

*SOME
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
ABOUT*

**LIBERAL ARTS
ACCREDITATION**

President's Introduction

Liberal arts accreditation at the national level is a comparatively new option. Heretofore there has been no national voice within the accreditation community speaking exclusively for undergraduate education or for the goals of liberal education.

It is quite natural that there would be questions about this new development and about the Academy in particular. Who are we? What is the significance of the Department of Education's approval of a new, national accreditor devoted exclusively to the cause of high quality undergraduate liberal education? What, under the banner of "quality assurance" does AALE propose to advocate? This booklet intends to address such questions.

For that matter, the more general topic of accreditation itself is a complex, Byzantine subject, seldom ranking high on anyone's list of favorite topics. Yet the issues it encompasses are of vital concern to the future of higher education in America. The American Academy for Liberal Education firmly believes that the public, the faculty, and administrators of higher education institutions need to be better informed about what accreditation is, what it should mean, and what it can do to strengthen higher education in this nation. We trust that this modest booklet will assist in achieving this second goal as well.

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I. Why the Academy?

Q. What is the *American Academy for Liberal Education*? What does this organization stand for?

The *American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE)* is a national organization dedicated to strengthening and promoting undergraduate liberal education through accreditation of liberal arts institutions and programs. The *Academy* is unique in the accreditation community in grounding the entire institutional or programmatic accreditation process on a rigorous set of *Education Standards*. These standards stress the acquisition of useful and important knowledge, the development of foundational abilities in reasoning and communication, and the formation of habits that give rise to a lifelong love of learning.

Q. Many advocacy and membership organizations are concerned with higher education, and several of these focus on liberal education. In what ways is *AALE* truly different? What unique concerns does it address that are not already the province of one or more of these other organizations?

The *Academy* is the only organization explicitly authorized by the Department of Education to accredit undergraduate liberal arts institutions and program on a national basis. For this reason, *AALE*'s mandate differs significantly from those of other well-known higher education advocacy groups. The *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, for example, aims to elaborate the nature and goals of liberal education and to interpret the value of liberal education to the general public. However, though *AAC&U* is a respected membership organization comprised of liberal arts institutions and interested individuals, it is not authorized by the U. S. Department of Education to carry out peer reviews and accreditation of liberal arts institutions, nor has it sought such authorization.

In addition, the *Academy* focuses on undergraduate liberal arts institutions and programs rather than on higher education generally. *AALE* has benefitted from the work of such organizations as the *American Association for Higher Education* and the *American Council on Education* on many important matters, including program and institutional assessment, educational policy development pertaining to post-secondary institutions, and the perennial issues of curriculum design and faculty development. But the *Academy*'s unique mission is to weave these factors into an institutional and programmatic accreditation process focusing exclusively on the quality of undergraduate liberal education.

Q. Does *AALE* only accredit institutions, or can a liberal arts program within a larger institution be accredited as well?

The *Academy* is recognized by the United States Department of Education to do both. It is fully empowered to establish Title IV eligibility for student aid for colleges and universities that seek its institutional accreditation. It is also authorized to accredit a college of arts and sciences or honors college within a larger entity. Institutions may choose to have *AALE* accreditation in addition to regional accreditation, or they may choose *AALE* as their sole institutional accreditor.

Q. How does *AALE* differ from regional and specialized accreditors?

The *Academy* differs crucially from the six regional accrediting bodies whose accreditation standards and processes are not founded on a primary concern for undergraduate liberal education. *Regional accreditors'* standards and processes are largely concerned with certifying institutional and fiscal integrity and ensuring sound administration of Title IV federal education funds. Regional accreditors are constrained by the very broad spectrum of their institutional membership from focusing on the substance and quality of undergraduate education as the sole, or even as a principal, criterion for accreditation. Furthermore, when regional accreditation standards do address undergraduate education requirements and the assessment of educational outcomes, these issues are typically expressed in quantitative (e.g., numbers of credit hours or degree completion rates) rather than qualitative terms. To their credit, some regional accreditors are taking steps to address the quality of the undergraduate curriculum and educational experience. However, attention to these issues varies widely from agency to agency, and the regionals' necessarily broad purviews do not allow them to ensure, for example, that different subject areas - such as laboratory sciences or foreign languages - are well integrated in a particular institution's liberal arts curriculum.

