

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that the public interest in higher education is multi-faceted, and that attempts to define the public interest purely in consumerist terms are counterproductive and dangerous, especially if they come to be considered the primary basis for evaluation. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding these issues is important for you and your institution.

Wise and effective policy decisions are congruent with a realistic, comprehensive understanding of the multiple forces, factors, conditions, and needs in any given situation. When single-issue advocacy is being applied, it is typical to hear the term “public interest” used as though there were only one public and only one interest. Such a view cannot be the basis for wise and effective policy decisions because there are many publics and many interests. Indeed, in a democracy there are constant collisions of interests and points of view. On many great issues, there is no agreement. Effective policy makers serve each critical public interest in ways that do not damage the pursuit of other equally critical public interests; they work with complexity instead of pretending it is not there.

Even if something is generally considered to be in the public interest, there may be little agreement about why. Some believe that the local university is important primarily because it fields a football team they support with devotion and passion. Others have different reasons to provide support, but believe in the institution and promote its welfare all the same.

When each of us thinks about our own interests in major societal institutions, unless we are comprehensive experts in the field of endeavor, we do not know all the ways that institution is serving us. For example, unless we are in the medical field and somewhat of an expert on hospitals, we do not know all of the ways that the hospital field is working on our behalf. And even if we knew it generically in such terms as research, most of us would not be able to tell anyone in any detail the kinds of research that are being carried out, nor would we be able to evaluate results and projections if they were presented to us. We would not know enough about the content of what is being done to make a personal judgment. Our interest in hospital advancements is genuine and serious, but general and not at all sophisticated. Our understanding of the public interest is primitive, especially if we do not study hospital policy comprehensively. Even though we know a lot more about higher education, it is impossible for any one of us to know all of the public benefits higher education is providing. Even if we can cite generic categories, we do not know and cannot master the details, in part because there are too many of them.

There is yet another level for consideration. Beyond knowing what a set of societal institutions does generally or specifically in the public interest, it is even harder to recognize all of the foundational principles and operational philosophies necessary for success. When such principles and philosophies are explained in simple terms, they make sense; however, such explanations are

rare because they usually are not necessary. Thus, attacks on conceptual foundations are much harder to recognize. Strategic foundational change can be promoted in terms of tactical goals.

In our society, it is rather typical to see a part of the public interest promoted as the entirety or the whole – only one thing is said to matter. But this is almost never true. Indeed, working comprehensively on matters of the public interest involves difficult balances between means and ends and compromises between multiple sets of good public interest positions that are in natural conflict with each other. For example, it is necessary to find the right, or at least a workable, relationship between security and privacy. It is not wise or safe to assume that the public interest lies in the 100% rejection of one and 100% acceptance of another.

These concepts and conditions – many publics, many interests; common interests, multiple rationales; general interest, in-depth knowledge; operational interests, foundational principles; and competing positive interests – create a background for considering public interest issues in higher education and accreditation. One aspect of the public interest in higher education is the successful education of individual students. Also, as a member of the public each student should have an interest in obtaining the best possible education. This means it is in the interest of the public at large and the student as a member of the public for each student to approach higher education as a learner and to take appropriate responsibility for obtaining an education. It is also in the public interest for each student to understand his or her responsibility. For all this to work, another aspect of the public interest must be fulfilled. The institution must have and use all the resources necessary and appropriate for each student to learn, particularly the best possible teaching and effective evaluation. Thus, the public also has an interest in the constant generation of qualified practitioners and professionals in various fields, many of whom become teachers.

The public has a deep interest in the results of higher education on many levels, but since ends require means, the public interest also includes providing the multiple resources necessary. For example, there can be no research results of the kind we all expect unless there are sophisticated labs. Such examples of ends and means relationships are self-evident. Much harder are the foundational ideas underlying higher education, especially those centered on the natures of the highest intellectual aspirations and work applied across various fields. Clearly, it is in the public interest for higher education to provide a place for the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, discovery, innovation, and creative expression all for their own sakes. It is in the public interest for places to be created and sustained where people can fail and learn from their mistakes. It is in the public interest for these places to be open to free inquiry, and to manage themselves according to the nature of the content they are dealing with and where that content takes them. It is in the public interest that these places preserve their freedom and flexibility to choose and address specifics in fields covering vast territories of thought, achievement, and action. These are sufficient examples to confirm the point that the public interest in higher education is far more complex than the simple formulation that the student is a consumer and must be served as a consumer. In fact, it is arguable whether this position is in the public interest at all since in its purest formulation, it absolves the student of all or most of the responsibility for learning.

As we have said in previous briefing letters, accreditation takes a holistic or comprehensive view of higher education. It does not separate means from ends or parts from wholes, and thus cannot accept the falsehood of any unitary definition of the public interest. This position is consistent with the deepest sorts of commitments to student learning because student learning as purpose and issue extends into many areas where the public interest is served. But to be true to itself and to the public interest, accreditation cannot accept that its primary or only purpose is to provide information, data, or comparisons for student consumers to use as they choose the institutions

they wish to attend, as the report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education recommends.

Of course, accreditation can and does provide information useful to prospective students. It is possible that the accreditation system could be more helpful by providing better information than it does at the present. But beyond public information, accreditation serves the public interest by doing three fundamental things. First, it ensures compliance with essential threshold standards appropriate to mission, content, and level of work. Second, it works *with* each institution or program individually to promote improvement in the delivery of effective advanced education to students. Third, at a deeper more foundational level, accreditation works in the public interest by providing a framework for the freedom and independence of institutional action that we wrote about in earlier letters. It is hard to know, but it certainly could be argued that the continuous development, preservation, and operation of this dispersion-of-powers, independence-supporting framework is the greatest of all public services that accreditation provides. This function is all but invisible and has been virtually taken for granted except by those who believe that the inconsistencies, creative approaches, and uniquenesses created by the parallel actions of many independent institutions working under a common framework should be replaced by centralized control, claiming that neatness, efficiency, and comparability will result and the public interest will be served.

We now have another explanation of why the accreditation system is under attack. Accreditation works from an understanding that there are multiple publics, multiple interests, and multiple, often conflicting public interests. Today, permanent outcomes-professing critics of accreditation focus on the single consumerist definition, whether expressed in terms of students, learning, or the economy as a whole. This focus represents yet another means for attempting to turn the foundational and operational strengths of higher education into negatives.

In our next letter, we will discuss the difficult problem of accreditation and public information, an arena where multiple public interests need to be served, and where currently a major policy battle is underway.

Thank you for your consideration and best wishes.

Samuel Hope
NASAD Executive Director