

PARTICIPANTS IN AN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY:
THE ROLE OF FACULTY AND PROPOSED ACCREDITATION
STANDARDS

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Our accrediting entity, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), is replacing its current accreditation standards which were adopted in the late 1970s. The new standards, presently in draft form, will likely be adopted by early 2010, and in force, at least partially, by 2012. At present, the new standards are set out in a document entitled, “Revised NWCCU Standards for Accreditation Draft 5.0.” The reader can download and read Draft 5.0 at <http://www.nwccu.org/Standards%20Review/Pages/StandardsDraft.htm>. I encourage you to do so, and read the document for yourself.

The purpose of this essay is to introduce you to some of the proposed standards, analyze them briefly, and make personal observations. Above all, I wish to encourage a higher level of informed dialogue regarding accreditation standards at BYU–Idaho. Accordingly, this essay is not intended to take an absolute position on whether or not any educational institution subject to NWCCU standards—including our own institution—meets, or fails to meet, the provisions of the draft standards, but to inform the reader about the new standards so that our faculty and administration may collaborate more closely in the accreditation process in the future. This should not suggest that I do not have (sometimes strong) views regarding what might be improved at our institution. Like many of my colleagues, I do. Instead of airing my own views about the degree to which BYU–Idaho meets the draft standards, I would like to encourage a dialogue involving your views, especially in light of what outside professional reviewers have determined to be acceptable professional practice within the NWCCU accreditation community; after all, BYU–Idaho has voluntarily subjected itself to external review and we, as faculty members, should be among the first to take the process seriously. That requires an interested and sustained investment of time and attention on our part.

I have organized the following review and analysis of selected draft standards around two themes. First, I examine the creation and maintenance of an academic community that actively includes the faculty and its views. Second, I point out that, according to the proposed standards, the institutional role(s) of the faculty as constituent partners of the academic community form an integral part of the institution’s “system of governance.” The draft standards intentionally and repeatedly treat the faculty of participating institutions as genuine partners in the University’s “system of governance” (draft standard 2.A.1), a role that has

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been increasingly subjected to perceived needs of institutional efficiencies. The academic community conceived in the draft standards is not a mere theoretical construct or vague concept, but a concrete reality reflected in a university's academic governance.

Given the fact that the accreditation standards have not been replaced since the 1970s, the question arises as to why a revision may be necessary now, and what kind of revision is appropriate. My observation is, first, that certain aspects of academic governance were taken for granted in the 1970s which are no longer taken for granted, or which have come under attack. For example, few would have argued in the 1970s that curricular decisions are the province of the faculty: individually, departmentally, collegially, according to independent professional standards determined by specific disciplines and standards of scholarship generally. Recently, that concept has come under increasing attack by "experts" mandating educational models and establishing professional standards that fail to take into account the variety of disciplines represented in a university curriculum, or that are patently beyond the scope of their own learning and training. The draft standards address this issue by writing out what may have been taken for granted earlier.

Second, there has been an increase in the direct involvement of institutional leaders and administrators ("efficiency experts") who are qualified mainly in areas of management and operational efficiencies, in academic areas and methods beyond the reach of their training or experience, individually or collectively. The tension between institutional efficiencies (e.g., relative cost of education, etc.) on the one hand, and quality academic instruction, on the other hand, is not new. Universities are often inefficient in a strict sense, and the fault (such as it may be called from the viewpoint of efficiencies) may lie with the nature of education itself. In higher education, relatively autonomous professionals are hired to offer personal services to a diverse student body, a process that is not a prescription for strict efficiency. Universities, in an effort to maintain necessary restraints on inefficiency, employ efficiency experts. Just as academic instruction and research may become so idiosyncratic or individualized as to threaten desired levels of efficiency, so too may concerns for mere efficiency threaten quality education. So long as efficiency experts and faculty share the responsibility for discovering a balance between these tensions as partner members in an academic community, quality education may be delivered within the bounds of reasonable restraints.

