

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that accreditation is important to the freedom and independence of individual institutions and programs. Please read on to find out why and why understanding this issue is important to you and your institution.

Balance is critical in human affairs, and finding it is always a challenge. Accreditation, as traditionally conceived, is intended to create and maintain certain balances important to the functioning of disciplinary programs and institutions of higher education in a free, democratic society.

Balance begins with the relationship between individual and community, and by extension, between specific institutions or programs and others sharing common purposes. For such relationships to work in a balanced fashion there must be a certain amount of structure and rule making, certain frameworks of regulations or common practices that protect, facilitate, and restrict at the same time. For example, we cannot each have our own personal currency system and transact business efficiently. Given that rules are essential, the next freedom-related questions concern the characteristics of rules, their scope and level of detail, the nature of rule setting, and the powers of rule makers, arbiters, and enforcers. If these questions are not answered in reasonable, effective ways, balances between individual and community, or individual and state, are skewed. In democratic systems, these balances are always the subjects of intense debate. In authoritarian systems, they have already been tipped in favor of the central command and against the individual.

How do this seeking, finding, and maintaining of balance work in accreditation? Consider standards and standards setting. In accreditation, as traditionally conceived, standards are intended to set thresholds that have the authority of professional consensus about what is necessary. In order to maintain freedom, what is best is not considered a community responsibility. On certain public thoroughfares, you must be driving a car; that is the legal threshold. The best car for you to drive is a matter of personal choice, not law. The same is true regarding whether your car is clean or dirty, whether it is carrying groceries or library books or a new computer, or whether you are a novice or master behind the wheel.

Threshold standards are set at all levels – what is needed to pass first grade or to qualify as a neurosurgeon, for example – but whatever the level, they are the threshold. Also, all standards used as the basis for fair and consistent adjudication are threshold standards. Yet, by design, thresholds set no limits to how far an individual or single entity can go beyond them, and as we have shown, there are many areas of engagement that thresholds leave to individual or local decision altogether. These facts do not invalidate the threshold, but rather confirm that it is a positive force for maintaining the balance between community and individual needs, contexts, conditions, and capabilities, and for protecting the free pursuit of “best” by individual people or institutions on terms they themselves set in relation to their profession. For NASM, this approach

is also consistent with the freedom necessary for art making and performance where there is no single correct answer. For all these reasons, accreditation reviews focus as necessary on threshold compliance but far more on improvement, and both in terms of specific institutional and program purposes.

Systems for reviewing and improving standards in accreditation are public, and in NASM members participate in developing and approving the standards texts. A great deal of effort and consultation go into getting the thresholds right, because everyone has an interest in their role as a balancing force. The standards must protect students, the professional interests and freedom of the field as a whole, and the independence of individual institutions and programs. The goal is standards without standardization; standards that go so far and no further; standards without links to utopian goals and the tyrannies such goals bring.

Of course, for the accreditation system to protect the freedom of institutions and programs, accrediting associations must do more than work effectively with the concept of threshold standards. Indeed, they and the system as a whole must operate under democratic rather than authoritarian values, principles, and methods. Otherwise, reciprocity and mutual responsibility are replaced with one-way accountability. Faith in the validity of individual aspirations and approaches inevitably lessens, and the critical balances necessary for the operation of independent institutions in a free society are lost. Under such conditions, those affected have no say and no participation; their only role is to respond to someone else's increasingly detailed specifications of what is right or best. Local responsibility withers as remote bureaucratic powers and reporting burdens increase and a pall of escalating compliance requirements smothers initiative. This sort of context is very difficult for the arts where creativity is central, and where at the highest levels there is no single best, only numerous examples of the individually wrought, unique superlative.

NASM has a historic and published commitment to maintaining the balances discussed in this letter and many more besides. The Association is clearly organized and operated on democratic lines. In these times, as proposals regarding evaluation, assessment, and accountability are presented, it is important to review them in terms of how they would affect the balances and the balancing mechanisms that have been critical to our nation's success in higher education and beyond. This does not mean that the accreditation system and accreditation organizations are perfect. No reasonable person claims that they are. Improvement is always possible. But improvements must not change fundamental balances in the individual and community relationship or harness the whole system to authoritarian aims under the guise of protecting the public interest. The freedom and independence of individual institutions and the individuals who teach and administer in them is very much in the public interest because those characteristics and conditions enable so much else. If freedom and independence are good for nations and societies, and for business, they are also good for higher education.

The next three briefing letters will respectively address accreditation and outcomes as results, accreditation and outcomes as a political movement, and accreditation and the public interest. All will continue the theme of freedom and independence.

Thank you for your consideration and best wishes.

Samuel Hope
NASM Executive Director