



## Thought Pieces on Accreditation



*Originally published in the September issue of NACC News, which began a series of thought pieces on the Accreditation Summit contributed by our community of nonprofit scholars. Mark Hoffman, Associate Dean of the College of Community and Public Service at Grand Valley State University, allowed us to offer our readers a reaction piece he wrote immediately following the 2016 NACC Accreditation Summit at Texas A&M University.*

### **Observations and Comments on the NACC Accreditation Summit**

Below are my observations, opinions, speculation, and a few random thoughts about the NACC Accreditation Summit at Texas A&M. I wrote them down while the experience was still fresh in my mind. I share them for whatever they may be worth to both those that attended and those who did not. For those that don't know me, I was Grand Valley State University's representative to NACC from 2013-14. As the current alternate representative, I returned to NACC for this meeting because my colleague, Sal Alaimo, had a conflicting obligation. I hope this gives me enough insight into NACC to make informed observations without being overly biased by a long-term psychological investment.

Of course, I must have some biases, so I should admit that I am a public administrationist by training. My interest in nonprofit management developed because that was the interest of most of my students. Working for several years with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy<sup>1</sup> and teaching nonprofit management classes in South Korea and Poland moved me further from the dark side. For seven years, I was director of a department that included courses and programs in nonprofit, public, and health management.<sup>2</sup> Now I am an Associate Dean, and thus understand fully the evils of accreditation. I also worry that my thoughts may also have been scrambled by the repeated frying and freezing of my brain cells as I moved between the inside and outside temperatures of College Station, Texas, in July. I have divided my comments according to seven pairs of dichotomous choices that, I think, must be made prior to formulation of an accreditations plan. Some of these were directly addressed by presenters. Some were only implicit or were undercurrents in conversations.

#### 1. Accreditation vs. not

The Summit's highest profile players in NACC leadership, Matthew Hale (Seton Hall), Stuart Mendel (Cleveland State), Patrick Rooney (Indiana), William Brown (Texas A&M), and Robert Ashcroft (Arizona State) were enthusiastically in favor.

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<sup>1</sup> The Johnson Center for Philanthropy is organizationally independent of the department, but within the same College.

<sup>2</sup> We have a NASPAA-accredited MPA program.



Some skeptical comments that most impressed me came from:

Norman Dolch (Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership), because it has such low value to our stakeholders that it is not worth the cost;

Steven Rathgeb Smith (current president of the American Political Science Association), because there is no problem that it really solves;

Jo Ann Ewalt (current chairperson of COPRA, NASPAA's accreditation arm), because it produces consistency at the expense of variety and innovation;

Roseanne Mirabella (Seton Hall), because there are better things NACC could be doing (specifically championing curricular transformations that would “encourage students to create the change we and they hope to see in the world”<sup>3</sup>);

David Renz (University of Missouri, KC), because it is biting off more than NACC can chew.<sup>4</sup>

At the business meeting after the summit, there was no vote. So I have no direct way to gage support. My sense is that a solid majority of participants were in favor of moving forward, but the devil is in the details. It is not clear that there is yet sufficient consensus to create an operational plan.

## 2. Accreditation vs. Accreditation-lite

Because the accreditations process can be resource intensive, both for the accreditor and applicant, there was some sentiment for a low-calorie accreditations process. This was articulated by Jennifer Alexander, who labeled it “curricular certification.” Another word proposed was “recognition.” Throughout the summit, “accreditation” was the most common word used, although it was sometimes followed by “or whatever.”

My own opinion is that “accreditation” is a recognized word and would be useful in communicating with potential students and university administrators. Assuming a seven-year accreditation cycle, for one of the seven years a rigorous accreditation process will not be worth the cost, but for the other six it will be more valuable than “curricular certification” or “recognition.” No pain; No gain. However, to accommodate alternatives to accreditation, I will henceforth refer to LARC: “Legitimation through accreditation, recognition, or certification.”

## 3. “Program” or “School/Center/Unit/Department”

This was the only dichotomous question for which I believe there was near unanimity. If there will be a LARC, it should be by program, not for a whole School/Center/Unit/Department (SCUDs) that deliver the

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<sup>3</sup> While I believe there is some sympathy for critical theory within the NACC membership, I don't think there is much support for this as an alternative. Graduate students often enter our programs with well-developed values. What they want from us is the knowledge, skills and strategies for best combining their values with their careers. They are not seeking our values.

<sup>4</sup> My interpretation / summation of his various comments over the two days.



program. Furthermore, “programs” should include not just degrees, but concentrations and certificates. This would make NACC’s LARC unusual. I did hear some express the sentiment that NACC should avoid undergraduate programs because this might harm the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance, which operates on this turf.

