

Observations on Accreditation in Canada, the United States and Japan *

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This report on my observations and the results of my trip to Canada, the United States, and Japan includes:

1. a brief comparison of accreditation practices in these three countries;
2. a more detailed account of my observations in the United States where accreditation is a major concern of institutions;
3. recommendations for courses of action that are suggested by my observations.

Accreditation in Canada

There are two types of accreditation in Canada. Provincial accreditation has to do with evaluation of credits a student earns, to determine their transferability from institution to institution. Incidentally, graduates from our four-year colleges here are considered undergraduates in Canada.

Institutional accreditation (meaning, the accreditation of schools and not of student credits) is an idea which was borrowed from the United States, and seems to be the concern only of schools of higher learning. The accreditation of schools of medicine and social work is certainly a going concern. The Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing, which is an associated member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, is presently considering the possibility of accrediting university schools of nursing. The colleges of medicine were once accredited through the American Medical Association. This international tie is still preserved.

As in the United States, accreditation is on voluntary basis, but institutions had better think twice before they dare disregard accreditation.

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Accreditation in the United States

American accreditation grew out of the fact that there was nothing comparable to a ministry of education in the federal government at the beginning, and education was left largely in state hands. Furthermore, there were no standards set for the opening of schools; so the better schools banded together to promote quality education among themselves and those who would like to join them.

Eventually six regional agencies sprang up, and these worked independently of each other. Each had its own policies, procedures, machinery and forms. Under the setup it was possible for schools to "shop around" for accreditation.

The creation of a non-governmental body to coordinate the functioning of these six, at least in higher education, has helped bring about uniformity at least in policies to be followed. There is now an evident desire to bring the agencies closer together in practice.

At present, the lines of administration and/or supervision are clearly and definitely drawn. A school wanting to be accredited should first find out what regional agency has responsibility for schools

in its state. It is to that agency that it may apply for candidacy. In the course of making their agencies available to overseas schools with American students, the agencies eventually came to divide responsibility for these schools; thus, Western Association accredits schools in the Far East; Middle State Association accredits schools in France, etc.

The first thing evident among American regional agencies is the common preference for institutional accreditation. Program accreditation is done by professional agencies. Most often, professional agencies will not have anything to do with professional colleges whose mother institutions have not been previously accredited by some regional agency. Professional and specialized accrediting associations are coordinated and monitored by the National Commission on Accrediting.

Although American accreditation was originally concerned with higher education and the college-preparatory high school, current trends lead the regional agencies to be involved in the accrediting of vocational and elementary schools. All the institutions which may apply for candidacy must be non-profit

ones. Some court case is raising the issue of eventual accreditation for profit-making schools like some private business schools.¹

It seems that the decision to accredit whole institutions instead of individual divisions within a school is impelled by the desire to have an institution look at itself as a totality and give each of its divisions a "feel" for the state of affairs of other parts of the institution. The agencies would seek to avoid the fragmentation of the multi-division school, which consequence would happen if each division looks to an outside agency for leading first before it has considered its position in relation to its own sister divisions in the institution.

Practically all the officials of the schools that I visited declared that the greatest value of accreditation to them is the revelation of their strengths and weaknesses through the required self-study. To them, the fact that conscientious work

and constant improvement does win them accredited status is incidental.

What do accreditors look for in an institution? The answer to this may partly depend on whether one looks at a high school or a higher division. Relatively, high school criteria tend to be more quantified than college criteria. It also may depend on the values more than others. The recent trend, however, is away from quantification at all levels and toward looking for quite evident potential for good, and for laudable quality of attitudes, goals, and "performance" of institution, personnel, and clientele. Since, admittedly, quality is difficult to evaluate, much reliance is placed on the judgment of the trained evaluator

When I expressed the fear that what school personnel may consider as "adequate" an agency evaluator may not think so upon visitation, I was assured that this danger is minimized by safeguards like (1) the school's getting experts for counselors during their self-study; (2) the

¹At press time, the following advice arrived from the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, through Dr. Norman Burns, director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education: "The constituent commissions of the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions here revised their eligibility requirements to eliminate the requirement that an institution be organized on a not-for-profit basis. They are not yet, however, accepting such applications since there is some uncertainty whether their tax exempt status might be threatened by including in their membership institutions which were organized for profit."

agency's sending down a counselor for a visit to advise a school doing its self-study; (3) the availability to both school and agency of professional literature on areas of concern like, say, the library.²

At present, agencies tend to vary in the number of evaluators that are sent to candidate schools, especially high schools. For example, given schools of average size, Western Association is likely to send no more than six; North Central or Middle States may send 20 – 25. As regards higher education, again evaluators sent to a school tend to be fewer in number than those sent to a high school. The near future may see this disparity corrected.

