



US Regional Accreditation: The Claims, Reality, Cost & Reason

James L. Turk
Simon Fraser University
March 29, 2012



Background

- Six regional accrediting bodies
 - Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, Western
- Non-governmental, non-profit voluntary associations
- Self-regulatory, peer review process
- Reviews undertaken by voluntary teams
- Each regional body is autonomous
- Yours - Northwest Commission on Colleges & Universities (NWCCU)

The Claims NWCCU & SFU

NWCCU

“Regional accreditation of postsecondary institutions is a voluntary, non-governmental, self-regulatory process of quality assurance and institutional improvement. It recognizes higher education institutions for performance, integrity, and quality to merit the confidence of the educational community and the public.”

--NWCCU

<http://www.nwccu.org/>



NWCCU

“Regional accreditation of postsecondary institutions is a voluntary, non-governmental, self-regulatory process of quality assurance and institutional improvement. It recognizes higher education institutions for performance, integrity, and quality to merit the confidence of the educational community and the public.”

--NWCCU

<http://www.nwccu.org/>



NWCCU

○ Principles:

- Foster excellence through the development of criteria and guidelines for assessing educational quality and institutional effectiveness;
- Encourage institutional improvement through continuous self-study and evaluation;
- Ensure the educational community, the general public, and other organizations that an institution has clearly defined and appropriate educational objectives, has established conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, appears in fact to be substantially accomplishing them, and is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to do so

<http://www.nwccu.org/Accreditation%20Overview/Introduction/Introduction.htm>



NWCCU Criteria

- 1) Operational Status
- 2) Authority
- 3) Mission & Core Themes
- 4) Operational Focus & Independence
- 5) Non-Discrimination
- 6) Institutional Integrity
- 7) Governing Board
- 8) Chief Executive Officer
- 9) Administration
- 10) Faculty
- 11) Educational Program
- 12) General Education
- 13) Library & Info Resources
- 14) Physical & Tech Infrastructure
- 15) Academic Freedom
- 16) Admissions
- 17) Public Information
- 18) Financial Resources
- 19) Financial Accountability
- 20) Disclosure
- 21) Relationship with NWCCU
- 22) Student Achievement
- 23) Institutional Effectiveness
- 24) Scale & Sustainability

NWCCU President

“ Institutions accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities are distinguished by their demonstrated ability to meet broadly accepted higher education standards of quality. The value of accreditation is not limited to quality assurance alone. Accreditation also fosters public confidence in the institution's ability to fulfill its stated mission and goals, facilitates student mobility between institutions, and enhances an institution's credibility with its peers. It provides effective mechanisms for creating institutional vision and enhancing programmatic and financial viability and effectiveness.”

--Sandra E. Elman, President, NWCCU

<http://www.nwccu.org/Accreditation%20Overview/Statement%20of%20the%20President/Statement%20of%20the%20President.htm>



NWCCU President

“ Institutions accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities are distinguished by their demonstrated ability to meet broadly accepted higher education standards of **quality**. The value of accreditation is not limited to quality assurance alone. Accreditation also fosters **public confidence** in the institution's ability to fulfill its stated mission and goals, facilitates student mobility between institutions, and enhances an institution's credibility with its peers. It provides effective mechanisms for creating institutional vision and enhancing programmatic and financial viability and effectiveness.”

--Sandra E. Elman, President, NWCCU

<http://www.nwccu.org/Accreditation%20Overview/Statement%20of%20the%20President/Statement%20of%20the%20President.htm>



SFU



KC Bell, Jon Driver and Glynn Nicholls

SFU on accreditation

Background

“When we investigated joining the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) we realized we’d have to decide about accreditation,” says VP-academic and accreditation sponsor, Jon Driver, “because the NCAA requires all its members to be accredited by a U.S. regional accreditation agency.”

“The independent, non-profit NWCCU accepted SFU’s initial application in January 2009. The full accreditation process, which is based on a series of SFU self-assessments and NWCCU member peer reviews, will take between five and seven years to complete.”

<http://www.sfu.ca/archive-sfunews/news/sfu-seeking-us-accreditation.shtml>



SFU – Claims about accreditation

Jon Driver: "As we did our homework, it became clear that accreditation could also lead to numerous academic and other non-athletic benefits."

Glynn Nicholls: "Accreditation will enhance both the university's reputation for academic quality and the value of an SFU degree for alumni abroad, while improving internal assessment and accountability."

