Autonomy and Integrity in the Era of Collaboration and Cooperation

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Barely two weeks ago I attended the biennial retreat for the staffs of all of the regional commissions. Two years ago we shared this retreat with you in steamy New Orleans. This time 55 of us gathered in a ritzy resort in Del Mar, California, the room rates of which would have sent most of you into a tailspin, particularly Cynthia. The chair of CRAC opened our gathering with a quiet but forceful request that we keep in the forefront of our thinking our role to protect ìinstitutional autonomy.î Iíve heard her say this before, so I know she speaks from a conviction that made her statements more than just a self-serving litany that we all expect to hear at such occasions. A centerpiece of this retreat was a draft document emerging from our project on student assessment sponsored by a $500,000 grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Jon F. Wergin, our Principle Investigator for the project, wrote in his introduction to the draft document, ìCommissions face enormous and often conflicting pressures to protect the professional autonomy of the academy from political encroachment, on the one hand; and to demonstrate social responsibility by holding institutions accountable for quality, on the other.î Toward the end of our meetings, my colleague Jim Rogers gave an impassioned and rousing call to action to protect our institutions from any attempt by the government to require transfer of credits. ìA-men,î yelled one of those in attendance as her hands and arms rose in applause. It was a semi-religious occasion in celebration of accreditation and institutional autonomy. I felt distinctly removed from it.

Not many years ago you might well have heard me speak about the vital role of accreditation in protecting the autonomy of our colleges and universities. Particularly in the U.S., we have made a fetish of our ìnon-governmentalî - at times almost ìanti-governmentalî - role. Colleges and universities, some of us have argued, serve society by being separate enough from political, economic, and societal pressures to be objective commentators on the very society that sustains them. American institutions of higher education exist because our society has determined that it is well served by having institutions committed to the search for truth and to educating others to be searchers for truth. A variation of this case, of course, is that colleges and universities exist to ensure the transmission of culture through time. The search for truth and the transmission of culture clearly contribute to the ìcommon good.î

Therefore, an accredited college or university should be a place where intellectual inquiry is fostered and intellectual freedom protected: these are fundamental to the whole enterprise. By protecting autonomy, we accreditors protect intellectual freedom and the capacity of the college and university to do its higher work without interference.

For the past two or three years I have allowed myself to wander from the orthodoxies of this accreditation tenet regarding its fundamental role in protecting the autonomy of higher education. Thatís why I didnít quite connect in Del Mar, and why I failed to join the applause with much vigor. I canít tell you whether this wandering has been triggered by the Commission major mission project in 2000 or whether my wandering in some way even influenced that project. I just know that the Commission concluded that yearlong, highly participative project with the terse statement that our business would be ìserving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of

higher learning.î ìServing the common goodî is distinctly different from ìserving our membershipî or ìserving higher educationî or even ìserving students.î And we knew it.

In response to this new mission statement, the most repeated question I hear from colleges and universities is ìwho defines ëthe common good?íî A very intriguing question, indeed. A few clearly continue to believe that the academy itself should be able to explain what it perceives to be the common good and, then, to evaluate how it contributes to it. Some, especially public institutions and even more particularly community and technical colleges, conclude that the understanding of the ìcommon goodî is created by talking to and listening to many difference constituencies of the college and its programs. A few apparently act on the belief that the marketplace defines the ìcommon goodî-identify and serve the educational and training needs of students and employers and thereby you serve the common good. Some argue that ìthe common goodî encompasses fundamental issues of justice, equality, and freedom, and, therefore, those issues must now define the relationship of our accreditation to higher learning. It is very clear to me that each of these understandings of ìthe common goodî shapes in very important ways both how an institution operates, the programs it provides, and the substance of the curriculum it creates in those programs. At a meeting of Graduate Deans, I once witnessed a remarkable interchange between the chief academic officer of the University of Phoenix and a dean from Northwestern University. The UOP officer proudly explained the speed with which her graduate business curricula could be updated and modified throughout their whole system, allowing for new or revised courses to be system-wide within six months; the Northwestern dean rather scathingly referred to such activities as ìcreating the flavor of the month.î