In contrast, the *Academy's* accreditation standards and procedures focus primarily on ensuring quality and rigor in undergraduate liberal education. *AALE's* expert accreditation teams are small - usually no more than three members - and their work is closely focused on liberal arts teaching and learning in the areas defined by the *AALE Education Standards*. Because these *Education Standards* are specific and well-focused, the *Academy's* accreditation process is highly efficient and minimizes strain on institutional time and resources. In addition, the *Academy's* use of a streamlined financial and institutional reporting instrument, the *Key Performance Indicators*, greatly facilitates the process of establishing an institution's ability to support its educational programs.

Specialized accreditors, such as those concerned with business, music, or engineering programs, often profess concern for an institution's overall undergraduate program as well as for the undergraduate major in their particular field. However, specialized accreditors are primarily concerned with graduate and professional programs that are not open to undergraduates or that serve a very small proportion of undergraduates. These specialized graduate and professional programs often compete directly with an institution's undergraduate liberal arts programs for financial, institutional, and human resources. Undergraduate liberal arts programs and institutions need an advocate to challenge the hegemony of specialized and professional accreditors, who are otherwise free to demand unilateral and unbalanced allocation of resources to their fields at the expense of the liberal arts. *AALÉ* is dedicated to upholding the integrity, coherence, and educational value of investments in undergraduate liberal education in the face of these competing interests.

II. Why Liberal Arts Accreditation?

Q. Our college faculty and administrators typically view the accreditation process as an unproductive drain on their time and resources. Since our institution already has regional accreditation, why do we need another accrediting body to review our liberal arts program?

For one reason: The Academy is the only accrediting agency that focuses exclusively on the quality of undergraduate liberal arts and general education curricula. Many liberal arts institutions find that *AALE*'s accreditation standards reflect their own missions and educational objectives far more closely than do the standards of the regional accrediting agencies. By designating *AALE* as a co-accreditor or accreditor of record for Title IV purposes, institutions can make arrangements with their regional agency to use the *Academy*'s liberal arts standards as the lead standards for self-study and accreditation review. For these institutions, joint or dual accreditation significantly eases the burdens and disruptions of the reaccreditation process by making the evidence-gathering and self-study process much more responsive to their liberal arts missions, programs, and objectives.

What is more, in today's increasingly competitive contests for public recognition and financial resources, substantive liberal arts accreditation can be a critical aid to the establishment, growth, and perpetuation of liberal arts programs and institutions. The *Academy*'s certification of excellence in liberal education can provide invaluable support to institutions and programs seeking to expand their base of applicants and donors, as well as to faculty and administrators seeking to strengthen the claims of undergraduate liberal education programs against the claims of competing institutional interests.

Q. Our institution is exclusively devoted to undergraduate liberal education and does not suffer from this institutional divergence of interests and competition for resources. In what way would *AALE* accreditation benefit us?

The role of accreditation as a form of institutional quality assurance for the general public as well as for prospective students, alumni, and potential benefactors has fallen into neglect and even disrepute, with unfortunate consequences for all concerned. The widely lamented reliance by parents and students on magazine ratings and popular opinion surveys as indicators of the quality of undergraduate institutions stems, in part, from their discovery that regional accreditation alone frequently guarantees little about educational substance or quality.

The *Academy's* substantive, rigorous, and well-focused accreditation standards and procedures offer an intellectually and academically responsible alternative to magazine “popularity contests” on the one hand and to the minimal educational standards of many regional accreditors on the other. Accreditation by the *Academy* affords liberal arts colleges and programs a clear and significant way to distinguish themselves from competing institutions in the eyes of parents and students, alumni and benefactors, and the general public. In addition, the *Academy* has developed web-based and print tools to profile the achievements of its member institutions and to convey to the public - especially students, their parents, and high school guidance counselors - the advantages of strong liberal arts institutions.

