

# The Accrediting System and Its Impact on Finance of Institutions of Higher Education in the United States

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One of the features of higher education in the United States is the practice of accreditation which has been employed as an important means to improve the quality of higher education. In contrast to many other countries, the accreditation system of higher education in America is unique. While most other countries control the quality of higher education through government authorities, accrediting activities of the United States are primarily done by voluntary and nongovernmental agencies. It is so unique that many people are curious about the reason why accrediting activities are dominated by voluntary and nongovernmental agencies rather than by government authorities. How does the system work, and what is its impact on finance in collegiate institutions? This study is intended to answer these questions.

## *What is accreditation:*

“Accreditation” is the noun form of the verb “accredit”, which, according to Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, means “to put (as by common consent) into a reputable or outstanding category: consider, recognize, or acclaim as rightfully possessing an uncontested status.” In other words, it implies that for an institution to be “accredited” is a good thing; it betokens a commendable and meritorious status; the status is assigned by some other party or parties; it is not self-assumed (Orlans 1975, p. 1-2).

One authoritative source defines accreditation as “a process of recognizing those educational institutions whose performance and integrity entitle them to the confidence of the educational community and the public.” Another holds that it is “the recognition accorded to an institution that meets the standards or criteria established by a competent agency or association.” In 1968, the U. S. Office of Education defined accrediting as “the voluntary process where by an agency or association grants public recognition to a school, institution, college, university, or specialized program of study that meets certain established qualifications and educational standards, as determined through initial and periodic evaluation.” (Orlans 1975, p. 2). In 1974, the word “voluntary” was dropped probably for the fact that a report characterized the “perception of accreditation as a private activity” as “anachronistic.” (National Commission on Accrediting 1972, p. 5). The use of accreditation to determine eligibility for government funds and other public benefits has lent an involuntary and public character to accrediting activities once regarded as entirely “voluntary and private”.

In examining the above definitions, it seems that the last one given by the U. S. Office of Education is more inclusive than the other two, because it demonstrates at least 4 distinguished elements of accreditation. That is, accreditation is a voluntary process in nature originally, subject to change due to the federal government’s intrusion, but many people are still against this kind of change; its purpose is to grant public recognition to either an institution or a specialized program of study; that institution or program should meet some specific standards or criteria; that the agency or association grants accreditation by means of initial periodic evaluations. In addition, We would find that a definition given by the Middle State Association of Colleges and schools could add an even more explicit explanation about accreditation to a layman.

The Association describes that “A Middle State evaluation is a longrange process designed to help an institution analyze its functions, appraise its educational effectiveness, and discover means by which its work can be strengthened. Accreditation is involved, but as a by-product rather than as the primary factor. Accreditation is simply a recognition, after evaluation, that in the judgement of its peers an institution is providing the quality of educational services

which society and the educational world have a right to expect of it” (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools 1978, p. 111). This definition tells people that the accrediting activity has laid special emphasis on evaluation activities, and that is perhaps the most important reason why people consider accreditation as an efficient device to improve the quality of higher education in America.

*The nature of accreditation:*

Generally speaking, the accrediting system of the United States could be divided into three parts: 1. State governments responsibilities and activities; 2. Voluntary and nongovernmental agencies' accrediting, and 3. Federal government's "listing" or statistical responsibilities (Harclerod 1980, p. 1). But, from a historical perspective, the state governments and federal government never played a role as important as voluntary agencies did in accrediting activities. Therefore, it has been pointed out in preceding statements that accrediting activities are primarily voluntary and nongovernmental in nature.

