

## A Position Paper on Accreditation on Nonprofit/Philanthropy University Curricula

Matthew Hale, Ph.D.  
Seton Hall University  
matthew.hale@shu.edu

Renée Irvin, Ph.D.  
University of Oregon  
rirvin@uoregon.edu

**Please do not circulate without permission from the authors**

### A Stake in the Ground

We intend this position paper to move the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) accreditation process forward by describing a potential model for implementing a nonprofit/philanthropy-first accreditation process. A nonprofit/philanthropy-first curriculum encompasses nonprofit/NGO studies and management, social entrepreneurship, social-purpose organizations, and philanthropy studies and management, with the express condition that the curriculum places the nonprofit/civil sector at the center of the curricular perspective.

This paper provides prospective university nonprofit programs, members of NACC, and the larger nonprofit/philanthropy community with a history, rationale, and initial model for accrediting nonprofit and philanthropy educational enterprises in a way that helps elevate the field. We believe that the process and structure outlined in this document is appropriate for the academic diversity of our field and builds directly from the meetings, summits and conversations about accreditation that have taken place over the past two years.

To a large extent this proposal is framed by a number of themes that have been fairly consistent since these accreditation discussions began in earnest in the summer of 2015. The frameworks called for implementing a NACC accreditation process that is;

- framed in a nonprofit/philanthropy-first perspective
- initially focused on curriculum review and program inputs (with movement toward outcomes review later as the accreditation process matures)
- minimally burdensome and cost-effective for programs going through accreditation
- within the administrative and organizational capacity of NACC as it is currently structured (developing into a financially and administratively separate entity in later years)
- flexible enough to encourage collaborative and non-hierarchical innovation within the field while still maintaining standards for excellence
- adaptable to a changing environment, yet with a specific plan for structured growth.

The arguments and rationale for the structure of the NACC accreditation process are articulated throughout this document. However, the key headline points are;

- The NACC accreditation will initially focus its accreditation efforts on **stand-alone nonprofit graduate and undergraduate programs**. A “stand-alone” program refers to a full degree program with a primary focus on the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. For example, Master of Nonprofit Management; M.A. in Philanthropic Studies, Bachelor of Nonprofit Administration, etc. A stand-alone degree program may be co-located in an academic unit with other degree programs (MPA, MBA, etc.), but our accreditation will focus only on the nonprofit degree program.
  - NACC will NOT initially accredit other degree programs with a concentration or specialization in nonprofit or philanthropy.
  - NACC will NOT initially accredit certificates or non-degree/non-credit programs.
- The NACC accreditation process will center on **matching the curriculum** taught to students in a specific program with identified best practices in nonprofit and philanthropy pedagogy and curriculum development. This process will largely consist of a process of **curriculum mapping** between the programs’ syllabi and the [NACC Curriculum Guidelines](#) and [Indicators of Quality](#).
- The NACC accreditation will provide a web-based **open space for sharing** innovative and dynamic course development and design practices.
- The NACC accreditation will help programs ensure that they have an **appropriate mix of professional and academic faculty** that is capable of teaching the curriculum. This will require programs to provide proof of the credentials of the teaching staff.
- The NACC accreditation will help program ensure that they offer the required and elective courses students need to graduate in a timely manner.
- The NACC accreditation process will be **largely conducted electronically** and as a result not require a lengthy self-study report and site visit. This will **lower the costs and time burden** of a NACC accreditation both to NACC and prospective organizations.
- The NACC accreditation process, via review of syllabi, faculty credentials, and scheduling of required and elective courses, **will enable review of truth-in-advertising and adequacy of the curriculum**. That is, if a university claims to have a degree program with “nonprofit” or “philanthropy” in the title, mission, and recruiting materials, they must have the curriculum and expertise to fulfill those claims.

