. First, it ought to be *relevant* in that it is demonstrably related to the question under investigation. Second, any evidence advanced ought to be *verifiable* in that its validity can be replicated or readily checked by others. Third, any evidence used should be *representative* in that it is typical of an underlying situation or condition and not a special case. Fourth, good evidence should be *cumulative* in that it consists of multiple mutually reinforcing components and is advanced to make an overall case. Finally, sound evidence is *actionable* in that it readily signals what ought to be done to rectify a condition or to conduct further investigation.

While stated as generalities, these properties ought to be constantly and consistently invoked when judging the soundness of any body of evidence submitted by a program or considered by an accrediting organization. More specifically, they should apply to:

- The evidence submitted by a program in the course of review and considered by the accreditor. In many accreditation settings, much of the material submitted and reviewed is descriptive or illustrative rather than being strictly evidential. This tends to be exacerbated when the requirements for submitting material emphasize narrative “self-study” rather than specified data displays. As a result, greater attention to evidence tends to be fostered when programs under review are required to assemble, analyze, and reflect upon specific statistics on performance or outcomes such as successful job placement or licensure passage rates. One result has been a marked trend among accreditors away from narratives toward much shorter, evidence-focused, briefs directed at particular aspects of program condition or performance.

- The accreditor itself as a “learning organization.” Although they are usually viewed as the receivers of evidence in order to make judgments about programs, accreditors themselves can systematically use evidence to build collective knowledge among their stakeholders or to continuously improve what they do. For example, some accreditors systematically collect examples of good or exemplary practices among the programs they accredit, document these, and disseminate them as a resource for the field. Others organize cohorts of program or institutional stakeholders that engage in ongoing collective inquiry on common topics as they undergo review.

A resulting choice for accrediting organizations, therefore, is the extent to which fostering a “culture of evidence” will be explicitly emphasized as a characteristic of both the organization itself and of the programs that it accredits. A second, related, choice is the extent to which specific standards of evidence organized around the properties of evidence listed above should be established and applied to the evidence submitted to an accreditor by an institution or program. With standards of evidence in place, the conclusions of a review will be able to address not only educational quality itself but also the confidence with which conclusions about educational quality can be drawn.

Evidence of Learning and Effectiveness. Partly in response to stakeholder demands, the prominence of evidence of student/graduate learning effectiveness in the accreditation process has risen steadily over the past two decades. This attention accelerated markedly in the last five years, as exemplified by the report of the Secretary’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education (commonly known as the “Spellings Commission”) (USDOE, 2006). As a result, evidence of “student academic achievement” (this is the language of the federal regulations governing the recognition of accrediting organizations) has become an integral part of all accreditors’ standards and review processes. In examining the quality of teacher education, moreover, “student learning” has a double referent in that it refers to the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of the graduates of teacher preparation programs themselves as well as the elementary and secondary students whom they ultimately teach.

More specific developments around this topic include:

- The Adequacy of Learning Results. Assessing student learning outcomes has been a central preoccupation of accreditation for many years, but the emphasis of review has been placed primarily on the adequacy of the assessment *processes* that an institution or a program has in place. Among regional and institutional accreditors, this has almost exclusively been the case. Among specialized accreditors, the actual levels of student performance on such measures as licensure examinations are of considerable concern, but even here accreditors have been reluctant to set specific minimum performance levels below which a program should be cited as deficient. Now the pressure is increasing for accreditors to do both—to explicitly examine evidence of how well students perform against explicit benchmarks of performance as well as the validity and reliability of the methods used to gather the evidence itself. Whatever the assessment method used, however, examining learning against specific benchmarks is

operationally challenging and requires accreditors to systematically consider the questions below:

Are adequate or acceptable benchmarks available? Much of the evidence of student learning outcomes that accreditors receive and review—for example student work collected in portfolios—is not collected through standardized processes that accommodate external benchmarking. And even those that can do so are not always easy to judge. Pass rates on teacher licensure examinations reported in compliance with federal Title II requirements, for example, are not comparable across states because states set their own individual pass-rate benchmarks. True benchmarks, in contrast, require an identically-calculated direct performance measure (not a rate or percent) for all members of the populations to be compared.