Agencies also vary in the period stipulated between evaluations. Some would like to re-examine accredited schools after five years; others, after ten years. All give conditional accreditation to schools which show pronounced weakness in some area but creditable quality in all others. Conditional accreditation simply means giving accredited

status for a short period during which the school is expected to improve in the area (s) where it was found weak, after which it is given full accreditation or it must show cause why accreditation should not be withdrawn.

For whatever good it may render the public, a list of accredited schools is published. Nothing is said about schools that do not make it. An accredited school which fails to maintain its standing upon re-evaluation is first given private warning. Failure to make good puts the school in danger of being given public warning, which seems to be in the form of a statement of its current status, in the listing of the agency.

In associations with responsibility for many states, evaluators for a school are usually taken from other states. At least they come from countries whose schools are not in competition with the candidate school.

²Concerning this problem, Dr. Burns comments: Despite the safeguards that have been set up, it is still highly likely that personnel engaged in institutional self-study may be more generous in their interpretation of adequacy than would be the visiting team. As a matter of fact, this frequently happens, and under such circumstances the judgment of the visiting team is more likely to be accepted by the accrediting association than the judgment expressed in the self-study report.

Since being accredited or not greatly affects not only a school's standing among its peers but also its ability to draw good teachers, many students, and outside aid, schools are quite touchy about the matter. It is to the credit of the concept and the management of the process that no more law suits have arisen in the history of American accreditation than have actually been filed.

In order to guard against such eventualities—which may ensnarl an agency and prevent it from reaching its objective of encouraging schools to improve—American agencies make it a point to ensure that every institution that feels it has been adversely affected have access to “due process of law” at every step in the procedure; i. e., it is given the chance to protest and be heard by a body of evaluators other than the original visiting team.

Also, most if not all the agencies see to it that any literature or document which they issue to the schools is legally defensible.

Another safeguard is to have the candidate school approve the membership in the visiting team before it is sent, and to replace anybody against whom the school puts up a valid objection.

Finally, the agencies are known to be helpful to schools who earnestly work for quality. Visits to schools are never punitive in spirit, and schools are advised about how to get ready when their time for a visit is due.

A protest, when pursued, can go up the hierarchy of administrators in the agency; the last resort is to appeal to the body which is composed of representatives from all the member schools. In a *voluntary* procedure like accreditation, no higher appeal can be raised beyond the desire of the represented peer group to welcome or exclude a candidate. So far, decisions thus handed down have been respected and abided by.

For their part, the executing staff of the agencies maintain the quality of their service (1) by reproducing literature that guides their evaluators as well as the candidate school; (2) by continuously looking for qualified evaluators; and (3) by holding training sessions for those to be sent out during the year. It may be well to note that the magnitude of the responsibility and the desire for accreditation are such that an agency is kept busy the whole year round.

Visiting teams are composed a year in advance. Those usually have a few new evaluators who work under the guidance of experienced evaluators. In this way the agency assures training for newcomers under actual field conditions without great fear that the quality of the work done suffers. The chance to work as evaluator (without pay) is held in such high regard that many more apply for it than the agencies can utilize within the year.

The chairmanship of a visiting team is a pivotal position. This is awarded only to those who, aside from having had experience in evaluating schools, have been found to have qualities for it. Potential chairmen are discovered (1) by earlier chairmen with whom they have worked, (2) by the quality of reports they themselves turn in, or (3) by the comments of fellow evaluators.

American agencies and their service to the schools are maintained by fees that member schools and candidate schools pay. The fees are predetermined according to size of student population or by level of division. However, when a school is visited, the school pays for the transportation, the accommodations, and the amenities accorded

the team. The practice of compensation for evaluators varies from one agency to another. In some they are paid honoraria in addition to expenses; in others, they receive expenses only.