This paper is an argument for moving the NACC accreditation process in a specific direction. As a result, we expect questions like “What about X?” and comments like “You forgot to include Y.” However, we have learned from numerous meetings, discussion points, panels and papers on accreditation (described in the next section) that the broad diversity of the nonprofit/philanthropy field makes answering all of these questions and comments to everyone’s satisfaction all but impossible. Yet the previous efforts also clearly indicate that many people feel an urgent need to try to identify and separate “quality” academic nonprofit/ philanthropy programs from other programs of insufficient quality. In short, the ultimate question is not whether we are satisfying all things to all people, but whether this accreditation process is

adequate to meet the needs of our growing field today, as well as flexible enough to meet the needs of the field tomorrow. We believe that it does.

## **The History and Development of the NACC accreditation process**

In this section, we summarize the steps taken thus far in the NACC accreditation process, the key questions raised throughout the development process, and whether these questions were addressed.

### *NACC Conference 2015*

In the summer of 2015, NACC held its biennial conference at DePaul University in Chicago. While the idea of NACC becoming an accrediting body had been considered for a number of years, it was at the 2015 conference that participants concluded that the time to explore NACC accreditation more seriously had come. In what was (admittedly) a hastily convened meeting of the NACC Board of Directors toward the end of the conference, the following resolution was passed.

#### Statement of Position

**The NACC board has agreed to explore and develop over the next two years an accreditation/certification process to be applied globally for nonprofit and philanthropic academic programs.**

Adopted July 20, 2015

In subsequent months, NACC members worked to develop a broad framework and memorandum for understanding the issues involved with accreditation. These discussions took place at a number of regular meetings and, as is NACC's standard practice, in the hallways and dinners at various academic conferences.

The results of these discussions came in the form of two memos. The first memo, *NACC Accreditation Next Steps*<sup>1</sup>, was presented to at the NACC member meeting in November of 2015. This document includes many (but not all) of general concepts that have guided the NACC discussions. Broadly speaking, a NACC-initiated accreditation process *should* be;

- flexible enough to meet a changing environment
- designed and focused around the emerging nonprofit/philanthropy-first concept
- designed to utilize NACC's expertise in the development of nonprofit/philanthropy curriculum
- intended to help build the nonprofit/philanthropy academic field
- capable of partnering with existing accrediting bodies
- cost-effective and non-burdensome to those going through the accreditation process.

---

<sup>1</sup> NACC Accreditation Next Steps: [Available here.](#)

The *Next Steps* document also identified an ambitious timeline for further development of the NACC accreditation process. All of the timeline steps mentioned have to this point been met and will be discussed below.

The first timeline step outlined was a focused member discussion on accreditation, conducted at the NACC annual meeting in November of 2015, which was held just prior to the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) conference. Over forty members at the member meeting dove into the accreditation concept with a lively and productive session. The results of this discussion were captured in a second guiding internal memo entitled *NACC Meeting Recap, Needs and Next Steps*.<sup>2</sup> The NACC members raised a number of important questions about the accreditation process. These are listed and briefly described below.

- **How do we cover the academic diversity of the field?** NACC members articulated that the nonprofit/philanthropy educational enterprise occurs across diverse academic settings. The members raised significant questions about the capacity of any single accrediting body to adequately address all of these diverse settings. No specific solution was proposed at the Chicago meeting.
- **How should we interact with other accreditors?** Much of the discussion at the member meeting revolved around the difficulties with and potential opportunities in working with existing accrediting bodies. This question encompassed sub-concerns from the added cost of another accreditation to questioning the desire of existing accrediting bodies to work with NACC in any meaningful way. No specific solution was proposed at the Chicago meeting. Note that focusing our initial accrediting attention on stand-alone masters or undergraduate programs (and not concentrations or specializations within other degrees) reduces some of this concern for now, as many stand-alone nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs are not co-located with degree programs accredited by other accreditors.
- **What is the relationship between NACC membership and accreditation?** No specific answer was proposed at the Chicago meeting. As with NASPAA and other academic organizations, we anticipate that some members of NACC will be accredited and some will not. Therefore, initially we must specify a clear delineation between the application process required to be a member of NACC and the accreditation process.
- **What is the relationship between NACC accreditation and US News and World Report Rankings?** This question is a recurring one. The existing ranking procedures are problematic to many NACC members because the USN&WR nonprofit management category rankings exist solely as specializations within either business school or policy school rankings. Again, no specific solution was presented at the Chicago meeting. The members determined this to be an important but secondary issue.