The importance and value of the autonomy and separateness of the university may have made sense in a different time and age. I do not think it is a particularly viable concept for all institutions of higher education in a democratic society in which access to higher education is rapidly being viewed as a ìrightî rather than a privilege for the elite, the wealthy, and the very smart or where a higher education degree has come to serve as the entry-level credential for almost all jobs that pay well, promise career mobility, and enable people to live the lives they envision for themselves. I do not think it is particularly viable in a capitalistic society in which our multi-billion dollar higher education industry is heavily dependent on the federal and state financial aid programs necessary to attract and retain students. It does not fit well with a society in which access to very significant sums of private capital is now mandatory for public and private institutions alike. It is not particularly viable when the academic community too often appears to be more concerned about enhancing the discipline than about the shared task of assuring the capabilities of students. The higher education community has chosen to be the provider of a large portion of education and training required for the national work force. The newest phenomenon among some of our most reputable universities, in fact, is to create for-profit entities to provide all sorts of training, some of which carries credit and some of which does not, but much of which leads to certificates of one type or another. So, I say, letís face reality: colleges and universities are intimately and eagerly intertwined with all sorts of financial, political, and social forces. Consequently, they have to be accountable for more than ìsifting and winnowingî behind ivy covered walls.

What is the role of accreditation in all of this if it is ìprotecting autonomy?î Protecting institutions from growing demands for accountability coming especially from state and national governments? Protecting programs from demands that their degree programs be reconfigured to meet changing employer expectations and student needs? Protecting faculty from expectations that they collaborate not only within their institution but also across institutions? Protecting institutions from expectations that they acknowledge what students know instead of what they have experienced

(and here I am referencing the growing tension over credit transfer)? Can we really be serving the common good through all of this protectionism? I seriously doubt it. If peer review is simply a tool by which we define and implement protectionism, then its days as a powerful influence in defining quality in higher learning are numbered.

Some of what I have just said, I said a year and a half ago to scores of Commission site visitors when they gathered for training at our Annual Meeting. Iím not breaking new ground today with these comments. When I wasnít shot at or fired for questioning orthodoxy, I knew that at least some of my membership was receptive to a new conceptual framework for the role of accreditation in higher education. However, I really had not done much to flesh out some alternative claim about the essential role of accreditation; therefore, I decided to make the most of this welcome opportunity of meeting with professional colleagues to explore what it is we are about, if not protecting autonomy. I will attempt to argue in a few minutes that there is a relationship between what we do with our institutions and programs and how we as agencies should think about our own autonomy.

As I pondered what I would say today, I realized that in some respects my Commission is attempting to create that new framework through our current project to rewrite our accreditation standards. ìRestructuring Expectations: Accreditation 2004î officially started in June 2001 and we hope to conclude it in February 2003 when we adopt the new standards. To be quite honest, I didnít know quite where all of this would lead when I said to the Board that we needed to move forward, just as I didnít quite know where the mission project would go a year earlier. I certainly had not expected talk of ìserving the common goodî as a result of that project, but now it is the shaping context of us as we create new standards. We called on a very diverse ìarchitecture working groupî and asked it what standards the Commission should consider that would allow for effective evaluation of quality yet also serve the common good.

There wasnít much consensus during the first long day of facilitated intensive discussions. Our ìa-haî moment came only on the morning of the second day just a couple of hours before we were to conclude. One of our community college participants wondered aloud why we just didnít return to the old tripartite mission of universities: ìlearning, research, and service.î He had made the rather comfortable but profound switch from ìteachingî to ìlearningî because we talked the whole previous day about our need to focus on learning. So I asked whether ìresearch and serviceî might be amenable to an equally profound restatement. I didnít know that The Kellogg Foundation had plowed this ground a few years earlier, but an administrator from Iowa State University acknowledged that her institution had borrowed heavily on Foundationís work when ISU restated its tripartite mission as ìlearning, discovery, and engagement.î Faces beamed, mine relaxed. The work was done. We quickly concluded that since we accredit institutions, we needed at least two criteria focused on the institution (mission and future planning were proposed but everyone wanted integrity to be explicit somewhere) and three new standards around these historic, but reinvented tasks long considered fundamental to higher education.

