

2008 Academy Update

Academy now accepting new applications

At the December 2007 meeting of the National Advisory Committee for Institutional Quality and Integrity (the body that advises the US Secretary of Education about the recognition of accreditors) the recommendation was made and unanimously approved that the Academy be allowed to accept new applications for membership (for information on the former vote to limit AALE, please follow this link). On the strength of this reversal, AALE will begin accepting new applications in January of 2008.

The principle issue that led to the 2006 recommendation to limit the Academy's ability to accept new applicants was its stance on student "success" or "achievement." In light of the August 2006 report known as the *Spellings Commission Report*, the NACIQI has increasingly focused on whether colleges are achieving their missions, narrowly seen as graduating students with certain work-related skills and making public their success rates. This has largely proceeded under the banner of bringing "accountability" to colleges and universities.

As grades have become less reliable proxies for student success, and as undergraduate colleges have increasingly abandoned a discernibly coherent core curriculum – something that made evaluating success both institutionally and across institutions fairly easy - the idea that colleges should be left to evaluate themselves has become increasingly questionable. In recent years this has led to a number of calls for improving student assessment, something that, according to critics, many colleges have appeared to resist. Enter the department's efforts to turn accreditation into an arbiter of institutional success with regard to student learning.

For time immemorial, colleges have taken the responsibility for determining their own missions (something that in the case of liberal learning may be only distantly connected to graduating students or attempting to provide them with various skills or forms of knowledge) and, along with the marketplace, have themselves assessed their success in meeting them. Accreditation has tended to act as an outside assurance that the institution has in fact been following its stated mission and academic procedures and that its evaluation of success in meeting these and other goals is accurate and can with some confidence be relied upon. Traditionally, accreditors have not attempted to impose their own standards of academic success, at least not in the form of quantitative benchmarks of the sort now required by the NACIQI. This traditional form of accreditation, which focuses on improvement as well as compliance, is how accreditors of non-vocational schools have gone about reviewing schools for decades.

The Academy has countered this concern by requiring at least a minimum of curriculum coherence and by establishing a multi faceted review process, conducted by experts in the *liberal arts*. The Academy has also recognized that, due both to subject matter and the general lack of agreement within *academe*, *qualitative* assessment, when properly done, is often a better indicator of student and institutional success than *quantitative*

assessments. Done well and in tandem, both qualitative and quantitative standards can offer insights into different aspects of the college experience.

This approach to review and assessment, usually referred to as peer review, is evidently seen by some, including some that make national policy concerning higher education, as more of a buddy system than as serious assessment. Thus, the Academy has been asked how it knows whether an applicant or member institution is in fact offering a quality education. Among other things, Academy reviewers sit in classes, interview students, faculty, administrators and board members; it also requires members to intellectually defend the claims being made in a required self-study. Additionally, the Academy's staff, peer reviewers, and the Council of Scholars and Board of Trustees review a school's application.

However, this highly regarded process was not seen as "good enough" by the committee, regardless of the academic credentials and experience of those doing the review. The fact accreditation decisions are a result of experienced and expert "judgment" rather than due to meeting quantitative "objective" standards *sans* judgment was seen to be a deficiency in the way the Academy conducts its business.

The result of this "accountability" push is that the USDOED is taking steps in the direction of mandating that accreditors substitute their own judgment of "what is good enough" for the college's. While the Academy has resisted this with good cause for many years, the future looks to continue down this path. Thus accreditors and colleges will be required to replace a complex but workable regime of compliance and improvement based on peer review with one reduced to mere compliance with quantitative measurements. Thus is rigid compliance with quantitative benchmarks to become the proxy for academic quality. In this light, the Academy has adopted additional criteria (see the Academy's current *Standards and Criteria*) that require members to adopt and report quantitative indicators of "student success" in addition to the qualitative measures long ago adopted by the Academy.

As one long time NACIQI member stated, no one questions the quality of the Academy's *Criteria* or the quality of its institutions. At issue is only whether agencies are deemed to be in strict compliance with the committee's current view of what is required by the regulations. Stay tuned, as undoubtedly there will be more to be said on this.