---

<sup>2</sup> NACC Meeting Notes, Recap and Next Steps: [Available here.](#)

Establishing an independent accreditation for nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs may help influence USN&WR to create a separate ranking for nonprofit and philanthropy-centered masters degree programs.

- **How important is it for NACC to begin the process of interacting with the agencies related to higher education accreditation?** The consensus at the meeting was that at some point it would be necessary to go through these regulatory agencies. However, as of November 2015, NACC did not know enough about what this meant in practical terms to truly move ahead.

Preliminary research indicated that accreditation processes are usually launched, seeking recognition by the nonprofit Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) only after establishing their operations over the course of several years. NASPAA's accreditation process, for example, was in operation for several years prior to being recognized by the precursor to CHEA. The US Department of Education is also involved in accrediting universities, but this is a more global accreditation related to eligibility for students to receive federal financial aid.

- **What is the business model for NACC accreditation process?** NACC members were unclear as to how this process might work within the financial constraints of the organization.

Initially, NACC would be the accrediting organization, but in the future, the function would be financially and administratively separate from NACC. (Fiscal and administrative separation is standard best practice for accrediting organizations.) A preliminary view of a budget was included later in the Summit Reader<sup>3</sup>, showing that the accreditation process would not generate a profit for NACC. Nevertheless, with careful attention to appropriate fees for the accreditation process, the accreditation process has a good chance of being self-supporting.

In addition to these central questions, NACC members appeared to reach a consensus around three specific points at the November 2015 meeting:

- **Theory and setting matter:** NACC members consider it essential to ground an accreditation in the emerging "nonprofit and philanthropy first" field. NACC members voiced concern about the lack of disciplinary recognition in other fields, and felt that accreditation models currently in operation for related fields were inappropriate for evaluating the quality of a nonprofit/philanthropy degree program.
- **An actual model for accreditation was needed:** A step forward came with the panel presentation of a basic accreditation worksheet, illustrating a simple and targeted accreditation questionnaire. A revised model of the questionnaire appeared in the Summit Reader.

---

<sup>3</sup> Papers featured in the Summit Reader will be appearing in a special issue of the Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership in 2017.

- **Keep moving forward:** Despite concerns about the potential burdens of accreditation, NACC members confirmed that it was in the best interests of NACC and the nonprofit/philanthropy field to continue the conversation surrounding accreditation.

## The NACC Accreditation Summit July 2016

The next significant development in the process was the NACC Accreditation Summit held at Texas A&M University in July 2016. Over 45 participants representing 38 universities and agencies (including non-NACC members) were present. With the possible exception of a number of panels and papers presented at the 2015 NASPAA conference, much of the formal discussion about a NACC accreditation had largely taken place among NACC members. The 2016 Summit provided an opportunity to bring in a number of professionals and academics unaffiliated with NACC to discuss the prospects of a nonprofit/-philanthropy-first accreditation process.

A comprehensive summary of the summit presentations is beyond the scope of this position paper. However, there are a number of summit-related documents and resources which have been posted on the [NACC website](#). These are briefly described below.

Since September of 2016; we have invited summit participants to post thoughts about the summit.<sup>45</sup> The full program for the Summit with all of the invited speakers is available [here](#). Extensive notes from the Summit were compiled into a document which is available [here](#). In addition, all of the papers prepared by invited speakers were compiled prior to the summit and distributed to participants as a summit reader. Mark Hoffman provided Summit observations, which were distributed to NACC membership in the [September 2016 NACC Newsletter](#). Based on feedback from participants, the Summit invited speakers were next given an opportunity to edit and revise their working papers. These manuscripts have been collected and will be available in a special edition of the [Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership](#).

