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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that faulty analyses, wrong judgments, and self-deceptions about the sources, natures, and purposes of improvement and innovation pose dangers to higher education and thus to our nation's future potential. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding these issues is important for you and your institution.

Throughout this series of briefing letters we have been reviewing the fundamental ideas that have shaped accreditation policy and practice in the United States. These basic ideas include relationships among the separate responsibilities of accreditation, institutions and programs, and the federal government. In considering these relationships, we have noted a central truth: the fundamental work of higher education is accomplished by people in institutions and programs, not elsewhere.

This concept of local responsibility and control is consistent with two principal functions of accreditation reviews: compliance with standards and improvement. The standards portion addresses the relationship of what the institution is and does to community-wide agreements about what is necessary. The improvements portion may involve changes that produce compliance, but far more typically is associated with specific efforts of specific institutions and programs to develop in terms they set for themselves. Clearly, accreditation's traditional approach favors individual and local knowledge and initiative, and trusts local development of the relationships among what standards require and enable and what each institution does.

Such an approach also enables accreditation to be useful at all stages of development. No matter how advanced an institution or program, there is usually a strong desire to improve. Looking back over just the last 50 years, it is obvious what this passion for improvement has wrought in the arts in higher education and in other disciplines as well. Achievement has been fostered by principles worked out in systems that favor freedom and local control. The accreditation system, traditionally conceived, is a servant of this local control. It stays within boundaries demarcated by published standards, policies, and procedures. Because these standards boundaries are maintained, accreditation reviews, if used appropriately, can play an analytic and catalytic role in helping each institution improve from its current base. When functioning properly, accreditation works productively with the distinction between what is necessary and what is desirable. Because what is necessary is kept within bounds, local decision makers remain free to create on all other parameters.

Where does improvement start? Here is one answer: wanting something specific to be better, creating an idea or approach that truly *is* better, and developing the means for effective realization. Most improvement begins with a comprehensive and realistic understanding of current situations and conditions, including the fundamental ideas underlying what is happening on the surface.

If an understanding of current conditions, situations, and foundational concepts is a central basis for making wise judgments about improvements, and if local conditions vary significantly, it seems only logical to conclude that improvement is fundamentally a local matter, once basic requirements are met. In other words, if we want to continue to have a higher education system that favors local control and initiative, we will be extremely cautious about any idea that promises to achieve improvement through greater centralization of powers to impose detailed, common definitions of improvement.

What about innovation? Let us begin by setting higher criteria for use of the word than is usual in most of today's discourse. Innovation means creating something truly new and different, and this means doing so for the very first time. Therefore, every new thing or every change is not necessarily an innovation. Indeed, true innovation is rare. Many in our society are pretending that innovation is common when it is not. And many seem to believe that innovation can be mandated in general or created on command. But to try to mandate something that occurs rarely is to invite falsehood and deception, and particularly self-deception. Creativity is ubiquitous, innovation is not.

Of course, innovation can be nurtured by encouraging conditions that promote individual creativity and initiative. There is a strong relationship between freedom and innovation; there are strong relationships among freedom, innovation, creativity, and local initiative.

What about the relationships among innovation, creativity, and consensus-based accreditation standards that constitute frameworks for local action? Clearly, accreditation can accommodate innovations and creativity within such frameworks, but what about ideas or proposals that go beyond the frameworks or extend or challenge them in some way? In arts accreditation, there are many examples of early support for new ideas, even whole new fields of study. Arts accrediting commissions have approved innovative, creative programs only to see some of them become the basis for further development and extension into many institutions. This approach and process are expected to continue in perpetuity.

Yet some innovations and creative approaches are intrinsically flawed. They have so many internal contradictions that they will not work. Further, an idea alone is rarely enough. Various systems necessary to support the idea must be in place if it is to be carried out successfully. Arts accreditation has helped institutions working with new ideas to eliminate internal contradictions and consider and develop the full complement of resources needed both to advance and protect themselves, as the new concept is brought to fruition.

Accreditation standards can be and are used in debates regarding change. Certain standards are virtually non-negotiable. For example, a baccalaureate degree must have at least 120 semester hours; degree titles must be consistent with content; the depth and breadth of learning proposed for a program must be attainable in the curricular time provided, and so forth. But beyond such fundamentals, there is plenty of room for innovation and creativity small and large. So, why isn't there more innovation, more creativity?

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education empanelled by Secretary Spellings laid heavy blame at accreditation's door. Obviously, the Commission did not do effective research into this area. However, as it did on so many other subjects, the Commission repeated what is often heard.