As you can tell from the document Iíve placed on your tables, weíve moved quite a distance since that November meeting, but the fundamental framework continues. I happen to believe that if we ultimately adopt and implement these new standards-we will still call them Criteria for Accreditation-we will have shifted the institutional focus for accreditation toward an extensive review of the fit of the institution and its graduates to the needs of the multiple publics it serves. At least I hope that is what we will have achieved. Strangely enough the importance of this shift is not engendering much controversy within the membership, and I can think of these reasons:

- The revolutionary implications of the restatement of an old, well-understood litany of purposes have yet to be fully understood. The power of the old concepts that connected the institution to the society it serves strikes the right chord in this day and age. The impact of having that in the forefront of institutional evaluation for accreditation, however, is perhaps not realized. We know this already because we struggle to understand the full impact of using proven student learning rather than effective teaching as the measure of quality in the learning-teaching continuum. We know the transformational potential of this shift of terminology, but that doesnít mean that accepting the shift in terminology immediately transforms. The groundwork is set, though, for transformation that occurs through new conversations over the coming years.

- The membership knows that if quality assurance through peer review is to be valued beyond the academy, it must weigh better and more openly the connections between that quality assurance and the public interest. The new criteria appear to reflect a strong consciousness of public expectations of higher education without letting those expectations define quality in higher learning. They bind accountability to historic commitments that become powerful as we acknowledge them anew.

- The membership knows that an emphasis on autonomy no longer fits the world in which they live and work. They respond to all sorts of governmental mandates in the federal financial aid program; public institutions report on all sorts of matters to the state and often must get state approval of new programs and new curricula; all institutions collaborate or lease services once thought fundamental to their work; they willingly participate in consortia for creation and delivery of programs, particularly through e-Learning. Very few institutions are really autonomous. So perhaps they find in the proposed new criteria a better touchstone: our emphasis on their capacity to ensure that they can fulfill their mission with integrity.

In thinking through the work weíve been about and its connection with protection of autonomy,î I am concluding that we might well be establishing the protection of ìinstitution and program integrityî as a better emphasis for accreditation. Mind you, Iím not even sure that the implications of what I am about to say are clear in our proposed revisions as they are currently written. In fact, although ìmission and integrityî is the title of the first of our new criteria, the wording of that criterion and its essential components address directly only some of what I am about to say.

Letís explore for a while a few important distinctions between ìautonomyî and ìintegrity.î Iíve never been a particular fan of speakers who build a talk around dictionary definitions, so I decided to turn to the fourth edition of Rogetís International Thesaurus to inform my use of language. All of you who have written and rewritten standards fully appreciate the usefulness of a thesaurus, particularly the new and nuanced perspectives you get on words that you use frequently and easily in our business. ìAutonomyî and ìintegrityî are two such words.

Under ìautonomousî and ìautonomyî you find that the major subheadings of government, independence, and voluntariness (or governmental, independent, and voluntary). As you explore each of those possibilities, you realize that for some ìautonomyî means ìself-governing, sovereign, self-reliant, self-contained, individualistic.î For others it could mean ìunforced, elective, and non-mandatory.î I imagine that we in the accrediting community think we mean the latter, but I think we are heard to use it in the former sense of the word, both for us and for our institutions and their programs.

In my earlier comments on the futility, if not impossibility, of using accreditation to insulate colleges from others, I argued against "autonomy" in terms of "self-contained" and "self-reliant." It is a bit less easy, perhaps, to argue against "autonomy" in terms of protecting institutions or programs so that they have an environment that supports choice and election, an environment rich with potential and possibilities but with little being forced on them. While I would like to think that all of us in the accrediting community think that's what we're really doing, time and again we ourselves abridge this meaning in "autonomy." The very act of an institution or program affiliating with us means that they have in that choice agreed to give up other choices. If they are not "self-contained" in establishing their own rules of quality, and if by "electing" to ignore our rules for quality they put themselves in peril, where is the institutional and program autonomy we allegedly protect?

I turned back to my well-fingered Thesaurus to explore synonyms for "integrity." Instead of going through all of the various possibilities, let me just touch on the various ways in which we could interpret the word. What are the ramifications of this proposition: "Protection of institutional (or program) integrity is at the heart of accreditation?"

1. "Integrity" incorporates some of the same attributes as "autonomy." That is, it can be understood to refer to "distinctiveness" and "uniqueness." In the higher education world, this refers to the unique and varied missions that our institutions and programs seek to fulfill. It can also refer to the multiple ways in which they can be effective at doing what they do. What we heard very clearly in this current project is that we continue to honor the distinctive institutional missions that have made U.S. higher education so strong and supple. By agreeing to protect "institutional integrity," we don't demand the autonomy of the self-sufficient and the self-contained. Instead we expect to find a clarity of mission and vision that informs and shapes the myriad connections institutions and programs may create in order to be distinctive or unique, to be mission-driven.

