

# **“The Yoga of Accreditation”**

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“Political Realities, Economic Constraints: Confronting Higher Education’s Challenges Creatively”  
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Good morning.

With your indulgence, I’d like to begin this short set of reflections by quoting a rather unlikely commentator on higher education, namely, the third-century Christian apologist, Clement of Alexandria (an academic of his day, for he was head of the catechetical school there). Wishing to speak engagingly to a “pagan” audience about the Christian gospel, Clement showed that he was media savvy, for he understood not only, as we would say today, “where his audience was coming from,” but also understood how best to convey his message to them. Clement wrote:

**“Come, I shall show you the Logos, and the mysteries of the Logos, and I shall explain them to you in images that are known to you.”<sup>1</sup>**

Higher education’s audience today is no less skeptical than that Clement faced eighteen hundred years ago. It is large, varied, restive, and diverse in its expectations. It includes:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Protrepticus, XII, 119, 1 in G.W. Butterworth, Clement of Alexandria, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1919, p. 255.

<sup>2</sup> “What Do People Want from Boards and Their Executives?” A presentation by Paul Lingenfelter, President of SHEEO, to the AGB/SHEEO Seminars, October 2007. I am grateful to Paul for having identified some of the following expectations. These are paraphrases of some of his and additions of my own.

- Students who, regardless of age, want choice, convenience, and quality. The higher the price tag, the greater the expectations for all three.
- Students (and sometimes their parents) who want low prices, generous financial aid, admission to high status schools, convenient class schedules, good food, housing, and recreation, freedom (students), safety (parents), small classes, contact with faculty, access to the latest technology, and cheap, ample, and convenient parking.
- Faculty members who are highly qualified and dedicated professionals who expect well-prepared students to teach, above-average salary and benefits, control of working conditions (including schedules), office space, respect, academic freedom, a strong voice in governance, secure employment, and good retirement.
- Policy makers who expect to deliver for their constituents, efficient operations, low tuition, access for in-state students, an ample supply of well-prepared graduates, satisfied parents, well-behaved students, docile faculty and staff, and generous alumni.

So what do we do? What would Clement do? A starting point is the very theme of this year's Annual Meeting, "Political Realities, Economic Constraints: Confronting Higher Education's Challenges Creatively." It suggests that we begin by acknowledging the enormously difficult situation we are in, and then, that we devise some innovative approaches. Given that we meet today under the auspices of the Northwest Commission, it probably will not surprise you if I propose that one of those fresh approaches has just been put in our hands. I am referring to the newly-approved Standards and the Accreditation Cycle.

But before I say more, permit me to set the stage a little by drawing our attention to the two principal constituencies with which academic leaders must (and must effectively) interact, namely, our colleagues within the academy and our several external publics. The challenge, as I see it, is to recognize that as academic leaders, we balance atop a metaphorical wall that, on the one hand, encloses the academy within and on the other, creates a distance from those outside. Notwithstanding efforts to realize the ideal of the "engaged university," we still pretty

much inhabit a world of our own, one that generally makes good sense to those within it, but which is very curious and sometimes maddeningly frustrating to those outside.

One of our most articulate colleagues, the late Bart Giamatti, spent much time thinking and writing about the nature of universities and the important (but also very fragile) relationship that should exist between them and the societies that create them. In his classic statement, a book titled, A Free and Ordered Space, he challenged higher education leaders to open a dialogue with their colleagues within the academy and with those outside it. But he bid us start by recognizing that ours is – to the outsider – a truly strange world, more ecclesiastical than corporate. He wrote:<sup>3</sup>

...the university, is where values of all kinds are meant to collide, to contest, to be tested, debated, disagreed about---freely, openly, civilly....(it ) is the place where the first seeds of speech first grow and where most of us first began to find a voice. It is neither a paradise nor the worst spot we have ever been in; it is a good place that continues to want to make her children better.

In short, he explains, our colleges and universities are enclaves society has created – and indeed has attempted to safeguard with protections – in which messy things can, do, and should happen. They are places where mistakes can be made relatively free of the potentially devastating consequences were those have been made in the so-called “real world.” They are truly testing grounds. Yet the very existence of such enclaves sets up a challenge we in the academy must acknowledge and embrace. **We** understand the culture, needs, and benefits of the academy; indeed we take them as “givens.” We have been raised in it: understanding our career choice as a kind of “vocation,” and our disciplinary preparation as almost analogous to

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<sup>3</sup> A. Bartlett Giamatti, A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1988, pp. 25-30.

the religious formation of clergy. But the risk is that we fail to understand how our academic communities and we within them appear to those outside. The need to foster understanding between those in the academy and those outside its metaphorical walls could not be more urgent than it is today. We can no longer pursue our enterprise solely within the sanctuary of our campuses.