#### 4. “Nonprofit First” vs. “Philanthropy and Nonprofit First --- in that order”

A “Nonprofit first” perspective holds that the legitimacy and authenticity of nonprofit sector studies and research rests on the nonprofit sector being the primary frame of reference, rather than viewing it as only relative to another sector.<sup>5</sup> Stuart Mendel’s argument was that LARC should be conditional on a program’s adoption of a nonprofit-first perspective. To the NACC audience, Stuart’s position did not seem controversial. It would reject programs without genuine nonprofit content created as “money grabs” to lure students. It would cast suspicion on programs that are appendages of MPA, MSW or MBA programs. While almost convinced, I would like to see a presentation defending Paul Light’s “Public Service” perspective (“nonprofit equal”?) that now permeates NASPAA’s rhetoric. Nonprofit First may not be the only acceptable perceptible within a LARC regime.<sup>6</sup>

Patrick Rooney’s “Philanthropy and Nonprofit First – in that order” (“Philanthropy First” for short) perspective is offered as a refinement rather than an alternative to Stuart’s “Nonprofit First.” I am less comfortable with this refinement than with the original. I don’t have a quarrel with what Patrick specifically says, as he always defines philanthropy broadly and inclusively. But my own experience makes me suspicious. Philanthropy firsters tend to dichotomize the field into grant-makers and grant-seekers. Very few people, including most of our students, enter nonprofit work with a grant-seeker self-identity. To me, it seems vaguely demeaning, and counterproductive if our major market are aspiring nonprofit managers.<sup>7</sup> This debate is intellectually very interesting, but can be likely smoothed over in the LARC process as long as the Philanthropy firsters don’t ask for too much.

#### 5. Education-centric vs. Centers-centric

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the most common names for the sector, “nonprofit” and “nongovernmental,” define it with references to other sectors.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Rathgeb Smith did argue for an “integrated approach,” but this led him to conclude that NACC accreditation was altogether unneeded. So it wasn’t explored as an alternative framework.

<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Philanthropy First may be more stifling or frustrating to critical perspectives within the field (as represented in presentations by Roseanne Mirabella, Maureen Emerson, et al.). Critiques of society and culture are likely to be harder on philanthropy, as a practice, than on nonprofit activity. No matter how inclusive the definition, quantity of philanthropic activity (“cha-ching”) is weighted toward social elites, and is intertwined with their political activity, as both are attempts to shape the world toward their understanding of the good. Nonprofit activity, while admittedly often sponsored by philanthropy, at least seems more diverse and democratic, and more amenable to the potential for systemic changes. Have not the Argentines, with their worker-controlled *empresas recuperadas* (taken factories), taught us that nonprofit management is compatible with systemic change? Has not the lopsided support from young people for Bernie Sanders negated the hypothesis that the pervasive service learning / volunteerism paradigm undermines support for systemic change?



My observation is that NACC's membership can be divided into:

The Grossvaters, stand-alone nonprofit "Centers" with an eclectic assortment of characteristics and functions.<sup>8</sup>

The Kinder, nonprofit programs in academic departments, most of which are also identified with public administration, political science, business, social work, or urban studies.

NACC was founded by the Grossvaters. But after a high mortality rate created a membership crisis, the fast multiplying Kinder were invited to join. On day one of the conference, I believe many participants inferred that in LARC, the Grossvaters and Kinder were equal. The focus was going to be on education. Heather Carpenter presented on curriculum mapping and Susan Schmidt on competency-based designs. But on day two, the "NACC Indicators of Quality in Nonprofit Academic Centers" was resurrected as a LARC tool. Stuart attempted to be accommodating, suggested the word "program" can be substituted for "center, but the values of the Centers-centric model are intrinsically embedded in the indicators. Then a suggestion was made that LARC should incorporate a Carnegie-like classification system. This produced a palpable uneasiness among the attendees, as the Centers-centric model was unexpectedly eclipsing the education-centric model as the LARC's gold standard.

In my opinion, other strong candidates for a LARC gold standard should be considered equal to the quality indicators. One candidate would be based on "engagement" activities, as described in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. That is, LARC should value a program that integrated quality community engagement into projects that simultaneously involved teaching, research and service. For many Kinders, an "engaged program" is closer to their ideal than is emulating the Grossvater nonprofit centers.

#### 6. Mission-based vs. content based

Resting on the well-received NACC guidelines, some NACC participants, particularly from the Grossvaters, assumed that the LARC would be content-based. Others, influenced by current trends in the CHEA academic accreditation regime, assumed it would be mission-based and outcome driven. I was among the latter. Perhaps, because I was surprised by the support for a content-based LARC, I felt this topic was not explored nearly enough.

I think a compromise is possible. My argument would be that NACC guidelines are so exhaustive that no program could do them all justice. Thus the only reasonable approach is to define a program's mission and then identify the appropriate priority for the various guideline items.

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<sup>8</sup> I use a masculine term not to be unintentionally sexist, but to be intentionally descriptive.



## 7. Domestic vs. International

This was a question where the presentations did change my opinion. Before the Summit I would have thought that a LARC should be designed for international participation. An international perspective is intrinsically valuable. However, I now understand that the logistics just don't make this very practical. The contexts and content of curricula vary too widely. The demand will be minimal. The costs of verification will be very high. So the best option is that the LARC would be left open for international participation, but that would not be an expectation.

Of course, there are other questions worth thinking about. Among them is what LARC means for NACC's soul. (Or, can a drinking club really morph into an accrediting body?) Is accreditation a temporary distraction? Or will it be an all-consuming project for the next five years? Or will it permanently become NACC's *raison d'être*. These questions were raised in personal conversations, but not addressed in the summit's program.

In summation, the Summit was a wonderful experience providing good information. Based on the spirit of the summit, I believe that NACC leadership now has its mandate to create and propose a LARC plan to its members. I think its biggest challenge will be to expediently and efficiently create a consensus around an operational plan. With members only meeting twice a year, and factoring in a moderate absentee rate, the goal of a 2018 adoption seems very optimistic.