## Thought Pieces on Accreditation

*NACC News presents a series of thought pieces on the NACC Accreditation Summit contributed by our community of nonprofit scholars. After attending the Summit, Susan Schmidt and Dorothy Norris-Tirrell carefully consider their thinking about a NACC accreditation effort.*

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*The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance is a national organization committed to strengthening the social sector by enabling a talented prepared workforce.*

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE NACC ACCREDITATION SUMMIT

The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (Alliance) joins this conversation from a unique position serving as the bridge from the academy to the workforce. Our work brings together the disciplinary based units that offer nonprofit studies coursework on campuses and the leaders and hiring professionals from national nonprofit institutions.

In last month's NACC Newsletter, Mark Hoffman from Grand Valley State University gave an excellent commentary on the issues that arose at the NACC Summit. Our goal here is to add to the discussion through some additional observations of the event and our experience with similar processes. Four lessons capture our thoughts.

Lesson 1: Structural differences across institutions and disciplines must be accommodated.

Similar to NACC members, Alliance campus partners represent a diverse set of higher education institutions. From small faith-based colleges to Carnegie Classification Research 1 public universities, nonprofit programs are located in public administration and policy, social work and human services, management and business, arts and sciences, interdisciplinary studies, and others. Our approach is not to standardize but rather to use competency rubrics to create a baseline of instruction, assessment, and

application across institutions to ensure equivalency among student outcomes.  A unifying approach will also be needed to create a level field for nonprofit accreditation.

Some of the most robust conversations about these differences was during the international portion of the discussion at the Summit. Colleagues working in this space noted an abundance of hurdles. These ranged from disparity on what a degree actually represents, how institutions are tied to political influencers, and the basic barrier of languages in teaching. Stand-alone nonprofit centers, those that Hoffman called Grossvaters, seemed most inclined to minimize this difference. They may have a perspective of how to provide cohesion since they are used to not fitting in any one single bucket.

Lesson 2:  The product has to be value-added to warrant additional effort and expense.

Developing and managing a new program requires effort.  We've found that clearly developing our tracking and assessment requirements at the campus level to support existing reporting, such as regional, disciplinary, or institutional requirements, is a win-win for both parties. Transparency around the true time required to meet even minimal accreditation standards is warranted.

At the Summit, business (ASCB), social work (CSWE), and public administration (NASPAA) were all represented. Presenters shared oversight processes that clearly required time and energy. Most noted that in their own schools, existing disciplinary accreditation would take precedence over a new version. These disciplines also have some amount of nonprofit content covered currently, although little of it appeared in core curriculum.

Lesson 3: Implementation is costly.

In our competency-based design process, time and resources must be committed: competencies must be created and validated, rubrics developed and reviewed, technology platforms established and updated, users trained, and assessment integrated in continuous quality improvement of the competency model.  Importantly, this is not "one and done" work; rather, it requires ongoing effort. The use of technology to track student progress from enrollment, competency achievement, and other requirements through credentialing is efficient.  While the technology itself can be a very reasonable cost, customization is more expensive. Staffing must support these roles, from technology build out, updates, maintenance and training of campus staff on assessment and reporting.

At the Summit, most participants acknowledged the hard and opportunity costs of adding process. The range of ideas presented was from a "lite" version, which could be bare bones but reliant on volunteer time that would only count minimally in T&P, all the way to a more full-blown approach that would mirror existing models. Again, with realistic knowledge of most higher education budgets, cost – particularly in faculty hours – will be a significant consideration.

Lesson 4:  Relationship building for a successful accreditation program takes time and is ongoing.

The path of nonprofit programming at each campus is unique.  For success, key individuals have developed relationships across the institution and in the community.  When faculty or key staff leave or take new positions, these relationships must be recreated.  The impact of this natural turnover requires an investment of time and energy by staff dedicated to this role.

Timeframe was not covered fully in the Summit discussions. Hoffman alluded to the time required, including getting a program up and running, as well as time for the accreditation to be viewed as legitimate enough that administrators will invest resources. Success will be realized when the accreditation is not an add-on to other accreditations, but rather the pinnacle in the unified discipline.

Conclusions

In summary, two main points underlie these lessons: 1) working across disciplines and across institutions is messy and complex, and 2) competency-based design gives order but requires focused staff resources and ongoing work to successfully develop and maintain. Since the study of nonprofits is inherently cross disciplinary and the types of institutions, program home, and degree areas are diverse, broad scope accreditation will likely not be quick or easy.  The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance has found competency-based design to be an effective strategy for navigating across institutions. However, this process requires the capacity of a 14-person staff to implement programs and technology in place to support the work.

We offer one caution in examining whether accreditation is a useful next step.  If workforce constituencies don't buy into accreditation, or the process doesn't meet their needs in some way, then accreditation is not in sync with larger waves of momentum in higher education. These trends emphasize student success through employability and earning potential. These two hallmarks, employability and earning potential over the lifetime of a career, start with the repayment of student debt.  Does accreditation make our programs more expensive or more affordable?  The most recent policy and regulation recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education show an emphasis on higher education innovation, accessibility, and affordability for students. Federal financial aid regulations are expected to continue enforcing consumer education for families and students, as well as return on investment for degrees. Accreditation should be supportive of these policy initiatives or risk low support from administrators who will direct resources to programs in alignment with national policy.