There are many reasons why federal government and state governments did not engage themselves actively in accrediting activities. Jerry W. Miller states that the functions accreditation serves for American society could have been established as a constitutional or statutory responsibility of government, much as it is in other countries which have ministries of education. The fact that it was not is attributed by Selden to historical social values and political philosophy in the United States:

The non-existence of an accrediting program operated by the national government can be attributed to the principles enunciated in the United States Constitution and to the American conviction that our social welfare is dependent upon education as a local responsibility. The absence of adequate state accreditation springs from a tradition of laissez-faire independence and sectarian rivalry, a fear of political interference, and a later acceptance of regional associations as the best instruments to perform what the states are legally empowered to do (Selden 1960, p.8)

On the other hand, some state governments have exercised the granting of charters for institutions of higher education since the establishment of Harvard

college in 1636. But, historically, the chartering process has not assured close scrutiny of educational standards and academic requirements of institutions, neither at the time institutions began nor on a continuing basis. The American Council on Education states:

The states differ greatly in the qualifications required before a private group can obtain a charter to operate a college or university. In some states, such as New York, the authority is assigned to the state department of education and the board of regents; these agencies have set up standards that must be met before a new institution may be issued a charter. In many of the states, however, few standards of any are maintained, and any group that can afford the cost of incorporation, or can persuade the state legislature to issue a charter, can obtain the authority to grant all kinds of degrees regardless of the staff or facilities that it may have for such purposes. In very few states, furthermore, is there any supervision over privately controlled institutions after they have been established. Such laxity has permitted, from time to time, the operation of institutions which do little more than sell degrees or certificates (Singletary 1968, p. 8).

In explaining the reason of state laxity in chartering and control of institutions, Miller pointed out two possible factors: The majority of the early institutions were religious related institutions. Their European heritage led them to be wary of any governmental influence or control of education. Moreover, traditionally, academe and society at large believed that all institutions, even publicly supported ones, can best serve society when political control is minimized (Miller 1973, p. 12). Daniel Webster presented a good reason for steering the institutions clear of political control. He said that it would be a dangerous, a most dangerous, experiment to subject institutions to the rise and fall of popular parties and the fluctuations of political opinions (Hofstadter and Smith, eds., 1961, p. 211). All in all, these reasons emphasize a critical issue of "academic freedom", and these reasons are more than enough to explain why accrediting activities depend mainly on voluntary and nongovernmental agencies rather than on governmental agencies.

#### ***The origin and development of accreditation:***

The accrediting movement in the United States as it relates to higher educational institutions had its origins in the need for reliable bases upon which the

growing number of institutions calling themselves “colleges” might be appraised. Indeed, much of this country’s early history of accreditation in higher education centered on the question, what is a college? (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1959, p. 9).

The development of accreditation could be described in following historical periods:

1. Before 1787, from the founding of Harvard college in 1636 to 1787, there was not a bit of effort to standardize, rate or classify collegiate institutions.
2. From 1787-1870.

The Board of Regents of University of the State of New York was established in 1784. Three years later, the Regents were required by law to yearly visit and review the work of every college in the state, register each curriculum at each institution, and report to the legislature. It was not until 1846 Iowa became the second state adopting similar activities (Harclerod 1980, p.2). Today, there are 17 states that have established agencies or commissions with direct legal charges to “accredit” institutions and programs or with general powers that have been used for this purpose (Birch 1979, pp. 172-4).

In 1847, the American Medical Association became the first programmatic association which has made a great contribution to the improvement in medical education after the so called “Abraham Flexner Study.”

Federal activity during this period began in 1867 with the establishment of the Department of Education, a statistical agency with a small budget. In order to fulfill its reporting and statistical duties, the agency staff found it necessary to collect a variety of facts about the colleges. The criteria adopted by the Department were quite simple: “Any institution that was authorized to grant degrees and that had college students in attendance would be regarded as a college.” On this basis, 369 institutions were included in the first list in 1870.

3. Between 1870-1914.

In the 1870’s the need became urgent for stronger academic standards and institutional evaluation of the rapidly expanding secondary schools and colleges. This critical need led to the development of voluntary associations. Between 1885 and 1895, four out of the six regional accrediting associations were formed, including the New England Association of College and Secondary Schools (1885);

The Middle States Association (1887); The North Central Association (1895); and the Southern Association (1895). The other two, the Northwest Association and Western Association, were formed in 1917 and 1924 respectively.

Accreditation of colleges by these associations did not necessarily immediately follow their founding, the first to formulate an accrediting program was the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1910. The other 5 associations issued their first list of accredited colleges between 1919-1954.

