

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN**

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that the freedom and independence of institutions of higher education is fundamentally linked to the freedom and independence of accrediting agencies and the accreditation system. Please read on to find out why.

Accreditation as a word signifies a relationship among five things: expertise, consensus-based standards, self-evaluation, peer review, and public information. In the United States, this relationship is managed by private-sector organizations owned and supported by institutions and professions. These organizations are the means for engaging educational institutions and programs and expert personnel in all aspects of accreditation. An underlying premise is that expertise in the content of what is being reviewed is essential for making valid decisions about educational achievement and the conditions necessary for it. Other premises are that institutions have different missions; that disciplines have different content, habits of mind, processes, and evaluation systems; and that both sets of differences are sources of strength and creativity.

All of the above means that the accreditation system must fulfill its functions in ways that respect and protect the freedom and independence of institutions and the differences among disciplines and professions. For such protection to work, accrediting organizations must be free and independent themselves. The usual term is non-governmental, but freedom and independence are also protected by systems of checks and balances both within and beyond accrediting organizations.

In the United States at present, the independence of accrediting organizations is deeply embedded in our conceptual, legal, and organizational frameworks for higher education.

Structurally, accreditation independence accomplishes several things. It precludes, and thus prevents, federal control of the content of higher education, consistent with the 10th Amendment to the Constitution and other education statutes. Because accreditation is conducted regionally or nationally and recognized federally, it minimizes the need for state decisions regarding content issues. It provides a bright line that distinguishes between areas of federal responsibility and institutional, accreditation, and professional responsibilities; it especially protects private institutions. In short, accreditation is a major enabler of academic and curricular freedom with all the benefits they produce. Institutions remain free to create and innovate and teach and do research within common frameworks of standards for which they themselves have responsibilities and oversight. Here is an example of the American principle of consent of the governed, a major source of our individual and corporate freedom, at work in higher education.

Today, this fundamental conceptual structure supporting freedom and independence in education and accreditation seems under attack, but tactics being used bypass the fundamental strategic issue. The approach is far more subtle. Criticisms are focused on reducing understanding of, trust in, and support for the basic premises and structural arrangements outlined above. If these

premises and structural concepts can be damaged sufficiently, new arrangements can replace them.

Too many proposals for change are not centered in freedom or independence for institutions, respect for the different natures of disciplines, or belief in the centrality of expertise and content.

Many current proposals about higher education and its future seem to reject the kind of diversified control that our present system supports and preserves. Centralization along lines associated with education ministries seems to be the eventual goal. Essentially, accreditation, as historically conceived, is not a proponent of curricular, assessment, or most any other kind of standardizing bureaucratic centralization. It is not ministerial; for example, it conducts periodic reviews; it does not monitor continuously. In contrast, accreditation creates frameworks that develop positive relationships between commonality and diversity; it respects and supports local decision making and recognizes the usual continuity of local commitments to teaching and learning.

Today, accreditation as concept and system is under constant attack because it is grounded in mission and disciplinary diversity, reflects and facilitates of dispersions of powers across institutions, regions, and fields of study, and thus supports decentralization. If greater central control is to be established, the traditional concepts of accreditation must be changed, damaged, or destroyed; proponents of all three of these positions are alive and well in the policy arena.

As you think about these matters, it is critical to separate criticism of the specific actions or approaches of any particular accrediting organization from attacks on the accreditation system as a whole, or on accreditation as a concept. It is the latter that we are discussing here. For reasons we have been presenting, it is critically important to avoid letting specific, local concerns obscure the fundamental national strategic policy issue of freedom and independence. To lose these attributes in accreditation is to lose them in institutions and programs. Freedom and independence are the things that need to be protected first and thus, the first policy analysis question when reviewing proposals for change.

The next briefing letter will continue the theme of freedom and independence in terms of relationships between accreditation and the federal government.

Thank you for your attention and best wishes.

Samuel Hope  
NASAD Executive Director