<http://www.sfu.ca/archive-sfunews/news/sfu-seeking-us-accreditation.shtml>



SFU – Claims (con't)

Nicholls: "It will establish clearer benchmarks for assessing learning outcomes as well, and will smooth the progress of curriculum reform and benefit students' learning experiences."

K.C. Bell - "A globally recognized guarantee of quality will increase SFU's profile abroad and help us attract the best international students."

<http://www.sfu.ca/archive-sfunews/news/sfu-seeking-us-accreditation.shtml>



The Reality

Claimed reality

Elman (NWCCU): “Institutions accredited by the NWCCU are distinguished by their demonstrated ability to meet broadly accepted higher education standards of **quality**... Accreditation also fosters **public confidence** in the institution's ability to fulfill its stated mission and goals, facilitates student mobility between institutions, and enhances an institution's credibility with its peers.”

Nicholls (SFU): “Accreditation will **enhance both the university's reputation for academic quality** and the value of an SFU degree for alumni abroad...”

Reality

- 1) Hardly an eminent crowd
- 2) Virtually every applicant institution is accredited
- 3) Accreditation has not protected the public from institutions that rip off students or engage in unethical practice
- 4) Visiting teams do not necessarily include a sufficient number of people from truly peer institutions

Reality

- 5) Huge pressure on accrediting bodies to pay closer attention to institutions' development of specific learning outcomes that become the basis of accreditation
- 6) Strong opposition from a range of top universities (e.g., Stanford, UCs, Caltech) for having gone so far and so aggressively down the road to focusing on student learning outcomes, and for essentially intruding into the realm of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Reality

- 7) Criteria important to faculty are not emphasized
 - academic freedom
 - tenure system
 - library resources
- 8) Others are largely absent (e.g., collegial governance)

AAUP - The Faculty Role in Regional Accreditation (2008)

“A review of the accreditation handbooks published by the regional accrediting commissions indicates that several of the topics mentioned in *The Role of the Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities* do not fare well. The system of tenure is rarely mentioned, and never in connection with academic freedom. References to faculty compensation appear within the standards of only three commissions, and references to faculty morale do not appear at all. On the other hand, all of the commissions generally assert the importance of academic freedom and, to a lesser extent, of shared governance.”

--<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/accredfaceval.htm>



The Cost

The Cost

- Administrative & support staff
 - Salary costs
 - Lost time from other priorities
- Academic staff
 - Salary costs
 - Lost time from teaching, research & scholarly work
- Reshaping the institution

The Reason

SFU

" When we investigated joining the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) we realized we'd have to decide about accreditation because the NCAA requires all its members to be accredited by a U.S. regional accreditation agency." -- Jon Driver

"A globally recognized guarantee of quality will increase SFU's profile abroad and help us attract the best international students."

-- K. C. Bell



United States

“Accreditation or preaccreditation by a postsecondary regional accrediting agency qualifies institutions and enrolled students for access to federal funds to support teaching, research, and student financial aid.”

--NWCCU

<http://www.nwccu.org/>





Daniel Webster College
Nashua, NH

ITT Educational Services Inc. paid \$20.8 million for debt-ridden Daniel Webster College in June 2009

“Key ... was Webster’s regional accreditation, which is the same gold standard of academic quality enjoyed by Harvard University and helps students transfer course credits from one college to another. Daniel Webster’s accreditation was its ‘most attractive’ feature to ITT Educational, said Michael Goldstein, an attorney at Dow Lohnes, a Washington law firm that has represented the company.”



Buying credibility & access to public funding

“Companies are buying accreditation. You can get accreditation a lot of ways, but all of the others take time. They don’t have time. They want to boost enrollment 100 percent in two years.”

-- Kevin Kinser, SUNY Albany

“For-profit education companies, including ITT Educational Services ... have purchased at least 16 not-for-profit colleges with regional accreditation since 2004, according to corporate announcements and filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.”

<http://www.ibj.com/itt-strategy-of-buying-accreditation-makes-critics-uneasy-/PARAMS/article/18816>



Summary

- Accreditation is not about quality but about marketing, access to public money, and (for investors) profit.
- Bureaucratic and administrative priorities trump academic ones
- Cost are high – financial and educational



What is to be done?

- Choices
 - Leave

Alan Koch (CBS):

"We made the move to the NCAA because of the competitive advantages it offers. The overall quality of play is higher and the spotlight on us from North American soccer - whether it's the draft or scouting - is greater."

<http://www.sfu.ca/sfunews/stories/2012/sfu-people-in-the-news-february-16-2012.html>



What is to be done?

○ Choices

- Leave
- Minimize the costs