

A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation

The “Triad”*

The regulation of higher education takes different forms around the world. Most countries have a “Ministry of Education,” a governmental agency that controls higher education. Consistent with American principles of governance, neither the people nor the Congress of the United States accept or use the centralized “ministry” concept. Instead, we have a three-pronged approach to “regulating” institutions of higher education. This approach features systems of checks and balances and is known as the “Triad.” The triad consists of three key entities – the federal government, state governments, and accreditation agencies.

Each of the three entities in the triad operates independently to achieve different purposes. Each has its own role in protecting potential students and assuring the success of higher education. This independence is defined and protected by laws that establish certain relationships among the elements of the triad and by the published documents of accrediting organizations. Cooperation, mutual respect, and trust among the elements are essential for maximum effectiveness.

The federal government’s role is to ensure the administrative and fiscal integrity of its funding programs. Because the federal investment in higher education has continued to increase, there is also increased concern about the effectiveness of federal oversight of these programs.

State governments generally issue licenses or other authorization to an institution to do business in the state. As might be expected, states vary considerably in the range of authority they exert over institutions of higher education. For some it is as simple as being “registered” to do business in the state while others have multiple agencies that play a role in oversight.

The third prong of the triad is accreditation, primarily a non-governmental function. The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by programs and institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. In addition, through its emphasis on self-evaluation and peer review, accreditation plays an important quality improvement role.

From the earliest days of our existence as a nation, there has been concern about overreaching by the federal government. The tenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution was adopted to prevent this from happening. That amendment says: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” More than just words on paper, this amendment has resulted in a higher education system that is rich in diversity and allows institutions and programs of higher education to operate autonomously and to adopt missions that are specific to their communities and their intended constituencies.

The ASPA paper entitled, “Foundational Principles in Federal Law on Accreditation and Higher Education” identifies the critical principles and explores the legal underpinnings of the triad. Of primary importance is that the three elements of the triad continue to operate independently, each fulfilling its roles and responsibilities. If the lines of responsibility are crossed, the system simply will not work as intended and we will risk losing the rich diversity and autonomy which has allowed our higher education system to flourish.

*This briefing paper is posted on the ASPA website.