

Reform Proposals for Accreditation: How to Get There

This document outlines a range of actions that can be taken to further the eleven reforms outlined in Peter Ewell's paper, *Eleven Reform Proposals for Accreditation*, with particular emphasis on changes to be made by Congressional action through Reauthorization and voluntarily by accrediting organizations themselves.

- Reauthorization. Many of the reforms recommended can be made through changes in the Higher Education Opportunity Act when it is next reauthorized. Among the most prominent are:
 - Change the language of Part H, Section 496 (a) (5) (A) to directly refer to, and require accreditors to attend to “student learning gain,” as well as “student academic achievement.”
 - Create a new entity to coordinate and oversee institutional accreditation as a “public-private” corporation of similar structure and support to the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Federal Reserve. This entity would be publicly supported but would have an independent charter to ensure appropriate distance and objectivity. It would recognize institutional accreditors in place of NACIQI.
 - Modify the scope of current recognition to allow voluntary changes in geographic boundaries among the regional accreditors. Alternatively, drop the term “regional” in statute and make all accreditors national and allow institutions to choose among them.
 - Require accreditors to adopt consistent terminology in describing review standards, accreditation actions, review processes, and student learning outcomes.
 - Cut significantly the number of items that accreditors are currently required to “inspect” as a part of accreditation reviews and move this responsibility to the federal government and/or require it of states as part of their processes of licensing institutions to operate.
 - Include language that allows accreditors to adopt “risk-based” approaches to accreditation in which institutions with a clear track record of success to undergo less frequent reviews conducted with a “lighter touch” than those applied to institutions that are at greater risk of an unsuccessful accreditation outcome.
- Accreditors. With or without changes enacted through Reauthorization, accreditors themselves could take a number of actions consistent with significant reform. These include:
 - Clarify the fundamental purpose of accreditation and focus the accreditation process more visibly on teaching and learning.

- Adopt common or consistent language to describe review standards, review processes, and student learning outcomes.
- Adopt a common set of “dashboard” measures addressing such topics as retention/graduation (for all students) and standard financial ratios, then use these measures visibly in the accreditation process including establishing threshold levels of performance.
- Establish multiple levels of recognition for institutions and/or rate institutions on several dimensions of performance as the outcome of a review, replacing the current “all or nothing” decision with respect to accredited status.
- Redesign on-site review processes to include audit methodologies and create tools that teams can use during visits such as mini-surveys, directed interview or focus group protocols, and ethnographic methods.
- Work with adjoining regions to redistribute states or institutions amongst the existing array of accreditors to achieve a more equitable distribution of institutions across accreditors.
- Include students on review teams and commissions.
- Adopt “risk-based” approaches to accreditation in which institutions with a clear track record of success undergo less frequent reviews conducted with a “lighter touch” than those applied to institutions that are at greater risk of an unsuccessful accreditation outcome.
- Continue to expand ways to make the institutional review process and the accreditation decisions that result from them more visible and understandable to the public.

These actions do not have to occur in a particular order or be necessarily performed by the assigned actor. Moreover, the reforms that they describe will most realistically happen over a long time period, perhaps as long as ten years.