

Solving the New Puzzle

Engaging the Emerging
Higher Ed Accreditation
Challenges of the 2020s

An Accreditation Strategies white paper

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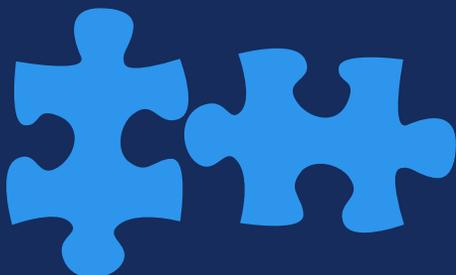


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Disruptive Trends in the Higher Education Landscape

Postsecondary institutions in North America that hold regional or program accreditation are facing unprecedented challenges that have emerged steadily, though incrementally, in the last two decades and acutely in the past year and a half during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include increasing demands for accountability, higher levels of and more avenues for accessibility, more affordable enrollment options for learners, and demographic realities like the so-called looming enrollment cliff. Concurrent to these challenges is the emergence of disruptive trends in the higher education landscape that promise to be the catalyst for meaningful innovations in learning, educational delivery, and governance. These realities are on a collision course with the massive bureaucratic regional accreditation entities that are still relatively entrenched in the modes of postsecondary regulatory dispositions and activities of the preceding decades. This white paper will explore those challenges and offer useful strategies for successful engagement with them.

Institutions are facing major accreditation challenges in the 2020s.

A new recession threatens affordability and accessibility.



Governance issues from partisan politics and faculty dismissals dominate headlines.



Innovation presents both opportunities and barriers to schools.

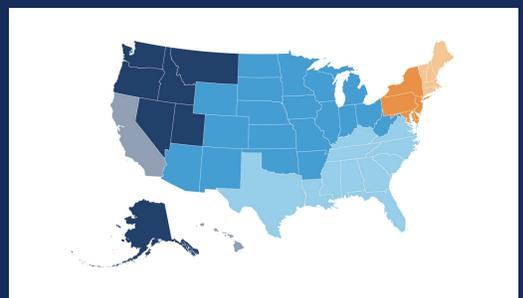
The Coursera IPO and the rise of course sharing suggest that virtual learning is here to stay.



Multimodal education like the hyflex model will make reporting compliance more complex.



The regional accreditation map itself is subject to potential disruption in the coming decade.



Emerging Challenges: Tensions in the Accreditation Paradigm

A novel recession, a global pandemic, and hyper-partisan politics, combined with ubiquitous calls for higher education to be more innovative, affordable, flexible, and accountable create a set of profoundly complex conditions for postsecondary institutions striving to maintain accreditation.

Access and Affordability amid Economic Uncertainty

The 2006 Spellings Report sent a clarion call to colleges and universities to make access to their academic programs easier to navigate and persistence to completion a more affordable enterprise for their learners. Proponents of a more equitable postsecondary paradigm are even more vocal in the post-pandemic space, but the creative strategies required of schools to make these changes invariably complicate the demonstration of compliance with relevant accreditation standards.

Interoperability and Multimodality alongside Tenuous Outcomes

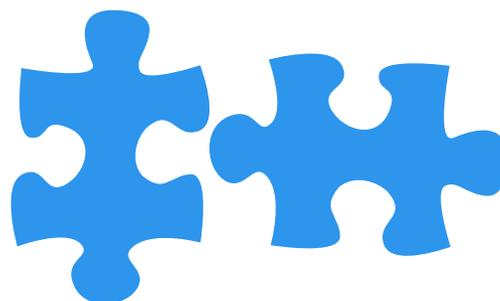
The days of the 4-year, single institution, residential student profile as the rule rather than the exception are quickly becoming a mere memory in higher education. Transcripts increasingly reflect a more varied student journey through schools and programs, across disciplinary and state boundaries, and between residential and distance education. While this trend evinces a more student-focused experience, it also problematizes outcomes assessment and comparable reporting requirements for the institutions charged with delivering on their educational objectives.

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Governance and Faculty Management in an Agile World

Recent stories in higher education news about interventions by regional accrediting agencies at universities where partisan political bodies set out to hire institutional leaders that would present potential conflicts of interest, or where university leadership attempted major restructuring of faculty tenure and employment policies in order to position their schools for innovation or to face new challenges are likely just the tip of the iceberg when envisioning the major fights over governance that we will experience in the coming decade.

Boards, presidents, and provosts are deliberately steering their institutions toward capacity for greater agility in curricular delivery and program cultivation, but faculty bodies and accrediting agencies (both regional and disciplinary) are committed to throttling such reformulations of the faculty governance paradigm.



Putting the Pieces Together: Ways Forward in the New Normal

Colleges and universities that wish to thrive in the 2020s will not only need to meet the emerging challenges and opportunities for innovation with courage and creativity.

They will also need to steward their accreditation compliance practices in collaboration with like-minded partners, integrate their strategies with larger communities of practice in their own institutions, and cultivate vision that goes beyond compliance to continuous improvement. The following strategies should be developed with institutional context, capacity, and mission in mind.

Collaborative and Novel Partnerships

New models of revenue generation like course sharing, MOOC offerings, institutional consortia, and other practices currently in vogue are not the only paths to meaningful partnership. Schools should seek to partner with other organizations and entities that have proven track records of navigating the new accreditation landscape. Consulting firms, advisory groups, and informal and formal networks can bolster a school's efforts to stay ahead of the curve.

Integrating Accreditation Strategies with Communities of Practice

Perhaps one of the most subtle threats to ongoing compliance with regional accreditation standards is the siloing of institutional divisions and departments, which stymies efforts toward transparency and cooperation in the development of SOPs related to accreditation. Institutions must develop and communicate broad, shared best practices and procedures across divisions. Consider organizing informal communities of practice that align efforts to uphold accreditation compliance.

Moving From Compliance to Continuous Improvement

Ironically, making compliance with regional accreditation standards a primary objective may be a misstep for organization's seeking to fruitfully navigate tensions between innovation and accreditation maintenance. Schools should calibrate their focus on continuous improvement efforts, understanding that compliance is a baseline activity, while benchmarking, excellence initiatives, and best practices both guarantee and transcend compliance. Rather than hovering at or just above minimally acceptable standards, colleges and universities that strive for continuous improvement have little to worry about when it comes to maintaining their accreditation status.