## NACC Accreditation Summit Findings

It is not accurate to say that the Summit produced anything approaching unanimity or even consensus on developing a NACC accrediting process. Some of the invited participants had significant concerns about whether or not NACC should even move forward with this process (for example, see Eikenberry and Mirabella 2017 and Smith 2017 in the JNE&L Special Issue, available soon in 2017). However, as with the previous meetings and discussions described above, the Summit was successful at raising a number of important new questions as well as crystalizing some old but foundational questions.

The key new questions raised at the summit include the following;

- Is “accreditation” the right term to use? Could “certification,” “recognition,” “endorsement” or “stamp of approval” be just as or more effective?

---

<sup>4</sup> [Observations and Comments on the NACC Accreditation Summit by Mark Hoffman](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Reflections from the NACC Accreditation Summit by Susan Schmidt and Dorothy Norris-Tirrell](#)

- How will issues of diversity, inclusion and equity be made a central part of any accreditation process?
- What evidence exists that there are “in name only” nonprofit/philanthropy programs that are effectively competing with high-quality academic nonprofit/philanthropy programs?

In addition to these new questions, Summit participants reiterated some questions raised at previous gatherings. These include;

- How do we balance the need for accreditation to be effective at enforcing quality in our field without forcing programs to undergo an invasive, time-consuming, and costly process?
- How would a NACC accreditation process complement the work of existing accrediting bodies (Public Affairs, Business, Social Work, etc.)? Would NACC work with existing accrediting bodies?

Finally, Summit participants were adamant that until NACC provided one or more models of a proposed accreditation process, the accreditation discussion would forever remain a space where questions of “what about X, Y and Z?” circulated without end. Only with a proposed “stake in the ground” model could we begin to answer the following questions:

- Who (exactly) would NACC be accrediting? Traditional degree programs; Undergraduate? Graduate? Certificate programs?
- What would an accreditation process examine? I.e., inputs, outputs, outcomes, curriculum, scholarship, and service.
- What is NACC administrative capacity for doing any of this?

Moving forward compels us to choose a model of accreditation that works as a launching point. The next section, therefore, presents a Stage One model of accreditation for consideration.

\*\*\*\*\*

### The NACC Stage One Proposal for Accreditation

In this final section we propose answers to at least some of the above questions and provide arguments as to why NACC should initially structure its accreditation process in this way. In most cases, we believe we have solid and practical rationale for the proposal’s structure. However, it is important to note that a fundamental part of this proposal is its built-in mechanisms for improving the NACC accreditation process as it develops.

### Who is NACC going to accredit?

In our *Next Steps* memo, we identified the following fields where nonprofit and philanthropy education occurs.

- Stand-alone nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs at the baccalaureate level
- Stand-alone nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs at the masters level
- Stand-alone nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs at the doctoral level
- Graduate or undergraduate-level stand-alone for-credit certificate programs
- Nonprofit/philanthropy concentrations within MPA Programs
- Nonprofit/philanthropy concentrations within MBA/ Business Schools
- Nonprofit /philanthropy concentrations within MSW/Social Work Schools
- Nonprofit/philanthropy concentrations within other academic fields whether they currently exist or are emerging (i.e. human services, economics, anthropology, political science, social entrepreneurship, and others)
- Non-credit continuing education programs

One could argue that a nonprofit/philanthropy-first standard of quality implies a certain uniformity of curriculum across universities. Certainly stand-alone nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs would need to exhibit adequacy of the nonprofit/philanthropy curriculum, and even concentrations and specializations, regardless of the home degree program, should focus squarely on nonprofit/ NGO/philanthropy skills and issues. Nevertheless, the academic home of many of the certificates and specializations will no doubt shape the emphasis of each concentration or certificate program, making accreditation review more challenging than for stand-alone degree programs.