In contrast, when a single viewpoint dominates or effectively monopolizes the system of academic governance (i.e., an academic administration largely comprised of the members of a single discipline, trained in efficiency models) unintentional organizational myopia may result. In

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such a system, questions of quality (which are difficult, if not impossible to quantify) mutate (perhaps unnoticed) into issues of quantity that can more easily be reduced to acontextual numbers and formulae. Under such circumstances an academic organization may convince itself that its numbers and charts can be substituted for genuine quality concerns, which are largely discursive and less capable of meaningful reduction to numbers. No single discipline can account for or understand the complexities of a university curriculum, and, unsurprisingly, no single discipline can manage academic quality in this complex environment. Wisely, the draft accreditation standards repeatedly stress the role of the faculty *as a whole* as active participants in the institution's system of academic governance, in an effort to maintain a balance between the concerns of quality education and those of efficiency: the combined experience, training, and wisdom of the whole faculty hopefully compensates for the natural and expected deficits of its management (no matter who is in charge or how seriously they may take their charge). The response adopted under the proposed accreditation standards is to balance vertical hierarchies of authority, and the potential dominance of efficiency expertise, with a horizontal distribution of authority and responsibility across the faculty generally, as valued participants in an academic community charged with a university's system of academic governance.

CONSTITUENTS IN AN *ACADEMIC COMMUNITY* VERSUS *CLIENTELE*

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The proposed new accreditation standards employ the language of society and community in defining the respective *roles* of administration, staff, faculty, and students. This contrasts with the language of commerce, which is limited in the draft standards to defining the *structure* of the institution. Of course, a university must employ efficiencies grounded in business or commercial models in order to operate within budgets, maintain organizational schemes, and utilize other customary trappings of commerce. But having defined the structure of the university or college using corporate language, the standards thereafter employ the terminology of community and constituency in defining the academic system of governance:

The *institution* has a *governing-board*-approved and widely-published mission statement that expresses clearly a purpose appropriate for an institution of higher learning, gives direction for its efforts, and derives from and is generally understood by its *community* (Draft Standard 1.A.1, emphasis added).

Academic policies, including those related to *teaching, service, scholarship, research, and artistic creation*, are clearly communicated to affected *students, faculty, and other constituencies* (2.A.10, emphasis added).

The proposed standards reinforce the language of *community* and *constituency*. Faculty members are not passive members of an impersonal, but perhaps efficient, corporate organization, but instead discuss and defend their own viewpoints which combine with areas of authority to create a “system of governance” for the institution academically. The term “constituent” implies that the community relies upon consideration of diverse viewpoints, and upon compromise rather than authority or office alone. This contrasts with efficiency models that employ vertical hierarchies of governance and top-down authority. The academic aspect of the university is not, strictly speaking, a business. The faculty is not a collective of fungible service-providers, and students are not mere customers or clientele, purchasing a commodity. All are members of a community, the first defining and implementing its legitimate functions as stewards of curriculum and academic standards, and the latter reaping educational benefits derived from work and discipline.

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CONSTITUENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN GOVERNING THE UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE ACADEMICALLY

The academic community and its constituencies participate in and inform the decision-making process itself relative to academic issues at various levels according to the new standards:

The institution demonstrates an effective and *widely understood system of governance with clearly-defined authority, roles, and responsibilities*. Its *decision-making structures and processes* make provision for the consideration of the *views of faculty, staff, administrators, and students* on matters in which they have a direct and reasonable interest (2.A.1, emphasis added).

Forming an academic community requires shared responsibility for the governance of the institution and in defining decision-making roles within that system. The inclusion of constituent views within clearly-defined roles as part of a formal system of governance provides the essential energy and professionalism for the institution to operate primarily as an institution of higher education. However, unless and until decision-making roles and policies are committed to writing they remain unclear.

NECESSARY ACADEMIC AND RELATED FREEDOMS FOR CONSTITUENTS

Clearly-defined written policies ensuring academic freedom make room for the essential energy and professionalism the institution requires to operate primarily as an institution of higher education:

The institution adheres to a clearly-defined policy that prohibits conflict of interest on the part of members of the governing board, administration, faculty, and staff. *Even when supported by or affiliated with social, political, corporate, or religious organizations, education is the institution's primary purpose and it operates as an academic institution with appropriate autonomy.* If it requires conformity to specific codes of conduct of its constituencies or seeks to instill specific beliefs or world views, it gives clear prior notice of such codes and/or policies in its publications (2.A.21, emphasis added).