III. Who Determines Institutional Character?

Q. Do AALE's uniform *Education Standards* mean that a particular college's unique mission, history, and character will be overlooked or compromised?

The *AALE Handbook for Accreditation* affirms that a particular institution's or program's mission statement must "reflect the importance and centrality of liberal education in a manner that corresponds to the way in which its curriculum is actually organized and taught." The *Academy* was founded precisely to recognize and affirm the purposeful crafting by an institution of its unique liberal arts curriculum.

The *Academy's Education Standards* are uniform or national insofar as they uphold the central importance, in any well-crafted program of liberal education, of imparting a basic knowledge of such subjects as mathematics and the physical and biological sciences, a foreign language, literary and philosophical classics, the political and cultural histories of Western and non-Western civilizations, and the foundations and principles of American society. The *Academy* recognizes that liberal arts colleges and programs will cast and then build upon these basic elements in a great variety of ways, providing their students with excellent yet quite distinctive educations. The *Academy* exists to recognize and reward the diverse ways such institutions have brought together the ends and means of a fine liberal education.

Q. How does AALE's accreditation process take into account the unique features or characteristics of an institution's liberal arts program?

The *Academy* takes great care to compose its peer review teams of distinguished faculty and officials from institutions similar to the one under study. These teams are drawn from liberal arts institutions of recognized excellence and include scholars and administrators whose broad learning and experience qualify them to assess the unique character of each institution's undergraduate educational program. The accreditation process itself involves an in-depth review of the building blocks of an undergraduate liberal arts education, with special emphases on an institution's general or core curriculum, its curriculum formation and review procedures, its teaching practices and educational assessment programs, and its various undergraduate degree programs or majors.

The Core Curriculum: Tradition and Innovation

The *Academy* believes that a well-designed core curriculum is most often the best way to ensure that undergraduates acquire a firm grounding in the arts and sciences which shape our lives and

culture, as well as sound skills in written and oral reasoning and communication. The *Academy's* peer reviewers look to see that an institution's or program's core curriculum involves substantive course work in mathematics, in the physical, biological, and social sciences, as well as in history, literature, and philosophy. *AALE* peer review teams examine the level and quality of administrative and faculty support for core and general education functions. They also assess institutional policies and procedures for core curriculum review, reform, and innovation.

The *Academy* strives to be at once traditional in this emphasis on a sound liberal arts curriculum and innovative in its recognition that successful liberal arts curricula can be crafted in very diverse ways. *AALE* accredited programs and institutions represent a broad range of approaches to core curriculum design and implementation. These include interdisciplinary programs in the arts and sciences, programs of study in the histories and heritages of Western and non-Western civilizations, global and trans-cultural studies, ethnic and area studies, musical and theatrical appreciation and performance, and programs in creative writing.

The *Academy* encourages its member and applicant institutions to develop procedures for assessing student performance that will better enable faculty and administrators - as well as *AALE's* peer review groups - to evaluate the results of their educational programs. *AALE's* new Liberal Learning Assessment standards, developed with the support of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, make it possible to use substantive outcomes assessment of liberal arts teaching and learning to enhance and facilitate the accreditation process. By working with an institution's established assessment programs, this enhanced accreditation process highlights student performance as reflected by grades, comprehensive or national testing, writing portfolios, musical and artistic presentations, supervised internship programs, co-curricular publications, and student-led conferences and activities. The *Academy* also encourages institutions to adopt innovative approaches in devising academic support services and programs that have a strong bearing on student achievement. These may include the development of student writing and math centers, subject tutorials, and mentoring and advising programs.