Table 1 gives the specific dates of the formation and initial accrediting of these six regional associations (Orlans 1975, p.9):

Six Regional Associations: States of Formation and Initial Accrediting

Association	Formation	Year of Initial
		Accreditation Standards for College
New England	1885	1954
Middle States	1887	1921
North Central	1895	1910
Southern	1895	1919
Northwest	1917	1921
Western	1924	1949

In 1900, the Association of American Universities was founded with an initial membership of 14 institutions which offered advanced or graduate programs. The initial purpose was to consider matters relating to graduate study and it played an important role in accreditation for 40 years.

In the early 1900's many American students were going to Europe to pursue their education beyond the bachelor's degree. This practice soon raised questions of the ability of American colleges to prepare students for advanced study. In 1904, the University of Berlin announced that it would admit to graduate study from the United States only those students holding bachelor degrees conferred

by members of the AAU. AAU had decided to request the U.S. Bureau of Education to classify the colleges and universities of the nation. The Bureau in 1911 made a classification but was prevented from publishing the list. In 1913, the AAU submitted to German Ministries of Education a list of 119 institutions.

#### 4. Between 1914-1948.

A major development in this period was the decision by the Association of American Universities to publish in 1914 the federal list of institutions that was withheld from publication by Presidents Taft and Wilson (Harclerod 1980, p.5)

During this period the Northwest (1917) and Western (1924) Association were established. In addition, the Middle States (1921), North Central (1910), Southern (1919), and Northwest (1921) Associations established accrediting standards and put them into operation.

In the 1930's the North Central Association adopted a new principle of accreditation less objective in nature, judging an institution in terms of its purposes and its total pattern as an institution.

A National institutional association started in 1926, when the National Home Study council was formed and began setting standards in correspondence education. More than 20 specialized programmatic association were started during this period, in such areas as: business (1919), law (1923), chemistry (1936), and journalism (1946).

The proliferation of new and specialized associations had brought about a very confusing situation and with it arose a need for coordination of accrediting agencies or associations (Harclerond 1980, p. 22-25).

#### 5. Between 1948-1975.

Major changes took place in every aspect of accreditation during this period. The AAU announced its departure from accreditation in 1948. When the prestigious AAU list was no longer available, the regional association lists became much more important. As a result, in 1948 the Western College Association embarked on the accreditation task. At the same time, the presidents of a number of major universities established the National Commission on Accrediting (1948) to try to stop the proliferation of new specialized associations and to trim the wings of those in existence.

Another major new development of this time was the passage by Congress

of the Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952. This Act allowed the United States Office of Education to adopt the policy of relying on the evaluations of the regional associations as a basis for determining institutional eligibility for federal grants. Since then, the Office of Education has initiated the recognition of accreditation agencies and published the recognized accrediting agencies list quadrennially. But, the Office of Education has retained the policy of avoiding direct eligibility determinations requiring the judgment of the quality of individual institutions (Orlans 1975, p. 46).

Also in this period, many new specialized associations were founded such as health administration (1948), health education (1964), psychology (1952), construction education (1974). Two new national institutional associations also came into existence: The Association of Independent College and Schools (1952) and the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools (1965).

In 1968, The Commission of Education established a special Division of Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility which strengthened the influence of the federal government over regional accrediting agencies and nationwide associations (Harcleroad 1980, p.27)

In 1949, a National Committee of Regional Accrediting Agencies was set up to coordinate the regional activities and to cooperate with similar national agencies, in the hope that ways might be found to minimize the evils that have accompanied the rapidly expanding accrediting movement (Orlans 1975, p.24). The committee was transformed into the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education (FRACHE) in 1964.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's it became clear that regional and national institutional accrediting forces would have to band together to wield more influence. At the same time, a major study by Claude Puffer (1970) emphasized the need for a national organization or council for all parties interested in accreditation. Based on these reasons, the NCA and the FRACHE, described by Orlans (1975, p.26) as "Two bears in a cage", combined in 1975 to form the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA)—An umbrella agency covering all kinds of accrediting agencies throughout the country.