Of course, academic freedom should not be wielded irresponsibly, or in a manner directly contrary to the purposes of education or the institution's value structure, but should be employed in the search for academic truth as understood within disciplines and based upon current scholarship:

Within the context of its mission and values, the institution defines and actively promotes an environment that supports independent thought in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. It affirms the freedom of faculty, staff, administrators, and students to share their scholarship and reasoned conclusions with others. While institutions and individuals within the institution may hold to a particular personal, social, or religious philosophy, the institution's constituencies are intellectually free to examine thought and reason and to distinguish between the pursuit of truth and a commitment to values. Moreover, they allow others the freedom to do the same (2.A.26, emphasis added).

In addition to the employment of academic freedom within the context of the institution's values, and in promotion of those values, members of the academic community entrusted with instructional duties are obliged to distinguish between scholarship and personal belief or opinion:

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Individuals with teaching responsibilities *present scholarship fairly, accurately, and objectively. Their personal beliefs and opinions are identified as such* (2.A.27, emphasis added).

Instruction in scholarship, a commitment to values, the expression of beliefs within the academic community frame the boundaries of academic freedom. Their responsible use marries the institutional mission to its primary educational purpose to qualify an institution for accreditation, as clarified in the proposed standards. This may make some members of the academic community uncomfortable when they personally believe that academic truth runs contrary to their personal views. However, respect for divergent viewpoints and the separation of personal views from accepted scholarship establishes academic integrity and strengthens the community as a whole.

FACULTY ROLES UNDER THE PROPOSED STANDARDS

I will address faculty roles as defined in the proposed standards as follows: 1) the preservation of institutional memory, the establishment of academic policy, and the continuity of high-quality academic programs; 2) an active role in curriculum development and implementation, securing quality through *direct participation in the hiring of faculty*; and, 3) preserving the liberal arts component of general education through instruction in basic knowledge and methodologies.

In government, business, and education, the leadership often changes hands with intentional regularity. This poses a challenge to institutional memory. What was said or done by a particular leader (or, in the case of education, a particular administrator) may not be remembered by their replacement(s), leading to policy discontinuities that disrupt or demoralize members of the institutional community. This challenge can be addressed by defining clear policies, committing them to writing, and posting them publically in a location easily accessible and dedicated to that purpose. However, not all matters can be reduced to writing. Consequently, the proposed standards assign responsibility for ensuring the continuity and integrity of academic policies and programs to the faculty:

Consistent with its mission, educational philosophy, programs, and services, the institution employs *appropriately-qualified faculty* sufficient in number to *achieve* its educational objectives, *establish and oversee academic policies*, and *ensure the integrity and continuity of its academic programs wherever offered and however delivered* (2.B.4, emphasis added).

The achievement of educational objectives, the establishment and oversight of academic policy, and the integrity of the institution's academic programs are therefore entrusted by the proposed standards to the faculty. In contrast to the intentional and frequent replacement of leadership, faculty tenure is customarily measured in multiple decades of continuous professional employment at an institution. It makes consummate sense that the constituent with the greatest longevity coupled with professional qualifications is entrusted with institutional memory and academic integrity, whose collective longevity is of great value in providing necessary continuity.

The role of the faculty in overseeing academic continuity is not limited to an "on-campus role" in the proposed standards. The prior quotation included the phrase, "wherever offered and however delivered." In fact, this phrase appears *sixteen* times in Draft 5.0, usually in connection with faculty roles. In the late 1970s, when the current standards were adopted, there was no online education as such. Today, significant portions of education are delivered online or in remote locations. The proposed NWCCU standards extend the reach of the faculty's role beyond the

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physical boundaries of the campus, and into every academic concern of the institution without regard for “online” versus “traditional” venues.

In addition to ensuring academic continuity, the faculty exercises collective responsibility for designing, approving, and implementing curriculum; the selection of new faculty; and (in the case of teaching faculty) collective responsibility for fostering and assessing outcomes:

Faculty, through well-defined structures and processes with clearly-defined authority and responsibilities, exercise a major role in the design, approval, and implementation of the curriculum, and have an active role in the selection of new faculty. Faculty with teaching responsibilities take collective responsibility for fostering and assessing student achievement of clearly-identified learning outcomes (2.C.5, emphasis added).