2. "Integrity" also refers to "wholeness and integration," "completeness" and "unity." In asking for an institution or a program to evaluate whether it functions with integrity, we can ask for review of such fundamental matters as clearly understood and honored shared governance. We can evaluate institutional by the organization's capacity to assure coherence and consistency across programs. Program agencies may seek to ensure that institutional integrity includes full inclusion of the program in the priorities of the institution. Integrity in this sense also includes connection with multiple constituencies directly touched by the institution or its programs including students, faculty, and employers. We should expect institutions and programs to be able to function with "integrity" in this sense of the word: protect them when their capacity to do so is threatened and challenge them when they lack integrity.

3. "Integrity" can also mean "soundness" or "fullness." This is a good term for qualitative evaluation. Perhaps this is where many specialized agencies currently locate their understanding of "integrity." A program of integrity is known for the strength of its faculty and curriculum, for the effectiveness of its graduates, and for its reputation within the institution and within the discipline. Institutions should be challenged to evaluate the integrity of their educational offerings, and we should be ready to protect their capacity to maintain that integrity.

4. "Integrity" means honesty, forthrightness, and fairness. I think the Commission has used it

that way in the past, and I realize that this understanding of the word remains our focus when we use it in our proposed new standards. The 1908s were a sobering time. After the very public scandals involving student financial aid and misuse of research grant overhead, everyone should have known that the higher education business is as vulnerable to corruption as is any other business. As any large business, it can also treat badly its employees and its students. In this time of multiple new partnering opportunities unfamiliar to people in higher education, of a driving need to garner new resources, and of increasing competition, honesty and forthrightness is something we should be willing to protect and its absence something we should be willing to consider beyond the bounds of acceptability.

What are the implications of this review of ìautonomyî and ìintegrityî for the matter of autonomy of accrediting agencies? I realize that this aspect of autonomy is of more concern to you at this meeting than my interest in the relationship between accreditation and autonomy of institutions and their programs. But even in this matter, I think we are hooked into the wrong conceptual framework. The integrity of our work is vastly more important than the autonomy of our structures and processes. At best, I argue, those ìautonomousî structures and processes enable our capacity to function with integrity, but they do not guarantee it nor are they absolutely necessary for it. Moreover, ìautonomyî of accrediting agencies today is as impossible to achieve as is autonomy of our institutions and programs.

1. We are interdependent. As a regional accrediting agency, I trust specialized agencies to do a sound piece of work in evaluating programs. At least my Commission does not replicate the review of specialized agencies; instead we ask teams to be aware of the findings of those agencies. Most of you expect us to do a trustworthy piece of work in determining the strengths and challenges of the institution in which your programs are located. A similar interdependence marks many of our relationships with various bodies in states. I count on most states to make a sound decision in giving an institution authority to operate and to grant degrees. You frequently align your programs to ensure students can reasonably be expected to achieve state licensure in the profession.

2. Federal and CHEA recognition processes both limit our capacity to be truly autonomous. At their best, these processes encourage connections among us and between us and multiple other constituencies. They hold us accountable to do what we say we do. At their worst-and I refer primarily to the Department of Education recognition-they become coercive in telling us what our standards must address and what processes we must have for reviewing institutions. CHEAís core values, which I find laudable, might not be every agencyís values, but CHEA recognition expects you to show how your structure, policies, and processes support them. I think particularly of the values of collaboration, openness to innovation and change, and public disclosure of ìperformanceî by institutions and programs. The Inspector General Office of the Department of Education recently audited my agency. We had to inform the IG that we were not a ìDOE program manager,î for that was the first rationale for the audit and the explanation for the DOE data validity standards the IG expected to use in the audit. As far as the IG was concerned, the Commission itself could be subject to a federal audit even though we are a private, not-for-profit agency.

