

Reviewing the Reviewer

Determining the legitimacy of an accreditation has become increasingly important as management education becomes more global.

According to AACSB International's latest research, there are more than 13,000 institutions that offer at least an undergraduate degree in business around the world. As the number of institutions offering business degrees continues to grow, coupled with the popularity and demand for business degree programs worldwide, the number of educational accrediting bodies also has grown. This complex landscape of institutions offering business degrees and accrediting bodies reviewing schools makes it more challenging to identify quality business education providers; particularly when the majority of these providers claim to be "accredited."

As business has become global, business schools are seeking to expand their reach through collaborations and partnerships with other institutions worldwide. With this trend, an institution's accreditation status has become a factor in choosing and establishing cooperative relationships. Thus, business school accreditation can be essential in determining if a potential partner is a good fit. For example, 83% of schools surveyed by AACSB International agreed that AACSB Accreditation opened the doors for international partnerships that otherwise would have been unachievable.

Because accreditation is becoming an important aspect in cross-institutional collaborations, it is important for schools to understand that accreditation organizations also must be held to appropriate quality standards and provide legitimate status to schools that hold their accreditation. An important dimension of evaluating the legitimacy of an accreditation organization is whether or not it must be reviewed periodically to maintain its status as a recognized, legitimate accrediting organization. Business school leaders should be aware and be able to qualify educational accrediting bodies, as well as the accreditation that these organizations hold. Institutional and specialized/professional accrediting bodies should undergo periodic reviews to ensure that they truly are providing quality evaluations for their constituents. If an accreditation organization itself is not held accountable through an appropriate, regular self-assessment and peer-review process, this should be a concern for any school claiming to hold that organization's accreditation.

Accreditation Mills: A Driving Force behind the Need to Review the Reviewer

Over the last decade, accreditation mills have become somewhat prevalent worldwide. One reason for this, as the Council of Higher Education Administration (CHEA) describes, is that "degree mills sometimes set up fake accreditation mills to claim they are accredited." Another reason is that accreditation mills are often developed in the wake of the internationalization of business and education in a developing region. This is due to the

demand for degrees that hopefully are accepted globally. This demand for recognition has been followed by a growing number of organizations that supply false recognition.

CHEA provides some helpful guidance for recognizing whether or not an accrediting body is a "mill." Here's what they suggest schools ask themselves:

- Can the accreditation be merely purchased? (e.g., there is no required review, only payment for accreditation status.)
- Does the accrediting body publish a list of schools they have accredited without the knowledge of schools?
- Does the accrediting body claim to be recognized by an accreditation review agency when they are not?
- Are few, if any, standards of quality published by the accrediting body?
- Can institutions earn an accreditation in an unreasonably short period of time?
- Does the accrediting body grant life-long accreditation? For instance, do they not periodically review their accredited institutions?
- Does the accrediting body have an organizational name that is similar to another well-established accrediting body to confuse the consumer?
- Does the accrediting body make claims it cannot back by factual evidence?

Today, the word "accreditation" is used very loosely, which leads to confusion and misunderstanding on the side of students, faculty, and employers. As low-quality schools gain the public's trust through marketing and unrecognized accreditations, business school constituencies cannot always see that there are dubious practices going on in the world of accreditation accreditors. This creates even more of a reason to ensure that accrediting bodies are reviewed regularly, and to raise awareness about the existence and practices of diploma/accreditation mills.

AACSB International Seeks Maintenance of its CHEA Recognition

AACSB Accreditation is recognized by the Council of Higher Education Administration (CHEA). CHEA is a non-governmental organization that reviews accrediting bodies in the United States. CHEA, along with the U.S. Department of Education, are the two primary entities that ensure quality in higher education accreditation throughout the U.S.

AACSB International and other CHEA recognized accrediting bodies must provide detailed reports every five years and pass a stringent on-site review every ten years. On-site reviews, similar to peer-review team visits by institutional accrediting bodies, review operations and financial statements, and examine the standards and accreditation services offered to institutions, as well as all of the processes that are involved in the agency's accreditation process. Several months ago, AACSB International submitted its accreditation application for renewal of its CHEA recognition. The application was approved in March 2011. AACSB now is in the process of writing its accreditation report and will participate in an on-site peer review in 2012–13.

The legitimacy of an accrediting body is essential to contribute to enhanced confidence that management education providers are held to high-quality standards and delivery on what they promise. AACSB is committed to this goal through its accreditation process.