Those who study the issue more carefully come to a different position. Accreditation can be used accurately or inaccurately as a reason for stopping discussions of change, or it can be used to

consider and develop change whether in terms of improvement or innovation. Accreditation can be in many ways, and it is not unusual for the word “accreditation” to be invoked in debate without reference to specific standards and policies or a call to the accrediting agency for consultation. This is unfortunate. As the record will show, the arts accrediting organizations and many other specialized accreditors support innovative and creative efforts on campuses.

Even if accreditation or perceptions about it do act as a brake at times, many other forces in society and academe are far more powerful inhibitors of change and innovation. Among these are: the continuing success of many traditional or slowly evolving ways of doing things (“if it ain't broke, don't fix it”); extensive, inflexible, and ever-expanding government regulations; infrastructures and interests associated with certain concepts or ways of working; common agendas and methodologies of funders; benchmarking and other comparisons; criteria used in rating and ranking systems; standardized testing; funding patterns; exchanges of methodology; continuous promulgation of a “best practices” ethos; political correctness; competition (“almost all cars in the same price range look the same”); and so forth.

Notice how many times the outcomes movement proposes increasing the use and thus the influence of many of these change inhibitors, and how it often justifies such proposals by decrying the lack of innovation. These kinds of contradictions may seem nugatory in public debate, but if they become the foundation of policy, they will do their destructive work uninhibited by previous theoretical, political, or public relations calculations.

Let us look a bit further at the record. By developing creative approaches and supporting creative people, American higher education remains one of our nation's most important generators of improvement and innovation. It has been a tremendous catalyst for all sorts of changes, most of them for the good. Both national and federal policies have supported the preservation and development of conditions for higher education to make all sorts of creative contributions in many disciplines and fields. The principles of accreditation that we have been discussing in these letters are part of the enabling resource base. Traditionally, accreditation does not try to micromanage institutions or to predetermine what innovation or change should be and then attempt to force it in a one-concept-fits-all manner. Many with so-called innovations to sell do not like this feature of accreditation. The outcomes movement has been perennially critical; it claims to know what the assessment future must be for every institution and every field, and seeks means to impose its vision.

It is useful to step back from current events and exchanges and look carefully at transcending realities. Fantasies are not good bases for effective public policy or institutional action. It helps to remember that both change and innovative change have potentials to do enormous good or enormous harm. The actual result depends both on the quality of the idea and the general effect on society as a whole. During the 20th century, a number of large-scale social innovations had broad intellectual and political followings for a time, but under the harsh impositions necessary to enforce these innovations, tens of millions of people died. Goals matter, especially whether they are centered in service to or power over others. Innovations in communication are good examples; each innovation enables large numbers of individuals to be more capable, effective, and efficient. However, changes and innovations that reduce individual or local powers in favor of centralized control and coercion often produce negative effects. In general, the ensuing bureaucratic aggrandizement, mistrust, and over-emphases on reductionist forms of accountability are not conducive to improvement, creativity, or innovation. Indeed, history shows that authoritarian centralization is usually stultifying to economies and cultures. Collectivization of agriculture was an unmitigated disaster, for example.

The few ideas that we have presented in this letter provide one basis for assessing the viability of a number of proposals in the policy arena concerning the relationship among accreditation, the federal government, and institutions. An objective look will reveal that many proposals being made contradict each other. Urgent concerns for innovation are juxtaposed with calls for standardizing curricula and courses so that “outcomes” can be easily compared with each other by government officials. Accreditation is urged to become a greater facilitator of innovation, but policies proposed for a changed relationship between accreditation and the federal government would make accrediting organizations enforcers of sameness, thereby removing from institutions certain fundamental freedoms to make regular or creative decisions about academic matters.

Innovation often comes from minds attuned to solving problems first on their own terms; specific consumer applications come later. Many proposals coming from USDE are centered on consumerism first where much creative energy is focused on manufacturing images, fads, and trends. Indeed, much of the rhetoric calling for improvement, creativity, and innovation seems to come from a mindset predisposed to criticize higher education on any grounds whatsoever, irrespective of fact or history. Improvement, creativity, and innovation are expressed generically and without reference to content. They are used as attack buzzwords and as justifiers for centralization rather than justifiers of freedom within necessary, but minimal frameworks. In part, many proposals using these words are based on the untenable notion that command and control bureaucracies can be incubators and facilitators of much of anything, except of course, expansions of their own powers. Of course, bureaucracies centered in more realistic and positive values can be extremely helpful. Goals matter.

For all the reasons we have stated and many others, proposals that would federalize accreditation as a means for federalizing higher education are recipes for hobbling the future creative potential of our nation. It is a vicious irony that such proposals are forwarded with the rationale that such centralization is essential if the United States is to keep its creative edge and compete effectively in the future.

Our next, and last, briefing letter in this series will deal with the relationships of the issues we have been discussing to accreditation in the arts disciplines.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Best wishes,

Samuel Hope
NASM Executive Director