Is there a method to determine what standard of performance is “acceptable?” The most straightforward approach is to set an absolute minimum performance standard, but accreditors have avoided this course of action for a number of good reasons. First, there is rarely any evidence grounded in empirical research that a particular test score or similar measure is validly associated with later professional performance. Second, setting absolute standards requires substantial attention to managing “borderline” performers—those just missing the minimum standard that can claim extenuating circumstances. Two major alternatives to minimum standards are normative standards and continuous improvement. Adopting normative standards entails setting a statistical criterion of some kind based on the program’s performance in relation to peers (for example, within a standard deviation of the mean, within the top seven deciles, etc.). This approach has been taken by several national accreditors that examine the graduation and job-placement rates or institutions offering career-based programs. Adopting the continuous improvement approach entails comparing the program’s current performance against its performance in prior years or reporting periods. This approach has been taken by some accreditors of business programs and in the health professions.

Because teaching is a licensed profession with licensure based partly upon examination performance, teacher education programs already have examination results for their graduates on a number of national certification examinations, and these are already considered in the accreditation process. As more authentic standardized assessments such as the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA)—which includes attempts to measure the performance of P-12 students—and the use of portfolio-based bodies of evidence like the Teacher Work Sample become more widespread, moreover, results should become a significant portion of the outcomes evidence examined in accreditation.

- Placement and Performance of Graduates. In addition to the adequacy of student learning results at the point of graduation, there is increasing interest among accreditors’ stakeholders in evidence of the continuing professional effectiveness of recent graduates. Here some

stakeholders are concerned about the extent to which the institution or program is meeting national or regional needs with respect to professional practice. This entails addressing such questions as the extent to which graduates actually enter the profession and how long they stay, as well as the extent to which they choose to do so in underserved regions or in jobs that serve underserved populations. At the same time, many stakeholders are concerned about the effectiveness of the ultimate outcomes of professional practice. In teacher education, for example, program effectiveness is in principle observable through the differential learning gains made by elementary school pupils taught by graduates of a particular teacher education program in comparison to others—an approach now being implemented in Louisiana, Tennessee, and a few other states (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011; National Research Council, 2010). Such approaches are increasingly enabled by state longitudinal data systems. But they are in their infancy and raise formidable questions about statistical interpretation and standard setting. Teacher performance can also be inferred from indirect methods such as classroom observation and student surveys although, again, formidable technical problems of administration and interpretation must be faced and overcome.

- Stakeholder Ratings. Learning effectiveness can also be indirectly inferred by the opinions about graduate performance offered by stakeholders, especially employers. Organizations that employ the graduates of professional preparation programs frequently have formal employee performance rating systems that can supply the necessary data to disaggregate by institution or program. For example, the Boeing Company recently engaged in an analysis of performance of its engineers, broken down by where they earned their engineering degrees, although data like these have not yet been systematically considered by engineering accreditors. Similarly, CAEP currently requires programs to administer stakeholder surveys to principals and other school officials asking them to rate the professional performance of their graduates.

The Rhythm of Review. The established view of accreditation is that it is a periodic process characterized by a high level of activity on the part of both program and accreditor once every few years, with long periods of relative inactivity between episodes. Increasingly, however, both institutional and specialized accrediting organizations have been moving toward a situation in which regular contact between the accreditor and the accredited is more continuous. This situation is visible in a number of increasingly common practices:

- Interim Visits or Reports. Although the ten-year cycle of review remains largely in place, all regional accreditors now require an interim visit or report at the five year mark. Although in many cases these interim encounters can be quite short, they help respond to the common criticism of accreditation that the current pace of change in higher education is simply too accelerated to tolerate a decade-long cycle. Although the duration of the standard review cycle is typically shorter in specialized than in regional accreditation, the same phenomenon of shorter cycles is occurring here as well.

