# Examining How Accreditation Standards May Drive Quality Improvement and Accountability in Nonprofit Studies Educational Programs

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## Abstract

This paper examines how nonprofit studies educational programs (NSEPs) accreditation may improve educational quality and accountability based on the history of accreditation in business education. This analysis focuses on accreditation as a total quality management process with reference to how it is implemented in business schools and more recently in the Society of Actuaries. Major benefits from accreditation for NSEPs relate to quality improvements, development and implementation of common core standards, sharing of improvement processes among institutions, enhanced employment opportunities for students, and better public awareness and recognition of NSEPs, leading to increased enrollment and donor support. Successful NSEP accreditation efforts include (1) identifying and obtaining the support of respected NSEP leaders, programs, and institutions; (2) developing standards that ensure program quality and accountability while being flexible enough to include differences in teaching and research orientation that permits innovation at NSEP institutions; and (3) securing the resources to sustain NSEP accreditation.

**Keywords:** *accreditation; standards; nonprofit management; academic programs; curriculum development*

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## Accreditation as a Quality Improvement Process

As the number of academic courses and programs in nonprofit education and leadership continues to expand, there is a growing need for stakeholders to consider ways to ensure and maintain quality, accountability, and instructional consistency among educational institutions. Wilson and Larson (2002) offered perspectives on the type of student and what they may be seeking in an NSEP. Most students in their study were professionals returning to school, seeking to improve their educational background in nonprofit studies, and they valued the reputation of the university and specialization of the NSEP when selecting a school (Wilson & Larson, 2002). In addition, Wilson and Larson noted that half of the students in their study received some form of financial assistance in pursuing an NSEP course of study. It would appear that both students and employers are interested in the quality and accountability of the NSEP they are using. Most students in the Wilson and Larson study were geographically place bound because of current employment while seeking an NSEP degree. Such a finding opens up the possibility of partnerships between nonprofit organizations, students, faculty, and administrators when seeking to improve NSEP quality, accountability, instructional consistency, and employment opportunities for graduates.

Challenges to defining degree standards are the differences in where NSEP studies programs are housed and the amount of specialization found in the curriculum. Today, 341 schools offer some type of nonprofit management education program (Mirabella, 2016), up from 321 in 2013 (Irvin & Lang, 2013). These are a diverse set of institutions providing 150 undergraduate, 210 graduate, and 20 joint undergraduate–graduate degree programs in nonprofit management, spanning 42 states. Currently, there are 48 PhD programs in nonprofit management education (Mirabella, 2016). Mirabella (2007) found that NSEPs are being offered in a variety of colleges spanning Arts and Sciences, Business, Public Administration, Social Work, professional schools, and interdisciplinary programs. In addition, Mirabella (2007) found a growing variety of program types offering coursework in NSEP studies that encompassed undergraduate, graduate, noncredit courses, continuing education classes, and online coursework. These diverse settings may result in significant differences in how an NSEP is defined and the type of curriculum used to prepare students.

One of the benefits from accreditation is the development of common standards across institutions and programs that are delivering course content. In this regard, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2010), one of the largest accrediting organizations in the United States, defines accreditation as a process "to assure and improve higher education quality, assisting institutions and programs using a set of standards developed by peers" (p. 1). It is a total quality management process in that (1) stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students, employers, and donors) have direct and sustained input into educational evaluation and improvements with (2) systematic and periodic reviews of curriculum, educational outcomes, resource allocation, and creative contributions to the discipline, and (3) a focus on and commitment to implementing incremental improvements designed to increase long-term educational quality (Deming, 1994). Accrediting organizations work with stakeholders to set specific standards to ensure programs meet and maintain threshold educational quality expectations and encourage incremental improvements to their educational

system (Eaton, 2015). Even though accreditation standards may be implemented on an institution-wide or program-specific basis, accreditation is carried out as a quality management (QM) process.

Within the context of accreditation as a QM process, it may be useful to consider natural advantages NSEP accreditation might have to a college or university as a program-specific quality assurance process. Wayne, Johnson, and Groesbeck (2006) outlined a number of benefits to faculty and the institution from obtaining AACSB accreditation. These same benefits may also be attributable to an NSEP studies accreditation effort. An accreditation effort could allow a school to distinguish itself in terms of having a greater commitment toward quality teaching, research, and service than a nonaccredited institution does. Wayne et al. found that of those surveyed at recently accredited AACSB schools, a statistically significant number of faculty (1) preferred and valued working at an accredited school, (2) viewed accreditation as improving their school's ability to acquire students and financial resources, and (3) improved the value attached to faculty teaching, research, and service resulting from accreditation. As noted by Wayne et al., accreditation may improve the ability of faculty to obtain the necessary resources to meet academic standards that were deemed lacking in a nonaccredited setting. Accrediting NSEPs may allow better and more abundant resources for improving the educational quality that benefits students, faculty research, teaching, and service. Because program-specific NSEP accreditation would naturally involve a collaborative effort among college administrators, faculty, students, alumni, and business and nonprofit leaders, these stakeholders would likely become more knowledgeable and committed to the long-term success of the program.