3. We all maintain vital connections to various communities of interest. In my situation, state legislatures anxious to reconfigure state systems suddenly impinge on my autonomy. West Virginia, for example, recently adopted a massive shift in its public institutions, carving out institutions from currently accredited ones, and moving programs around the state. The

expectation was that the regional accrediting agency would do what was necessary to assist in this process, no matter our standards and our procedures. We strive to accommodate within reason. You do the same with the various voices of your professions, whether they are your sponsoring organization or not. Employers voice the need for access to programs customized for their employees and provided at the workplace. And again, we work with our institutions and programs to enable them to be responsive.

4. Regional associations strive to collaborate with each other. As our institutions and programs jump state lines and regional boundaries, our agencies endeavor to create shared processes to ensure regionalism even in the face of national and global realities. Our newest interregional protocol, for example, gives the host region significant voice in the review of the home regionís institution working in the host region. Host region standards can be applied through this arrangement. We have let go of some of our autonomy in accepting an interregional set of good practices for eLearning. We are exploring what it might mean to share in accreditation of international institutions.

5. My Commissionís recent experience with our AQIP program tapped new and vitally important connections. Without the sponsorship of the Pew Charitable Trusts, we could not have even started the project. Without significant collaboration with many state quality aware programs for advice, support, and assistance, we could not have mounted the program in such a short time. We linked with organizations such as the American Quality Society and with for-profit partners such as Plexus to create and offer new training programs and gain access to powerful software to support our new Vital Focus processes.

So, if autonomy is not the most important goal and integrity is, how in this environment of collaboration and cooperation do we assure our capacity to operate with integrity?

- We need to be more open to accountability. We can provide better information; we can open our meetings to the public; and we can quit hiding behind confidentiality. This is easier said than done because our institutions and programs still want us to honor the long-standing tradition of confidentiality. But we have little choice but to help them understand that we all benefit from more openness.

- We need to listen to and then consider seriously diverse views on how we should measure quality in higher learning. Voices within our agencies and within the academy argue for changes, and so do voices external to both. To do this, we must be ready to questions assumptions of the academy of our professions. The challenge here, often, is in identifying those credible voices.

- We need to make sure that our standards and processes strengthen the linkages between institutions and their programs, and the multiple publics they serve. From those connections we must work to discern what institutions are learning and how that learning should shape accreditation.

- We need to review the roles and inclusiveness of our systems of peer review. Do we seek in our peer reviewers the wisdom and judgment necessary for us to learn as well as apply standards, or are we just after trainable, likeminded people?

- We must defend fundamental principles when our capacity to operate with integrity is in jeopardy. When is the price for doing government work simply too high to pay? At what point do the Higher Education Act and/or the Departmentís implementation of it demand of us activities that threaten our integrity? We may face this with the next reauthorization. I thought I was close to facing this when the Inspector General of the Department of Education recently tried to audit the Commission as an agency managing a departmental program. But we also have to worry whether we tip the balance such that the voice of the academy, no matter how conservative and self-serving it can be at times, becomes lost in the cacophony of interests trying to shape higher education today.

With the last point, I probably am venturing into another speech, and maybe even the one I should have worked on for today.

When the Commission wrote its new mission statement, it also adopted statements of vision and core values. Since I donít read them very frequently, it is clear that their contents are mine on some subliminal level. The word ìintegrityî is scattered throughout The vision states that ìthe Commission will be an organization know for its distinctive strengths of integrity, flexibility, creativity, responsiveness, and risk-taking . . .î and went on to say that the Commission will conduct ìits work with such openness, excellence, and integrity that it earns a national and international reputation for leadership in defining quality in the rapidly changing educational marketplace.î One of the eight core values of the organization is ìintegrity.î Listen to the multiple meanings hidden in the statement of that core value:

> The Commission will place fairness, honesty, and objectivity at the forefront as it assesses its own policies, practices, and behaviors to ensure that they made credible the actions taken to enhance quality improvement in higher learning. At the same time, the Commission will implement accreditation processes that establish integrity as central to educational and institutional quality within and among higher education organizations.

I am confident this was written largely about the matter of honesty, fairness, and forthrightness, but the statement of the value is ambiguous enough to allow for more and richer understandings of ìintegrity.î What a great word to have as a core value! It strikes me as being so much richer and so much more ìsocialî in its meaning and impact than ìautonomy.î Were I to hear a fellow accreditor sing a psalm about our honoring and protecting institutional and program integrity and about protecting our capacity to operate with integrity, I would be ready then to raise my hands and arms in applause. And despite my better judgment, I would probably utter ìAmen.î

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