**For these reasons, we believe that NACC should start its Stage One accrediting process by focusing exclusively on stand-alone nonprofit and philanthropy graduate and undergraduate degree programs.**

[The latest data from Roseanne Mirabella's research](#) indicates that there are 53 stand-alone full nonprofit/philanthropy graduate degree programs. Among NACC members, there are 29 stand-alone graduate full nonprofit/philanthropy degree programs.

As the accreditation process matures, the Stage Two target for expansion of accreditation is likely to be **credit-bearing stand-alone certificate programs**. These are usually structured as graduate programs providing 4 or 5 courses (totaling 12 to 15 or more semester credits) on nonprofit/philanthropy topics. According to Mirabella's web site there are approximately 79 stand-alone graduate certificate programs in the U.S.

Only after these accreditation processes are well established would NACC move toward accrediting **nonprofit and philanthropy concentrations and specializations within other degrees** (such as MPA, MBA, etc.). Ideally, by establishing a track record of successful accreditation of the stand-alone programs it would make working with other existing accrediting bodies more productive. According to Mirabella's research, there are approximately 150 concentrations and specializations within other degree programs. These overlap with the population of stand-alone certificate programs because at many universities the stand-alone certificate curriculum is the same as the required coursework for a nonprofit concentration within another degree program.

### How is NACC going to accredit?

Much discussion over the last year has focused on what NACC will review in an accreditation process. In our opinion, the discussion has often contained an element of fear to it because in existing accreditation processes, the university's reporting task is burdensome and universally loathed.

We have repeatedly heard that programs (particularly small programs) are already overwhelmed with reporting and data requirements of not only existing accrediting bodies like NASPAA and AACSB, but also reporting and assessment requirements of individual colleges and universities. We have heard additional concerns about the potential monetary cost of NACC accreditation.

Some have voiced concern (Mirabella and Eikenberry, 2017; Feit et.al 2017, featured soon in JNE&L Special Issue, 2017) that the rising culture of assessment is antithetical to the true values of the nonprofit sector. Much of this critique is based on critical theory perspectives which call into question the bias inherent in the codification of knowledge in universal standards.

Finally, we have heard repeatedly that the one area where NACC currently offers unrivalled expertise is in the area of curriculum guidelines. NACC is still the only organization to produce specific curriculum guidelines for nonprofit and philanthropy education. We also recognize that the guidelines are not perfect and they will always require additions, clarification and incremental improvements.

**Because of these factors, we believe that the NACC Stage One accreditation process should include comparing what is taught in the program with the coursework suggested in the NACC curriculum guidelines.**

Our proposed accreditation process is composed of four primary deliverables; curriculum mapping, review of faculty expertise, marketing consistency with delivered curriculum, and innovation sharing. We propose that universities seek reaccreditation every seven years.

- I. **Curriculum Mapping Exercise.** NACC would ask potential schools to map their syllabi to appropriate NACC Curriculum guidelines. This is similar to a mapping process outlined by Heather Carpenter in her Summit paper (JNE&L, 2017). By undertaking this exercise, the accreditation process can evaluate whether the program has a strong nonprofit or philanthropy focus in its curriculum and whether the program is delivering what it is promising to prospective students.

For example, an introductory "Foundations of Nonprofits" course might point to a specific class exercise as evidence that they are exposing students to NACC Curricular Guideline 2.1 which states that students should be exposed to the;

*2.1 Evolving role and function of philanthropic, nonprofit, voluntary and civil society organizations in relation to other sectors including the emergence of new forms of social enterprise.*

- All of the core/required courses for the degree and at least two-thirds of the overall degree program requirements would be mapped with the NACC curricular guidelines. The syllabi for at least two-thirds of the overall degree program requirements would be posted publicly, during accreditation review, on the NACC website. Best practices and

transparency in recruiting would suggest that programs also post course syllabi on their website for review by prospective students.