An AACSB International (2006) report entitled *Business and Business Schools: A Partnership for the Future* highlights the natural advantages and affinities associated with programs working with employers of their graduates, donors, and alumni, as well as outside constituencies that seek research on practical issues intersecting the interests of faculty. Oftentimes, donors will want to become aware of specific programmatic needs before allocating gifts to an organization. In addition, donors like to have a common set of measures to evaluate how their funds are being deployed to meet educational objectives. An NSEP accreditation process could provide an externally validated means for showing progress toward educational goals in relation to commonly accepted benchmarks of quality. In addition, because of this specific context, a good share of the reporting requirements may already have been developed in terms of reports to other external constituencies such as academic administrators, governing boards, donors, and/or alumni. An accreditation process will allow these reports to be tabulated and presented in a comprehensive manner that may lead to better educational outcomes. A program may have periodic reports on enrollment growth, student placement, curriculum development, and research over many years, but fail to examine these metrics in totality in the absence of any need for benchmarking. An accreditation process often requires a program to measure its quality against that of similar institutions using this information to better understand areas for improvement.

### Benefits of NSEP Accreditation for Students, Faculty, Colleges and Universities, and the Public

The CHEA (2010) document *The Value of Accreditation* provides a categorical listing of the benefits of accreditation for students and the public that can be adapted to

the case favoring NSEP accreditation. Accreditation for NSEP students would relate not only to judging program quality, but also to increasing employment opportunities and the likelihood of receiving financial aid or transferring credits. NSEP accreditation would

- assure students that the educational activities in the accredited NSEP program have been externally validated as having high educational value;
- provide a national and comparable measure of program quality that would assist students in applying to graduate school or job openings;
- offer external recognition of overall NSEP quality that signals to prospective employers a student's course of study has met widely accepted standards that may be a prerequisite for success in the profession; and
- allow students access to federal, state, or organization funding programs available to those enrolled in accredited NSEPs.

Public benefits from NSEP accreditation include better information on educational quality, program successes in research, curriculum development, and placement, as well as promotion of accountability and improvement efforts. Accreditation could allow for alignment with the principles being put into practice in nonprofit organizations (Corbett, 2011). NSEP accreditation would

- assure the public that the NSEP has met rigorous standards that have been fairly, accurately, and independently administered;
- promote accountability through periodic and ongoing external reviews, with the finding of compliance with generally accepted professional standards as promulgated through the accreditation process; and
- identify programs that have voluntarily committed time and resources to improving the quality of NSEP teaching and research.

Beyond these benefits are the ones that relate to the institution itself and the faculty who serve the NSEP. Institutional benefits from NSEP accreditation include greater visibility of an externally validated program, leading to greater access to donors, students, employers, and business partners. NSEP accreditation would

- provide favorable publicity highlighting the school's achievement of accreditation and signifying educational qualities superior to institutions whose programs have yet to be accredited;
- offer a means of establishing giving relationships with alumni, employers, and businesses that work with NSEP faculty and become aware of the quality of the program through the accreditation process; and
- facilitate the establishment of consortium relationships with other recognized institutions that want to share research, curriculum ideas, and faculty in the NSEP field.

Faculty benefits derived from NSEP accreditation would encompass greater recognition of teaching, research, and service activities that enhances the marketability, mobility, and professionalism in the discipline. NSEP accreditation would

- allow faculty to better collaborate on curriculum design, research, and grant activities with other accredited NSEPs, thereby increasing their marketable skills;
- increase research opportunities through granting organizations as a result of request for proposals (RFPs) disseminated through the accrediting body; and
- develop clear standards that would distinguish NSEP faculty from others who do not have the background, skills, or experience to deliver a high quality NSEP.

**Business School and Recent SOA Accreditation Implications
for NSEP Accreditation**

On June 17, 2016, the AACSB International marked its 100th year anniversary, making it one of the oldest accrediting bodies in the United States. From the beginning, AACSB's primary purpose has been to accredit schools of business. Initially, the AACSB accredited schools in North America at undergraduate and graduate levels. However, as business education programs expanded geographically and in terms of disciplines, the organization evolved to include accreditation of foreign schools and accounting programs. The AACSB's current mission is to advance quality management education worldwide through accreditation, thought leadership, and value-added services (AACSB International, 2016).

