

UT MARTIN ASSESSMENT NEWSLETTER

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Our most important job is to help our students succeed!

Accreditation and why it matters

Recent campaign rhetoric, especially among conservatives, has included discussions of accreditation of higher education institutions, perceived shortfalls, and possible solutions to address those perceived shortfalls. As we move further into the campaign season, we expect higher education institutional accreditation to continue to be a topic of discussion. Here, we present a brief description of the purpose of institutional accreditation so that you will have a basic framework for evaluating political rhetoric regarding accreditation.

UT Martin successfully completed the SACSCOC Compliance Certification Process in Spring 2023. We are currently revising our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and eagerly awaiting confirmation of reaccreditation from the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, which will be announced at the Annual Conference in December. For many it seems like a lot of bureaucracy and red tape, a lot of worry and bother for very little return.

Accreditation is a process used by the higher education community to assure quality and to promote continuous improvement. Up until 2020, accrediting bodies were regionally defined. Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), Northwest Commission on Colleges & Universities (NWCCU), Southern Association of Colleges & Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), and WASC Senior Colleges & Universities Commission (WSCUC) were the regional accreditors, and

colleges and universities were assigned to an accrediting body based on geography. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Education lifted the geographic requirement, allowing institutions to seek accreditation outside their geographical region. This did not change much for the accrediting bodies.

Accreditors are private, non-profit, member-driven organizations whose primary functions include:

- assessing the quality of academic programs at institution of higher education (IHEs),
- creating a culture of continuous improvement and stimulate a general raising of standards among IHEs, and
- involving faculty and staff extensively in university evaluation and planning.

IHEs pay annual dues and fees to achieve and maintain accreditation. Accreditation relies on a rigorous peer-review process to both define and evaluate the high standards IHEs strive to meet.

To be recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, accreditors must meet certain criteria. These include: ensure an IHE's ability to provide a quality education, help facilitate the smooth transfer of credits between IHEs, and promote confidence among the private sector employers who hire an IHE's graduates. Accreditation standards must consider the following:

- student achievement
- curricula
- faculty
- facilities, equipment, and supplies
- fiscal and administrative capacity
- student support services
- recruiting and admissions practices
- student complaints
- program length

- degree or credential objectives
- academic calendars catalogs, publications, grading, and advertising
- compliance with program responsibilities under Title IV of the Higher Education Act.

IHEs must be accredited by organizations recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to distribute federal student aid and be eligible for federal grant money. Without those federal funds, most IHEs would find themselves in financial trouble. Maintaining accreditation is an intensive process spanning many years, requiring due diligence, attention to details, and university-wide efforts. (It should be noted here that accrediting organizations must also periodically go through a rigorous evaluation process similar to IHE accreditation in order to continue USDOE recognition.)

In reality, accreditors make relatively few demands, and those they do make grant a huge degree of discretion to the institutions. Accreditors defend sound institutional policies and practices, emphasize adherence to an IHE's mission and vision, and defend the faculty's role in shared governance. Most importantly, current accrediting standards across all recognized regional accreditors support the faculty's pre-eminent role in shaping curricula.

So why the "war on accreditation" and why now? Accreditation has come under political attack, especially most recently in Florida and North Carolina, though Tennessee has not been immune. In most cases, politicians are seeking increased discretion to make fundamental changes that exceed the scope of their authority, at least their authority as perceived by SACSCOC. In a narrow sense, these initial fights may seem to be partisan conflict extended into higher education, but the larger question concerns control over IHEs.

In a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article, Jarod Kelly wrote,

Conservatives have made it increasingly clear that they think governing boards of public institutions should answer to no one. But that view has an unspoken addendum: as long as the member of those boards are selected by Republicans. SACSCOC is the accreditor at the center of these early battles simply because, in 7 of the 11 states in its region, Republicans control state government and therefore possess the power to select members of the governing boards. As those battles extend beyond the Southern region, the terms of conflict may change. But accreditors are likely to remain the perceived enemy any time they question the authority of governing boards or other bodies that impose changes that violate procedural norms or shift curricular responsibility away from faculty (Kelly, J., 2023, March 31. Chronicle of Higher Education).

In order to protect and defend faculty's pre-eminent role in shaping curricula, we must guard against sudden, and often ill-advised, regulatory changes. Accreditors can serve as an important check on political motives and assist in maintaining the political independence of our institutions. The process of institutional accreditation, like any peer-review process, is imperfect. But the peer-review process is far better than any measures designed only for political gain or promoting a political viewpoint.

For more information on accreditation and the former "regional" accreditors, please see this website put together by the Florida State University Board of Governors staff: https://www.flbog.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Full_Board_02a_Accreditation_Report_082322_CE.pdf

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