- NACC’s role would be to examine the linkages between the NACC curriculum guidelines and the program’s coursework, and report whether or not these linkages are logical and appropriate.
- The syllabi do not have to comprehensively cover all of the NACC curriculum guidelines, yet must demonstrate a nonprofit/philanthropy-first focus to the program, and must deliver what the program claims to deliver on its promotional materials (see III below).

**II. *Faculty Experience Review.*** In addition to the presentation of these curriculum for review, NACC would also expect that programs would provide the qualifications of the professors and instructors who would regularly teach each course. The goal would be to show the linkages between the professor and her training, research, and professional experience with the course material. These linkages would be reviewed by NACC, with the idea of ensuring that professors are capable of presenting the materials in each syllabus.

- Faculty members responsible for teaching all of the coursework in the syllabi described above will be the focus of the faculty experience review.
- Faculty qualifications must be available to any prospective student on the program website.

**III. *Additional Website Analysis.*** Throughout the accreditation discussions this year, many have voiced concerns that some nonprofit degree program websites are not accurately portraying the educational experience. Strong student demand for nonprofit programs has prompted many universities to offer programs that are, at best, hopeful in nature (making progress over time to develop a nonprofit/philanthropy focus), and at worst, fraudulent in claiming a ‘nonprofit’ degree when little or no truly nonprofit or philanthropy curriculum is offered. A quick search on Google reveals common problems:

- a. Programs advertising “nonprofit management” degrees, yet offering no programmatic information openly available to prospective students, and instead diverting prospective students to phone and email correspondence with an aggressive sales pitch.
- b. Programs advertising quick, easy degrees in philanthropy or nonprofit management, but little to no coursework. This can take the form of offering credit for life experience, or offering courses with catch-all titles that might be applicable to any life situation or sector.
- c. Programs that operate what appear to be standard masters degrees in other established fields, with a few nonprofit courses tacked on (yet billing the degree as a full nonprofit or philanthropy masters), requiring the student to take courses that are meant for another sector and may be inappropriate for the nonprofit/philanthropy sector.

NACC would request that the university review its program website in its entirety, identify all of the claims made on it and provide citations or proof that the claims made are factual. This will be reviewed and verified by NACC staff. These claims may include the availability and scheduling of nonprofit/philanthropy courses, the credentials of the faculty (as noted above),

employment after graduation, financial aid availability, availability of career counseling or other types of services, and other concerns.

**IV. *Program Syllabus and Innovation Sharing.*** One of the primary goals for the NACC accreditation process has always been to help build and improve our academic field. It is our contention that the sharing of syllabi and specific innovations will provide a knowledge base for fledgling programs in our field to observe excellent practices.

NACC will provide a mechanism for sharing syllabi on an open website, to allow programs to view a variety of approaches to nonprofit and philanthropy curricula. NACC will also request that programs self-identify 3 to 5 characteristics of their program that they see as innovations for the field and report these as part of the accreditation process (with the option of posting them on the NACC website) with a narrative about why each characteristic is an innovation. For example, one program might describe how they have woven critical theory perspectives throughout their curriculum or in a specific class. Another program might highlight an innovative class exercise that works particularly well to develop student competency in the topic.

Finally, the program's structure and intended outcomes should be driven by the mission. The program undergoing accreditation should provide a short narrative explaining how the coursework and other features of the program are designed and implemented in order to fulfill the stated program mission.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is a humble attempt to move the NACC accreditation process forward by articulating a comparatively simple process of accreditation that initially focuses on accrediting stand-alone nonprofit and philanthropy programs.

We believe that by introducing this basic framework, it will be possible for NACC to create the infrastructure and financing necessary to implement it. The initial focus is modest, yet effectively targeted to investigate programmatic quality. We hope that by describing this model of accreditation, readers will be able to better envision the process from their own program's point of view. We would be grateful for comments and suggestions as we move forward.

This paper, corresponding links, and additional updates are also available on the Accreditation page of the NACC website:  
<http://www.nonprofit-academic-centers-council.org/accreditation>