The history of the AACSB offers important insights and perspectives on how an accrediting organization can adapt and thrive in the midst of an ever changing educational environment. The period from 1916 to 1936 ushered in basic accreditation standards to address issues related to curriculum, qualified faculty, teaching and research characteristics, and the creation of Beta Gamma Sigma, an honor society to recognize student scholarship in business (AACSB International, 2016). The AACSB forged strong partnerships with 16 founding schools and with the business community (AACSB International, 2016). Accreditation was based on schools meeting a set of rigorous educational and research characteristics defined by founding members. With the backing of a notable set of business programs, the AACSB expanded membership and obtained administrative as well as faculty support for its accreditation effort. However, in 1952, the AACSB experienced a major challenge when the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA) mandated moving from a national to regional accrediting system. A regional system would result in having several diverse accrediting bodies, each with its own set of standards, organizational memberships, business partnerships, and funding sources. Consequences of this decision might be to dilute business accreditation standards and reduce the critical mass of university and business partnerships necessary to sustain the AACSB. Fortunately, in 1953, the NCA reversed its position, allowing the AACSB to continue as a national accrediting body, but the issue of regional accreditation did not go away (AACSB International, 2016). In the 1980s, major differences arose among business schools about the level and type of research needed for accreditation. During this period, a few smaller schools applied for and were rejected for accreditation based on a failure to meet a narrow set of research standards imposed by larger member schools. In response, a regional accrediting body, the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), was founded in 1988. This organization was designed to accredit smaller teacher-oriented business schools. By the early

1990s, concerned about losing the ability to work with small to moderate-sized business programs, the AACSB changed to a mission-based accreditation system allowing schools to flexibly define and meet research and teaching standards tied to the school's mission statement. In 2003, the AACSB followed up with a learning assurance initiative allowing schools to set mission-driven learning goals in meeting accreditation standards, as well as changes to facilitate the accreditation of international schools of business. AACSB membership and the stature of the organization grew following these changes (Hunt, 2015). When the accounting profession instituted a 150 credit hour requirement to sit for the exam in a number of states, the AACSB created an accounting accreditation program to ensure educational quality in this area (Bitter, 2014).

AACSB's history suggests the following factors be considered in an NSEP accreditation effort: (1) obtaining initial support from recognized leaders and institutions to lend credibility to the effort; (2) development of a set of accreditation standards that are reasonable, attainable, and flexible enough to allow for educational innovation; and (3) establishing strategic long-term relationships with NSEP stakeholders who can provide resources.

Recent experience by the Society of Actuaries (SOA) in creating their Centers of Excellence Accreditation (CAE) process offers additional perspectives on the rationale for accreditation in a focused educational area such as NSEP. The SOA (2016b) founded in 1949 has a mission to (1) offer basic, advanced, and continuing education to practicing actuaries; (2) conduct research relating to trends, public policy issues, and new knowledge; and (3) promote high standards to ensure professional competence and conduct in the field of actuarial science. Educational quality assurance is provided through a series of associate and fellowship exams with courses offered in math departments or colleges of business. For many years, the SOA did not accredit educational providers, preferring to have exam performance at a particular school serve as a quality indicator. Despite the success of this method for 60 years, the SOA in 2009 introduced its CAE (Centers of Actuarial Excellence) program to recognize institutions with outstanding actuarial science education. The SOA's rationale is to (1) strengthen research ties between academic institutions, (2) enhance and support actuarial research and intellectual capital development, (3) encourage universities to play a greater role in advancing actuarial knowledge, and (4) build connections between the actuarial profession and top-tier actuarial programs and faculty. As a result of the CAE initiative, the SOA (2016a) has been able to (1) raise and distribute funds for actuarial research at colleges and universities, (2) help students identify actuarial programs that meet high educational standards, and (3) offer students opportunities to attend actuarial conferences where their knowledge of recent research can be expanded. The SOA experience reinforces CHEA findings previously noted on the student and institution benefits of accreditation. NSEP accreditation could stimulate further student support and faculty scholarship in addition to improving educational quality and accountability in the area of nonprofit educational leadership. Payne and Whitfield (1999) outline how AACSB benchmarking may be used to improve program quality using a partnership approach.

## NSEP History and Accreditation

The lessons outlined from accreditation from schools of business allow for this story to inform the conversation and highlight the potential benefits and challenges of accreditation for NSEPs. An analysis of the NSEP landscape can also inform the

conversation and lend insight as to whether the benefits would outweigh the challenges of implementing such a process. Three organizations whose work and missions could inform the process of accreditation of the formal study of the nonprofit sector, which is approaching its fifth decade, are currently involved in NSEP. The first organization important in the conversation is the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC), which was formed in the early 1990s and created the original set of guidelines for graduate and undergraduate curriculum for programs of the nonprofit sector, nonprofit leadership, and philanthropy. These curricular guidelines have been updated as recently as 2015 for graduate and undergraduate programs. NACC is an organization based on institutional affiliated memberships. Currently, 46 institutions of higher education are members of the NACC network (Ashcraft, 2015).