- Focused Visits or Reports. In other cases, accreditors have asked institutions or programs to undergo focused visits or off-cycle reports that address only one or a couple of topics which the prior review visit revealed to be questionable or in need of improvement. Among regional accreditors, a recent estimate provided by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is that as many as a third of accredited institutions are engaged in one or more off-cycle focused reviews of this kind (ACE, 2012).
- Statistical Monitoring. In parallel, more and more accreditors are establishing statistical performance indicators to monitor institutional or program performance. These go beyond traditional “annual reports” that just list descriptive attributes like student enrollments or instructional resources to embrace observable aspects of performance such as completion rates, licensure passage, graduate placement, efficient use of resources, or scholarly productivity. These measures are generally reported annually and provided to the public via reports and websites. Some accreditors have gone further by establishing minimum performance levels on some of these indicators. If an institution or programs falls below one of these triggers, it is either sanctioned or tagged for focused review.
- Continuous Virtual Monitoring. As the on-line footprints of collegiate programs increase in terms of both infrastructure and instructional delivery, additional ways for accreditors to monitor performance become possible. Announced or unannounced, representatives of accrediting organizations can “visit” program websites to virtually inspect whether or not certain standards appear to be met. More intrusively, they can simulate dialogue with the program’s staff about administrative matters like applying for admissions or certification, can directly examine syllabi or other instructional materials, or can enroll as a student to audit a class. Although such approaches are not yet widely used, they are an increasingly powerful option for accreditors as the e-presence of educational programs grows.

Any of these variations on the traditional rhythm of review help maintain more continuous contact between accreditors and programs, but those that are most flexible—like triggering more focused review if certain conditions are met—are likely to be the most promising.

The Conduct of Review. The centerpiece of a typical accreditation review is a multi-day site visit conducted by a team of peer reviewers who directly observe instructional settings and resources, and interview faculty, staff, and students. Although protocols are sometimes used to guide the team, typical practice relies on their experience as peers to look for the right things and to ask the right questions. Increasingly, however, accreditors are moving beyond this established approach. In part, this is because the quality—and particularly, the consistency—of peer judgments about quality are now being questioned. In part, it is because particular topics of growing interest in accreditation—interpreting learning outcomes data or examining instructional technology—are not typically within the competence of a typical peer reviewer. At the same time, additional methods of inquiry beyond just physical observation and interview are now being used by a growing number of accreditors. Examples of such innovations in the conduct of review include:

- “Disciplining” Peer Review. Responding to widespread complaints about lack of consistency across peer-based team judgments, accreditors are increasingly turning to explicit tools that teams can use to evaluate evidence and draw conclusions (Ewell, 2012). As noted, protocols and rubrics are the most common of these. Many regional accreditors now use rubrics to align team perceptions of the effectiveness of such processes as assessment and program review. In addition to these are tools designed to broaden the ways teams gather evidence beyond interviews and direct observation. For example, “mini-surveys” consisting of only two or three questions, quickly tallied by a team member, can be used as an aid to discussion in large group gatherings; this focuses subsequent discussion and helps avoid the problem that such sessions can be dominated by the opinions of a few vocal participants. Similarly, some members of the team can engage in ethnographic data gathering without formal interviews at all. Additional tools can be used as aids to decision-making or coming to judgment. Using nominal group technique, for instance, allows all members of a team to contribute equally to a decision or conclusion without the discussion being dominated by the chair or a couple of strongly opinionated members.
- Off-Site Reviews by Expert Panels. One way to compensate for lack of topical knowledge among peer reviewers is to employ specially convened expert panels to examine particular aspects of institutional performance on the basis of a submitted portfolio of evidence. For example, such panels convened by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) conduct a “desk audits” of relatively easily-verifiable aspects of institutional condition and performance like financial stability and administrative capacity. The WASC Senior Commission is developing similar expert panels to examine graduation/retention rates and results of assessing student learning outcomes.
- “Risk-Based” Approaches. One common complaint about accreditation is that review standards are applied indiscriminately in reviews regardless of the particular circumstances of the institution or program under review. This can mean that an institution or program that has little risk of not being accredited is examined in exactly the same way as one that is visibly weak, and therefore at risk, in one or more areas. To reduce the burden of accreditation for those at little risk of losing accreditation, many regional accreditors would like to move more aggressively toward establishing review approaches in which the level of scrutiny applied is tailored to the current characteristics of the institution: an institution that has few resources and many complaints from students is examined more closely than one with ample resources and a long track record of successful engagement with its accrediting organization. The recently issued draft reports of both the ACE Task Force on Accreditation and the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) have advocated for establishing such approaches (ACE, 2012 and NACIQI, 2012).
- Audit. Most quality assurance work outside the U.S. is not centered on peer review but employs visiting experts to inspect various aspects of an institution or a program directly. One of the

most common techniques here is the academic audit, in which visitors choose a small but systematic sample of entities to look at (students, faculty, courses, classrooms, etc.) and “backward map” the decisions and standards that led to their current status or situation (Dill, Williams, Massy, and Cook, 1996). The “Inquiry Brief” approach to reviewing teacher education programs pioneered by TEAC is founded on the audit approach and continues as one of the three accreditation pathways offered by CAEP.