The faculty’s role in the hiring of new colleagues traditionally includes reviewing the professional qualifications of candidates, interviewing them, observing their skills firsthand, and of expressing collective preference in the form of a final vote ranking candidates, conducted at the departmental level or lower. The faculty role in the actual hiring extends beyond the physical confines of the institution to include the hiring of distance-learning or online faculty, in order to ensure the integrity and continuity of academic programs “wherever offered and however delivered.” Together with the administration, the faculty thus appropriately participates as full partners in hiring new faculty.

Finally, the faculty guards the integrity of general education programs, which programs are, according to the proposed standards, in the nature of a *liberal arts* education:

The general education component of undergraduate programs demonstrates an integrated course of study that helps students develop the breadth and depth of intellect to become more effective learners and to prepare them for a productive life of work, citizenship, and personal fulfillment. Baccalaureate degree programs and transfer associate degree programs include a recognizable core of general education that represents an integration of basic knowledge and methodology of the humanities and fine arts, mathematical and natural sciences, and social sciences. Applied undergraduate degree and certificate programs of thirty (30) semester credits or forty-five (45) quarter credits in length contain a recognizable core of related instruction or general education with identified outcomes in the areas of communication, computation, and human relations that align with and support program goals or intended outcomes (2.C.9, emphasis added).

An integrated course of study in the liberal arts suggests that instructional faculty may, at the general educational level, be called upon to teach elements of the curriculum that lie outside of a their formal disciplines or areas of study. That raises concerns regarding the quality of instruction.

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At times, the implementation of course modules, or “specialized units of instruction” designed by professionally or experientially qualified faculty, may be used to bridge the gap between faculty expertise and course content. In other words, institutions often solve the challenge of professional competence by using an expert to write a “module” embedded in a GE course. The proposed standards indicate that the creation and implementation of such expert modules alone is not enough to qualify for accreditation. Instead, specialized instruction must be *taught or actively monitored* by qualified teaching faculty:

The general education components of baccalaureate degree and transfer associate degree programs have identifiable and assessable outcomes that are stated in relation to the institution’s mission. The related instruction components of applied degree and certificate programs have identifiable and assessable outcomes that align with and support program goals or intended outcomes. *Related instruction components may be embedded within program curricula or taught in blocks of specialized instruction.* However, each approach must have clearly-identified content and *be taught or monitored by teaching faculty who are appropriately qualified in those areas* (2.C.II, emphasis added).

The proposed standards thus prevent an institution from assigning responsibility for expertise and/or quality instruction to non-faculty administrators, or even to under-qualified faculty (relative to a particular subject). Instead, the institution must undertake to place qualified faculty in a position to actually teach, or actively monitor the instruction of modules of specialized instruction. This may create institutional inefficiencies assigning qualified faculty to *monitor* certain elements of liberal arts (or general education) instruction instead of teaching in a classroom or online. Nevertheless, the draft standards balance the need for efficiency against the NWCCU’s mandate to provide quality liberal arts instruction. Perhaps it is not possible to design a quality general education course that anyone can teach (on campus or remotely from home).

SUMMARY

The proposed new accreditation standards under consideration by the NWCCU clarify and define the governing structures of participating academic colleges and universities. In the 1970s many things may have been clear that have since become opaque. These include the definition of an academic community, the identity of its participating constituents, and their respective roles and zones of academic authority. The use of commercial management models with strict vertical hierarchies of authority, the arguable exclusion of the faculty from direct participation in an institution’s system of academic governance, and the treatment of education as a mere commodity are addressed. Authority in academic

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affairs is balanced among the board, administration, and faculty. Within the system of academic governance, the faculty collectively and individually exercise numerous critical roles with respect to the preservation of institutional memory and policy continuity, the design and implementation of curriculum, the hiring of new faculty, and the implementation of a program of liberal arts education.

Although this essay deals with standards that are now only *proposed*, their adoption in the near future seems likely. Additionally, BYU–Idaho may go through a partial review under the new standards within the next few years. My brief overview of proposed standards for accreditation is not exhaustive. There are additional standards dealing with libraries and other resources critical to the maintenance of a university or college, for example. I encourage my faculty colleagues and our administrators to review the draft standards in their entirety, and—should they be adopted by the NWCCU in the next few months—the final version of the standards in preparation and anticipation of our next accreditation visit, and as a means of assessing our own performance in light of these widely-accepted professional measures. ☺

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