#### 6. From 1975-

The new Council on Postsecondary Accreditation has played a major role in

the attempt to stem proliferation, and to discourage federal efforts to turn voluntary membership associations into quasi-governmental organizations with police powers (Harclerod 1980, p.5). With its broadbased constituency, COPA is also described as a “balance wheel for accreditation”, or “main gear to interrelate (1) the general public, (2) users of accreditation, (3) general accrediting agencies, (4) specialized accrediting agencies, and (5) national associations representing institutions” (Harclerod, p.29). Indeed, during its first six year, COPA has thrived and has functioned well in a coordinating role to some extent. Although the initial purpose of slowing down the proliferation of accrediting agencies has not been achieved, (since the number of active accrediting agencies keeps growing), COPA’s major effort in the area of information dissemination and research has been significant.

One additional item deserving attention is that the recent indirect but emphatic federal entry into the accreditation area has led to the use of the term “triad” as a symbol of a three-part structure for accreditation (Kaplin 1975). The “triad” concept describes three operations: first, states “charters” or licenses and in some cases “accredit” institutions; second, accrediting associations admit to membership and thus “accredit most institutions that provide programs of acceptable educational quality; third, the federal government provides funds to postsecondary institutions and students on the basis of institutional “eligibility” derived from “listing” approved, nongovernmental, voluntary accrediting associations (Harclerod p.18-19). This uneasy and troubled “triad” provides the basic structure for accreditation as we enter the 1980’s.

Having finished the historical review, we shall now turn to the discussion of the procedures and criteria of accreditation as follows:

### ***Accreditation procedures:***

The Procedures of accreditation used by the six regional accrediting agencies are not the same. But, in general, there are four major steps followed by all the agencies. They are:

1. A voluntary application for accreditation, which signifies a wish (and, usually, the hope or belief that the applicant cherishes) to meet the accrediting agency’s published standards;

2. A searching self-study by the applicant institution or program, which is conducted in accord with general guidelines provided by the accrediting agency;
3. An intensive visit of inspection, which is carried out by a team of volunteers dispatched by the agency;
4. A subsequent decision by the agency's accrediting commission, which is based upon the self-study, the team report, and any other information available, to grant, deny, or renew accreditation for a given period, and which signifies that the applicant does, or does not, meet the agency's standards (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools 1978, p.26-33).

Of those four steps, two of them are most important. The first is a self-evaluation by the institution's full academic community. This results in a report which both enables the institution to review and reappraise its work as a whole, and affords visiting evaluators the background they need. The second is a visit by a team of experienced academic colleagues. Their function is to study the institution's analysis of its work, in the light of the facts as they see them, and to give the institution the views of competent outsiders on its strengths and weaknesses.

#### *Accrediting standards:*

Now, we are going to look into the standards of accreditation used by regional accrediting agencies, in other words, the criteria by which the institutions are being evaluated. The earliest attempts at accreditation by the regional associations were based on simple sets of criteria involving such fundamental institutional characteristics such as size of endowment, number of faculty, number of years of high school required for admission, and length of the educational program. As interest and need grew, however, the criteria became more numerous, more specific, and more quantitative. Afterward, the criticism of such specific and quantitative standards had been aroused.

In 1929, the North Central Association embarked upon a three-year study of its evaluation standards. They found that there was not a single one of the quantitative standards that could be validated against any of the qualitative measures which were applied to the institutions. Therefore, in 1934, the North

Central Association decided to adopt the qualitative standards instead of the old quantitative standards. In the years that followed, other regional association moved in the same direction and today all express their criteria predominantly in qualitative terms.

Although the standards which have been used by the accrediting agencies are slightly different, there is considerable similarity among all documents in terms of the broad institutional characteristics examined in the evaluative process. The eight major areas which received consistent attention from all agencies are;

1. Goals and objectives;
2. Governance, administration, and organization;
3. Instructional staff;
4. Educational program;
5. Students and student services;
6. Library;
7. Facilities and equipment;
8. Financial resources (Petersen 1979, p. 13-49)

Just as diverse as the accrediting procedures, the accrediting standards are far from uniform. If we examine the six regional accrediting agencies' standards, we will find the differences in the varying degrees of details and the specificity of the standards.