- Cohort Approaches. Under the established approach to accreditation, institutions or programs are reviewed one at a time. But if collective learning and program improvement is the primary objective of accreditation, establishing “learning communities” comprised of three or four entities being reviewed at the same time can be productive. The WASC Senior Commission is employing such learning communities in its work to pilot the Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as part of the accrediting process.

Results of Accreditation. Most of the outcomes of a review in traditional accreditation settings are black or white: an institution or program is either accredited or not accredited, with little information beyond this simple status reported to the public. Over the past decade, this has begun to change as accrediting organizations have responded to the wishes of various stakeholders and the public to provide more information about quality. Among the most prominent ideas or approaches associated with accreditation results are:

- “Graded” Outcomes. One alternative to the simple disclosure of accredited status is for accrediting organizations to create two or more levels of accreditation, ranging from the most basic in which an institution or program meets threshold standards to successively increasing levels in which the institution or program fulfills standards at a higher level or “with distinction.” These approaches are well suited to “aspirational” standards because such an approach to constructing standards provides a lot of ceiling within which to assess performance. Another way of constructing graded outcomes is to sort institutions or programs on the basis of the quality of the evidence they present. The Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the United Kingdom, for instance, assigns institutions to one of three “levels of confidence” regarding their claims about quality and these assignments are publicly disclosed. The approach is roughly similar to Bond ratings in the financial arena. A “triple-A” assignment means that there is little risk involved for a potential investor, while lower ratings signify increasing levels of risk. This kind of activity seems particularly suited to accreditation’s growing role in consumer protection or informing consumer choice.
- Tailored Public Reporting. One alternative to simply reporting accredited status to the public is disclosure of all review products including team reports and commission action letters. This is done by several specialized accreditors in the U.S. and is common among government-run quality assurance agencies in other countries where full reports and communications are frequently available on line. Certainly this alternative has the virtue of complete candor. A substantial drawback, however, is that these materials may make little sense out of context, are

too voluminous to provide meaningful information, or are written in a kind of “code” that only insiders can understand. To meet this challenge, some regional and specialized accreditors only disclose action letters or similar follow-up communications. But this may discourage accreditors from sharing feedback that will be helpful to those reviewed, but potentially embarrassing or damaging to them. One course of action here parallels practices in financial auditing: the balance sheet and income/expenditure statements are accompanied by a confidential “management letter” that provides evaluative information directly to the organization’s management. Perhaps the best alternative is to develop short summary reports on the outcomes of each accreditation review that provide an overall statement on the outcome of the review, together with a summary of strengths and challenges organized around common headings derived from the accreditor’s standards. This alternative is currently being actively pursued by many of the regional accreditors and is in place for about ten percent specialized accreditors (CHEA, 2005).

Together with the topic of graduate learning and performance outcomes, the topic of how to frame and communicate the results of accreditation reviews have generated the most prominent discussions of needed changes in accredited practice over the last five years. Transparency leads the list of recommendations of the reports of both the ACE Task Force on Accreditation and the draft NACIQI report being issued this spring. Recent surveys of accreditors, furthermore, reveal transparency and reporting to the public to be easily the most common actions taken or planned by accrediting organizations in response to pressures for reform (CHEA, 2005).

Moving Forward. As the Commission established by CAEP undertakes the important work of crafting new standards for the accreditation of teacher education programs, it should carefully consider the kinds of practices outlined in this paper. Some of these practices have already been adopted by CAEP in one or more of its review pathways. Others may be deemed inappropriate or inapplicable to teacher education. But because crafting new standards is an opportunity that most accreditors only encounter every few decades, it should be made the most of by looking carefully at what other accrediting organizations now do.

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