A second player to consider engaging in the conversation on NSEP accreditation is the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA). ARNOVA was founded in 1971, and its focus is ". . . strengthening the research about and helping shape better practice . . ." (ARNOVA, 2014, para. 2). ARNOVA is an individual membership association and serves as a connector for researchers and practitioners. An annual conference brings together scholars to learn about the day-to-day concerns of nonprofit organizations, and likewise practitioners come to learn about research they can use to improve the work of their organizations.

The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (NLA), the oldest of the groups, founded in 1948, is another stakeholder in NSEP accreditation that could inform the process as well and be affected by its adoption. The NLA's mission is to ". . . strengthen the social sector with a talented and prepared workforce" (NLA, 2015b, para. 1). Similar to NACC, NLA also includes a network of about 40 higher education institutions; however, adherence to the guidelines of NLA results in students earning a Certified Nonprofit Professional (CNP) credential upon graduation. The NLA embraces a competency-based education model relying on evidence-based assessments, experiential learning, and other applied practices (Nonprofit Leadership Alliance, 2015a). The Association of CNPs, whose members are alumni of the NLA program, is another group that could add value to the accreditation conversation.

Considering the framework of membership for each of these associations, noting NACC and NLA are organizations based on institutional affiliated membership and ARNOVA is an individual membership association, NACC may best lend itself to a program level accreditation emphasis. It is improbable that an individual membership association such as ARNOVA is the right form to lead an accreditation process. Likewise, NLA offers a competency-based education framework to affiliated campuses to certify students to be Certified Nonprofit Professionals. This individual student focus does not necessarily lend itself to a program level accreditation emphasis either. Thus of the three, NACC seems to be the best positioned to lead program accreditation given its history with promulgating curricular guidelines and its institutional membership framework.

The NACC, ARNOVA, and the NLA may not include all the stakeholders important to engage in an examination of how accreditation standards may drive quality improvement in nonprofit education leadership programs; however, minimally their input is vital to the conversation. Their networks include colleges and universities, students, donors, and business and nonprofit leaders already invested in the con-

tinual improvement of educational programs, students' abilities upon graduation and throughout their career, and the programs and services delivered by nonprofit organizations. Other research in the area of nonprofit leadership competencies (Lucy-Bouler & Luch-Bouler, 2012) reinforced through applied learning experiences, as well as the critics of accreditation and the effects of this process on programs need to be thoroughly considered (Stepanovich, Mueller, & Benson, 2014; Womack & Krueger, 2015) prior to adoption.

A brief mention of some of the criticisms of accreditation is helpful to advancing the accreditation conversation to have some sense of its critics. Eaton (2013) outlines a number of criticisms including accreditation (1) is responsible for declining performance as evidenced in low graduation rates, high loan default rates, declining standards, and limited student achievement; (2) is costly; (3) is an obstacle and does not embrace innovation; (4) is secretive, burdensome, and intrusive; and (5) operates under two conflicts of interests. "First, institutions review other institutions, thereby encouraging a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' approach. Second, institutions finance the accreditors that are reviewing them" (Eaton, 2013, Criticism 6 section, para. 1). The criticisms of accreditation are noted, but the history of AACSB offers compelling insights to consider.

## Conclusion

Accreditation of NSEPs could provide a framework for improving educational quality and ensuring accountability to rigorous academic standards, based on past experiences with accreditation in business education. According to the AACSB's history, NSEPs will need to secure assistance from well-known, reputable institutions and organizations such as the NACC, ARNOVA, and the NLA in efforts to establish an accreditation program. By developing these partnerships, NSEPs can begin the process of gathering resources to sustain a long-term accreditation system. Integral to the acceptance of NSEP accreditation is the need to maintain fairness, reasonableness, and flexibility in applying standards. As seen in the case of the AACSB, failure to address these common sense principles may sow the seeds for regional accreditation organizations that are likely to dilute standards and resources. If NSEPs work with all stakeholders to create mutually beneficial standards and straightforward methods for achieving accreditation, then they will generate long-term support to sustain the organization. Often, overlooked benefits from accreditation are the ones generated to students in the form of greater professionalism, increased scholarship and employment opportunities, and quality assurance. Given the growth and diversity of NSEPs in the last decade, accreditation could now be a means of solidifying support and recognition for discipline.

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