IV. Who is the *Academy*?

Q. What qualifies *AALE* to assess and certify excellence in liberal education?

The wide range of distinguished scholars, administrators, and independent institutions that have supported or become affiliated with the *Academy* since its inception are the source of its strength and probity. Their support and affiliation assure academic institutions, students and parents, and the general public of *AALE*'s high standards and openness to educational excellence in its many forms.

Unique among accrediting agencies, *AALE* rests final responsibility for its decisions with the eminent members of its *Council of Scholars* and *Board of Trustees*. Brief mention of their names and accomplishments will indicate the variety of perspectives and caliber of judgment *AALE* brings to its accreditation process.

Council of Scholars

AALE's Council includes distinguished faculty from a broad range of academic disciplines. Members include noted scholars Kenny J. Williams of Duke University, Ralph Rossum of Claremont McKenna College, and James Q. Wilson of the University of California at Los Angeles.

The Council's newest members, Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and Joseph E. Earley, Sr. of Georgetown University, add notably to its breadth and depth of learning. Dr. Chadwick-Joshua is the acclaimed author of *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Huckleberry Finn* and is completing work on *Divas: The Voices, the Myth, the Reality*, a study of the great female jazz singers of the Harlem Renaissance. Dr. Chadwick-Joshua has also been actively involved in national and international conferences on women's studies, ethnographic and rhetorical studies, and multiculturalism. Dr. Earley, research professor and professor-emeritus of chemistry at Georgetown, has taught and published widely in the field of inorganic chemistry. His most recent work focuses on the reduction of perchlorate ion (a recently identified environmental hazard) by titanous ions. Dr. Earley has long been active in developing and teaching general education courses in science for students in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and he edited *Individuality and Cooperative Action*, which addresses the philosophic import of recent scientific developments.

Board of Trustees

AALE's Board of Trustees, which makes final accreditation decisions, counts many distinguished scholars and public figures among its members. Among these are Harvard University's Edward O. Wilson, author of *Conciliance: The Unity of Knowledge* and *Naturalist*, and Martin Peretz, publisher of *The New Republic*. Also serving on *AALE*'s Board are Jacques Barzun, provost-emeritus of Columbia University, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of Emory University, Paul Gross, former provost of the University of Virginia, John Harris of Samford University, Samuel Hope of the National Office for Arts Accreditation, Deal Hudson of the Morley Institute, Peter Kalkavage of St. John's College, Sheldon Rothblatt of the University of California at Berkeley, Charles Sullivan of the University of San Francisco, and Glen Thurow of the University of Dallas.

Institutional and Individual Support

AALE has received financial support from many private foundations and governmental organizations. These include The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, Inc., as well as the U. S. Department of Education's "Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education" (FIPSE) and "Learning Anywhere, Anytime Program" (LAAP). Numerous scholars and administrators have also commended *AALE* for its role in furthering the twin spirits of tradition and innovation, which inform any truly liberal education.

Jaroslav Pelikan of Yale University, recipient of the *Academy*'s inaugural Jacques Barzun Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Education, has written that "the liberal and liberating education for which the *Academy* stands as champion and defender depends upon a living sense of both continuity and change in relation to our several institutions."

William C. Friday, former president of the University of North Carolina and recipient of *AALE*'s 1999 Barzun Award, commended the Academy for the role it plays in "leadership development, intellectual exchange, and scholarly advocacy" in support of liberal learning.

Underlining *AALE*'s practical contributions to the sustenance and improvement of liberal education, Patrick H. Swygert, president of Howard University, remarked that

The work of *AALE* is very familiar to us at Howard. Academic administrators in the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have and continue to subscribe to *AALE*'s philosophy on liberal arts. In fact, its published *Education*

Standards were used in recent deliberations about curricular changes recommended as a result of the merger of the former College of Arts and Sciences and the former College of Fine Arts.

AALE's constructive influence on higher education extends beyond institutions of higher learning. Virginia's State Council for Higher Education (SCHEV) recently adopted *AALE's Education Standards* as guidelines for effective general education requirements for institutions of higher learning throughout the state. Other states are expected to follow Virginia's example.