Can a "conservative process" become a viable instrument for progress in higher education?

Accrediting for Progress
or for the Status Quo?

ANYONE who was in touch with reality during the summer of 1967 does not need to be reminded that we live in revolutionary times. The social forces which have long challenged higher education, have taken on startling, new dimensions and greatly increased potency in the past few months. These forces are calling into serious question the relevance of all formal educational institutions and programs to the demands of our times.

Higher education can no longer afford to ignore or dally with the critical social realities of our age. Within the limits of their sources and competencies, institutions of higher education must join in the leadership of efforts to ameliorate current social ills and to develop ways and means for effectively dealing with the unanticipated, as well as the anticipated, human problems of the years ahead. This will require radical changes and improvements in our institutions and programs. Because the nature and direction of these needed changes are unclear, our efforts to improve will need maximum freedom for experimentation and great tolerance for diversity and failure.

Chief among the means which have been used over the years to attempt to ensure the adequacy of the institutions of higher education in our country has been the distinctive American procedure known as accreditation.

Accreditation is "the process whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or university or a program of study as having met certain predetermined qualifications or standards." 1 "By means of accreditation, professional organizations, associations of institutions, and official state agencies make known to the public those colleges and universities . . . which meet required standards of quality determined by the accrediting agency." 2 Every year large portions of our professional resources

are invested in accrediting as the means for ensuring that the public interest in higher education will be protected. In the light of current social realities, these efforts to "protect the public interest" raise some nagging questions.

Does accreditation serve to help colleges and universities move toward programs that are increasingly responsive to social change? Can "accreditation" be made a more creative and constructive force in higher education under present conditions? In dealing with these questions in the brief space provided by this article, primary attention will be given to accreditation in teacher education, the field most likely to be of concern to the readers of Educational Leadership.

"Consensus of Wisdom"

Cottrell has noted that:

Accreditation, in its very nature, is a conservative process. It represents a check on novelty through the force of a kind of consensus of wisdom. It distrusts extremes of divergence from the norms. The defense of accreditation thus hinges upon the degree to which the consensus can be established, upon the conviction which can be mobilized for the wisdom of its canons, and upon the degree to which variation from those canons can be tolerated without substantial nullification of their meaning. 3

It should be added that accreditation rests also on the conviction that external sanctions are necessary to enforce the acceptance of the "consensus of wisdom" by the institutions which seek accreditation.

Are the norms which stem from our present "consensus of wisdom," in teacher education, for example, adequate for the times? A quick review of the present standards for accreditation in teacher education suggests that a number of important factors are not considered in determining minimal acceptance of programs and institutions for the preparation of educational personnel. For example:

- The adequacy of the institution's definition of teacher education—is it proscribed by a "professional" view of the teacher or does it permit and encourage active concern for the adequate preparation of all levels and kinds of educational personnel—professional and paraprofessional, school and non-school?
- The relationship of the higher institution to the institutions and agencies for which it is preparing personnel
- The relationship of "teacher education" programs to training programs for other human service professions both within and outside the institution
- The quality of the institution's relationships to its community and to the other institutions which serve that community
- The manner in which "preservice" training programs are related to programs for the continuing education of teachers
- The extent of institutional and faculty involvement in relevant federal programs and the impact of such involvement on regular teacher education programs
The extent to which the newer media and new organizational patterns for education are utilized and critically evaluated in the teacher education program.

Provision for the continuing assessment of the effects of the above and related factors on the institution and its programs.

Achieving consensus regarding the way these and other really important matters should be handled or judged is undoubtedly impossible at the present time.

Even an effort to achieve consensus about such factors would tend to inhibit the openness and diversity which are needed in approaching new problems or old problems in new contexts. Traditional accreditation, which depends upon such consensus, does not seem to offer much promise for progress with respect to many of our basic problems in teacher education.

Given the present social situation and the assumptions, first, that higher institutions can and must accept primary responsibility for effecting social change and improvement if they are to survive as anything other than futile educational appendages, and, second, that in our "system" of education some sort of voluntary, non-governmental "organizational method to maintain academic standards" is preferable to direct federal control, what should be the nature and function of "accreditation" for the future? What enlightened and imaginative changes in accreditation will enable it to become and remain a viable force in the maintenance and extension of relevant standards in higher education?

Steps to Progress

Among the steps that should prove productive in answering these questions are the following:

1. Review and clarify the purposes of accreditation and evaluate the appropriateness of the means used for achieving the ends sought.²

2. Minimize the expenditure of professional resources on those accrediting operations which are designed to sort out the "unfit." Present social and economic conditions suggest that we will need all of the higher education facilities we can maintain. If, in spite of this fact, it is deemed necessary to apply minimum standards on the national level to protect the public interest and to provide a basis for determining eligibility for federal funds, the process should be planned and carried out with as little expenditure of professional resources as possible.

3. Encourage every state, as a supplement to the minimal accreditation function, to develop effective procedures for preventing the chartering or operation of "diploma mills." The restraint or discouragement of charlatanism in higher education is a task which voluntary accreditation has never been able to perform.

4. Utilize the cooperative relationships which higher institutions maintain through their professional associations to develop new sanctions and procedures for use against the negative controlling

influences of the federal government and other non-educational forces. The protections against such external forces which "strong" accreditation has provided in the past will need to be replaced. In these times of rapid change it is likely, anyway, that the processes of traditional accreditation would be too slow to be fully effective in dealing with external pressures.

5. Encourage colleges and universities to meet the requirements of the public interest by providing annual, open, institutional self-reports to the public and the profession. Such reports would serve in lieu of the periodic review and application of "standards" to the institution by outside visitors. Professional associations could facilitate this self-reporting process by providing guidelines for the content of the report based on a consensus about the important factors which deserve or require attention.

Preparation of materials for such an annual report would enable institutions and their faculties to clarify their own place in the scheme of higher education and should result in the production of information which would assist students, parents, counselors, employers, and other educators to understand the purposes of the institution and the means which it employs to achieve them. The success of this endeavor to replace external evaluations with internal audits would depend, of course, on the integrity of the reports. If we must set aside this kind of approach to standards in higher education for want of honesty, then there is little hope for our contribution to the future of the world anyhow.

6. Maximize the professional investment in efforts to encourage and facilitate improvement, experimentation, and change. Having set aside the punitive and restrictive objectives of traditional accreditation, professional organizations could replace standards with guidelines for excellence and external constraints with encouragement and assistance.

7. Utilize the complex machinery of accreditation which has been developed over the years as the organizational basis for coordinated professional action for improvement and change. In teacher education, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education has the unique and important characteristic of being the only agency in which the organizational resources of all groups concerned with teacher education are brought together for cooperative action.

Genuine improvement in teacher education will depend on a system of voluntary, cooperative efforts which can take full advantage of new ideas in teacher education. All aspects must be open to modification and experimentation. Traditional patterns should be retained only if the choice to do so is explicit and is viewed as open to evaluation. "Accreditation" will contribute to this forward movement only if it, together with higher education, is radically reoriented.

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