

# **The Structure and Function of Higher Education Accreditation in the United States: Common Concepts and Current Controversies**

Eric L. Sauers, PhD, AT, FNATA  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences  
A. T. Still University  
[esauers@atsu.edu](mailto:esauers@atsu.edu)

## **PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES**

- Define and discuss the contemporary functions and values of accreditation in U.S. higher education.
- Define and discuss the structure of accreditation in US higher education, including national, regional, and specialized / programmatic accreditation.
- Discuss current controversies regarding the role of accreditation in higher education with particular emphasis on federal funding and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.
- Discuss specific implications for accreditation in AT with special attention to the recognition standards that the CAATE must adhere here to obtain and maintain CHEA recognition.

## **PRESENTATION OUTLINE**

### **1. Societal Value of Higher Education**

- *“Knowledge is the New Oil.”*
- *“The U.S. wants to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, yet student loan debt is estimated at more than 1 trillion dollars and 34% of business leaders disagree that graduating students possess the skills and competencies their businesses need”*
- *“Higher education acts as a public good, therefore quality assurance is a public responsibility”*

### **2. Defining Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

- *“Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement.”*
- *“Accreditation is the recognition that an institution maintains standards requisite for its graduates to gain admission to other reputable institutions of higher learning or to achieve credentials for professional practice.”*

### **3. Function of Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

- *“Key accreditation functions include: assuring quality, access to federal funds, engendering private sector confidence, and easing transfer”*
- *“Accreditation should focus more on student learning outcomes and less on regulation. The more regulatory focus the greater the distraction from learning outcomes.”*

#### **4. Structure of Accreditation in the United States**

- *“The United States has no federal Ministry of Education or other centralized authority exercising single national control over postsecondary educational institutions in this country.”*
- *“Quality assurance in US higher education is a complicated triad of state regulation, federal regulation, and independent third party accreditation.”*
- *“There are two basic types of educational accreditation, one referred to as “institutional” and the other referred to as “specialized” or “programmatic.””*

#### **5. Common Principles of Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

- *“The common procedures for institutional and programmatic accreditation include: standards, self-study, on-site evaluation, publication, monitoring, and reevaluation.”*
- *“Quality assurance should result in a triad of access, affordability, and achievement (outcomes)”*

#### **6. Contemporary Challenges for Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

- *“There are significant concerns that accreditors are not taking action even when they find evidence of significant problems.”*
- *“Accreditors have an obligation to highlight and promote high performing institutions/programs”*
- *“There is a problem with quality assurance, not with accreditation. Actually, Accreditation should be the SOLUTION”*

#### **7. The Future of Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

- *“There is a strong political tension between the desire for reducing regulatory burden and costs of accreditation, while at the same time assuring consumer protections and value from higher education.”*
- *“The future of accreditation and quality assurance in higher education will be largely determined through the political processes of reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA)”*

#### **8. Implications for Accreditation in Athletic Training**

- *“The Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) received recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in September of 2014.”*
- *“The most significant impact of seeking CHEA recognition has been related to demonstrating public accountability by requiring institutions to provide consistent information about academic quality and student achievement.”*

## KEY REFERENCES

1. U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Accreditation in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/print/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html>
2. Eaton, JS. (2012). *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation*. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Retrieved from <http://www.chea.org/pdf/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202012.pdf>
3. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2010). *Recognition of Accrediting Organizations: Policy and Procedures*. Retrieved from [http://www.chea.org/pdf/Recognition\\_Policy-June\\_28\\_2010-FINAL.pdf](http://www.chea.org/pdf/Recognition_Policy-June_28_2010-FINAL.pdf)
4. National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity. (2015). *Draft Recommendations to inform accreditation and recognition policy and practice*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/naciqi-dir/2014-fall/naciqi-draft-recomendations-report-01012015.pdf>
5. Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. *Higher Education and the Triad*. Retrieved from <http://www.aspa-usa.org/content/about-accreditation>
6. Rice A. (2014). *What reauthorizing the Higher Education Act means for students*. USA Today. Retrieved from <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/10/12/what-reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-means-for-students/>
7. Lingenfeller PE. (2012). *The Knowledge Economy: Challenges and Opportunities for American Higher Education*. EDUCAUSE Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.educause.edu/library/resources/chapter-1-knowledge-economy-challenges-and-opportunities-american-higher-education>
8. Higher Education Opportunity Act. Public Law 110-315-Aug.14, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-110publ315/pdf/PLAW-110publ315.pdf>
9. United States Government Accountability Office. (2014). *Higher Education: Education Should Strengthen Oversight of Schools and Accreditors*. Retrieved from <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-59>
10. Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. (2014). *Recommendations for Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act*. Retrieved from <http://www.aspa-usa.org/content/position-papers>