It should be noted, however, that all regional standards are based essentially upon two fundamental premises: (1) an institution should be evaluated in terms of its own stated objectives; and (2) accrediting standards should be expressed in qualitative rather than quantitative terms.

***Impact on finance of institutions of higher education:***

Having reviewed the framework of accrediting system, we know that accreditation was devised in the United States as a means by which educational institutions and professional associations could establish standards and conduct self-regulation on a voluntary basis without government restraint or direction. In other words, it was devised initially to improve the quality of higher education and to protect academic autonomy. However, the implementation of accreditation has generated some unexpected impacts on finance of institutions of higher

educations. Because accreditation has been used as a means to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds by society and to determine eligibility for federal assistance by federal government. In addition, accreditation also might help institutions to manipulate resources more efficiently.

In the term of helping identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds, it implies that there are many public and private funds which are available only to those institutions that have been accredited. For example, when the Ford Foundation made a half billion dollars available for grants to colleges and universities in the mid-1950's, the first stipulation was that applicants must be accredited. Other philanthropic organizations tend to observe the same limitation (Harclerod 1980, p.27). Under this condition, because accreditation determines whether an institution has the opportunity to get access to external funds, those accredited institutions would certainly be better off than the nonaccredited institutions. Therefore, in order to survive, it is important for an institution to be accredited.

The most explicit impact of accreditation on an institutions' finance is, perhaps, that accreditation has been used as a basis for eligibility for federal assistance. The use of accreditation as a test for determining eligibility for federal assistance can be traced back to the Veterans Readjustment Act of 1952. To receive benefits, eligible veterans were required to enroll in courses offered by educational institutions approved by the state agency. The state approving agency could approve courses when such courses had been accredited and approved by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association.

After 1952, many subsequent provisions establishing accreditation as one of the criteria for eligibility and directing the Commissioner of Education to publish lists of recognized accrediting agencies are to be found in the National Defense Education Act of 1958, Higher Education Act of 1965, War Orphans Educational Assistance Act of 1965, Health Manpower Act of 1968, Vocational Education Amendment of 1968, Nurse Act of 1968, and the "Mondale Amendment" in the Education Amendments of 1972 (Orlans 1975, pp. 44-45, p.232).

The primary purpose of the Veterans Readjustment Act of 1952 was to protect the veterans against victimization by a diploma mill. The federal govern-

ment was concerned with assistance to veterans, not the educational institutions. For the same reason the provision was included in the War Orphans Assistance Act and the National Student Loan Insurance Act. Under other laws federal assistance has as its objective the support of educational institutions and accreditation is a requirement for institutional eligibility.

While these laws define an "eligible institution" as an accredited institution, the Commissioner normally is authorized to waive the requirement when he determines that there is no nationally recognized accrediting agency. Under such circumstance, he may utilize an advisory committee to evaluate the program or use the three-letters rule (letters from three accredited institutions that they will accept credits for transfer). An institution may also be deemed as accredited if the Commissioner determines that within a reasonable time it will be able to meet accreditation standards. The advisory committee approach and three-letters rule have been employed infrequently (Orlans 1975, p.232).

No matter whether these federal laws were proposed to help students or to support institutions, one thing is certain: accreditation influences an institution's finance in terms of source of students and institutional income. As federal grants become a major financial resource available to those institutions that are suffering scarcity of resources and declined enrollment in the 1980's, the eligibility for federal funds becomes more crucial to an institutions' survival. In a word, the impact of accreditation on college and university finance is more significant at present than in previous days.

Finally, we should see how accreditation affects an institution's inner resource allocation. According to the Middle State Association, an institution willing to be accredited must be admitted to the status of candidate for accreditation in advance. During the candidacy period the institution is required to file an annual external financial audit report (Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools 1978, p.30). The requirement of an externally audited financial statement by the Association would allow public interest groups to supervise how the institutions allocate their revenues. The Association also encourages the institutions to prepare an institutional development plan, because the association believes that: "No institution has such abundant resources that their utilization can not be increased by wise planning" (Middle State Association of Colleges and

Schools 1978, p.21). This requirement, we believe, would no doubt lead the institutions to manipulate their resources more efficiently.