Just recently the regional agencies for higher education have put up a coordinating body in Washington. This super-agency is now active in establishing commonalities among the regional agencies.

The federal office of education has an office for accreditation. This office supervises the accrediting agencies and, in a way, accredits the accrediting agencies themselves. In its functioning I have actually known it to be helpful to the accredited accrediting agencies. Probably my fear that it may enter a vicious circle in its functioning may not be probable. My fear was that, should all professional engaged in education become members of accredited institutions, the Office of Education, when it evaluates the many accrediting agencies it has to supervise, might be forced to invite as evaluators of *agencies* those who belong to the staff of some school which some agency must have accredited. Of course, luckily, regional

agencies are not competitive. It proliferation of programmatic accreditation continues, however, competition among agencies cannot be avoided. And thereby hangs the woeful tale.

Accreditation in Japan

The little information that I could personally gather from Tokyo raises issues of other dimensions which are laced with accreditation, especially in higher education. For schools comparable to our high schools, the problem is simpler in that there seems to be no effort to accredit these. In fact, an international school had to apply for accreditation with an American agency (as did some schools in the Philippines whose clientele hoped to pursue higher education overseas).

I was given the impression that accreditation as it is known in the American continent cannot thrive in Japanese-oriented education. The ministry of education in Japan has control over the school system, so accreditation may well mean government approval. If there is an accrediting body, it does not function in the same way that its American counterpart does.

Accreditation in Japan would seem to be a highly quantified sort. The president of the association

which is in charge of accreditation spoke of standards to be met by Japanese schools. I asked how much of them should be met before a school could be accredited. About 70%, he said.

Lessons Derived from the Visit

First, if we are trying to borrow the concept of American accreditation, we should realize that we are overlaying it on an educational system which, like Japan's, already has set standards for schools to meet before they are allowed to operate. If the government agencies for education are zealous in seeing to it that schools meet the quantifiable standards they set, then there is more reason to consider accreditation here as recognition of quality goals and quality performance in the achievement of those goals, as well as the provision of plant and personnel beyond the minimum required by government standards.

Second, part of the reason for proliferation of accrediting agencies in the States is simply magnitude—the vastness of the territory that must be covered. Even then, present agency officials are not happy about this development and would want to streamline the unwieldy growth if they had it to do all over again.

If a federation of accredited agencies is envisioned among us--a country hardly one-fiftieth of the United States--economy, an evident shortage in certain expertise, and the fewer number of professional schools would dictate that this federation take this form:

1. Extant school associations have institutional accrediting agencies for themselves.

2. The PAASCU take care of programmatic accreditation.

If institutional accrediting could be done by a more comprehensive agency, like one linked to the CO-COPEA, the proper maintenance of agency machinery could be better assured without necessarily sacrificing the peculiar interests of the member associations. (Regional associations in the States admit public and private, sectarian and nonsectarian schools.)

Third, it is essential to have a pool of trained evaluators with this essential requirement. If we all begin to train personnel now, there are not enough schools applying for accreditation at present to give adequate training to even a core group. And reading literature about accreditation procedures is not like undertaking the activity itself. It is difficult to conceive of what different men under different situations would think creditable or not. Literally, one has to see and

hear the thinking going on before a decision is firmed.

Appreciating our plight, the Federation of Regional Commissions of Higher Education (FRACHE) is interested in the possibility of helping train evaluators for us if some funding agency can send and maintain them while they go around with trained evaluators. These same trainees may then be invited to sit in decision-making sessions during which is determined whether candidate schools be accredited or not. When this possibility was discussed, it was felt that at least a semester of "field work" should be afforded the trainees. Even just this period can allow for intensive training because there is no lack for schools to be evaluated from October to May every year, in every region.

In order to make this training program attractive for funding, it is best to recommend a minimal group of potential chairmen. A group of six, two from each ACSC, CEAP, and PACU, should be a good number: one generalist from each, and three types of specialists, one contributed by each association. The most likely choices should be one for physical plant, one for library, and one for laboratory facilities. The other areas of concern could be taken care of by the generalists.