***Summary and conclusion:***

Accreditation is a unique system in the U.S.A. It improves the quality of higher education and protects academic autonomy. One of its characteristics is its voluntary and nongovernmental nature. From a historical point of view, it was the state of New York which first provided for "accreditation" of colleges and universities. In 1787, the regents of the University of the State of New York were required to register (accredit) all institutions of higher education under their jurisdiction. Most other state, however, did not establish such an agency until at least a century later and some still not up to this day. Finally, in the 1870's and 1880's the need became critical for stronger academic standards and institutional evaluation of the rapidly expanding secondary schools and colleges. It provided the opportunity to establish voluntary *membership* associations. These associations proliferated very fast both in number and in variety. Today there are six regional accrediting agencies and 48 professional and vocational associations recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (Petersen 1980).

The procedures and standards set up by the voluntary regional agencies to evaluate institutions are various. However, their basic components are quite similar. For example, in terms of procedures. They all emphasize self-study and on-site visits. They all emphasize qualitative standards instead of quantitative in the evaluation of institutions.

Constitutionally, the federal government is not responsible for education, But, through its governmental listing responsibilities the Department of Education has been involved in accreditation by way of summarizing the state educational activities and publishing a list since 1870. Most important thing is that in 1952 the Office of Education published a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations as a main source of information regarding the eligibility of institutions to participate in federal funding programs. Since then, the federal government has been relying more directly on higher education's own "voluntary" accrediting system in determining which colleges and universities are eligible for federal funds.

The implementation of accreditation has some impact on an institution's finance. First, the need of submitting annually audited financial statements and preparing institutional development plans as a requirement to be accredited would encourage an institution to manipulate its finances more efficiently. Second, the use of accreditation as a criteria for determining an institutions eligibility for federal funds and other public or private funds has exercised tremendous impact on the source of students and institutional income. Under the scarcity of resources and declined enrollment of the 1980's, accreditation would have a significant impact on institutional survival.

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# 美國大專認可制度及其對學校經費 方面之影響

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中文摘要

美國的大專認可制度是一種十分特殊的管理大專院校品質的制度，它不同於一般國家多半由教育部管理學校，而是由同性質的或同地區的大專院校自行結合而成的民間學術團體負責評鑑學校，並對認為能達到一定水準者予以認可，凡經認可之學校即可加入為該認可組織或機構之會員，此種制度即謂之認可制度。這種制度的實施對於美國高等教育機構具有相當大之約束力，特別在提高學校素質方面貢獻尤鉅。

本文之主旨即在探討美國不由聯邦政府或州政府負起管理學校品質之責，而由民間組織的學術團體主其事之原因為何；又此等民間認可機構如何發揮其功能及其對美國高等教育機構經費方面之影響如何，亦為本文研究目的之所在。

本文之內容大要包括下列數點：第一，探討認可制度之意義與性質，特別着重在認可制度之非官方的自願性性質之探討；第二，探索認可制度的起源及其發展，對認可制度的發展史作一系統的敘述；第三，探討各認可組織實施學校認可時之步驟及其所使用之標準；最後，探討認可制度的實施對於高等教育機構的經費方面所發生之影響如何。

本文之研究，除對美國大專院校認可制度之輪廓作一概括性之敘述外，特別着重於此一制度之特質與功能之分析，期能對此制度之精神與價值有一深入之瞭解。

本研究之結論主要有下列兩點：第一，美國所以形成由民間組織自行管理高等教育之認可制度的原因，一方面固係政治制度所使然，最主要的乃受保障學術自由，不使政治干預學術之傳統影響所致。第二，認可制度對於學校爭取校外經費補助及校內經費分配合理化、公開化均有其積極之作用。由於認可資格的有無，關係着學校申請聯邦政府及各種基金補助的機會，在一九八〇年代大專院校普遍處於招生不足、經費短絀之情形下，各校為生存計，無不力求獲得或確保其認可資格，因而認可制度對於高等教育機構素質之提高貢獻至鉅。