I would submit that one of the major the challenges we face today – one that most starkly reveals a dissonance (a “fault line” if you will) both *within* the academic community itself and *between* it and the larger community outside, is the persistent (and frequently strident) call that is issued for the accreditation process to supply the rigor and accountability that colleges and universities themselves are generally reluctant to provide or seemingly unable credibly to certify. Because we are all so familiar with them already, we need not rehearse here the titles of the many reports, studies, commission findings, and other publications, not to mention the relatively recent appearance of the Voluntary System of Accountability, that serve as evidence of the urgency of the matter. Whatever the genesis of the call – be it legislators, trustees, tuition-paying parents, the media, (or just last month the US Undersecretary of Education’s call for full disclosure of all aspects of the accreditation process<sup>4</sup>) -- the message is the same: **demonstrate value added for resources invested**. These calls themselves set up a dissonance within our campuses, for faculty members, almost to a person, believe sincerely that the work they do is of value and that the metrics by which their work and that of their students is assessed are sound, reputable, and worthy of the dollars that are allocated to

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Kelderman, “Education Department Official Calls for More Transparency in Accreditation,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 26, 2010.

support them, and they either resent or dismiss these calls to account. Presidents and chancellors, however, 'though residents of the academy and generally sympathetic to the feelings of their faculty colleagues, nonetheless understand the urgency of the call for accountability and seek to respond to it in ways that are faithful to their institutional values and particular circumstances. For many, especially given the need to deal with reduced state support and/or declining tuition revenue, a ready vehicle is the strategic planning process, including institutional effectiveness and student learning assessment. It can serve as a comprehensive "convening exercise" – one that focuses the attention of the multiple campus constituencies on clarification of the institutional Mission, analysis the environment in which the institution operates, mechanism for assessment and improvement, reallocation of resources, and its capacity to marshal new resources.

(As a personal aside, such was the approach I initiated while president at Southern Oregon in the 90's as we and the other Oregon University System institutions dealt with a 33% reduction in state support over a period of three biennia.)

At the same time, however, as we all know, this approach carries certain risks. With the exception of the president or chancellor who initiates it, many of the constituencies within a college or university (most particularly the faculty) are skeptical about the value of strategic planning and assessment. Its critics view it as a huge commitment of time and energy that entails the development of a plan and process, neither of which lives on sufficiently robustly in the institution as to provide sustained direction and accountability. The reasons for this cynicism are many and absolutely understandable. On the one hand, strategic planning is often

one of the first things a new CEO initiates after taking office, embraced for the structure and direction it will provide. But on the other hand, the campus veterans are quick to point out that they have seen this before and know (or at least opine) that it leads nowhere, most particularly that it doesn't truly set reasonable priorities which lead to resource allocation or reallocation, or that those metrics, if established, really affect subsequent decisions, and finally, whether the exercise as a whole demonstrably and credibly advances the mission of the institution.

Adding to the complexity of such a situation as just described, may be the timely (or, depending on your point of view, untimely) occurrence of the decennial accreditation process. At least as it has been structured formerly, the process has sometimes evoked a similar skepticism from many of the same constituencies (but this time perhaps even *including the president or chancellor*). They have questioned the long-term value of the investment of time in an exercise perceived to be compliance with an external requirement of an agency not usually otherwise involved with the regular operations of the institution, but whose requirements cannot be ignored either.

These views were recently given voice in a Letter to the Editor of The Chronicle of Higher Education, written by a director of faculty development at an institution not a thousand miles from here. He wrote:<sup>5</sup>

I am amused by the ongoing debates surrounding assessment, "closing the loop," faculty workload, and the other rhetoric involved. (While) in business, it is common practice to have a continuous-improvement system and culture in place...In higher

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<sup>5</sup>"At Colleges, Assessment Satisfies Only Accreditors," Letters to the Editor, The Chronicle of Higher Education, November 22, 2009.

education, the culture is much different. I know faculty members who bristle at the concept of performance reviews and efforts to determine the effectiveness of (and ways to improve) teaching and learning. Some of that is due to the influence of the traditional academic freedom that faculty members have enjoyed. Some of it is ego. And some of it is a lack of understanding of how it can work. There is also a huge disconnect between satisfying outside parties, like accreditors and the government...We are driven by regional accreditation and program-level accreditation, not by quality improvement. At our institution, we talk about assessment a lot, and do just enough to satisfy the requirements of our outside reviewers....we write a separate report to satisfy the accreditors...We don't have a culture of continuous improvement. We don't make changes on a regular basis, because we are trapped by the catalog publishing cycle, accreditation visits, and the entrenched misunderstanding of the purposes of assessment.

My own experience of service on decennial evaluation committees has sometimes inclined me to conclude that the generally prevailing attitude on campus toward accreditation might be best summed up in just six words: "They're coming. They're here. "They're gone!"

If I have overdrawn the picture, it has been simply to make this point. The Commission's newly-formulated Standards (including the Seven-Year Accreditation Cycle) offer a potentially and highly effective vehicle for addressing both the dissonance that may exist on a campus as well as the lack of mutual understanding that may exist between an institution and its principal constituencies. As the process is now structured, it offers a college or university the opportunity of bringing together in a critically useful manner strategic planning and assessment **and** appropriate and timely peer review.

As the title of these remarks suggests, I see this as a "yoga" opportunity....**literally**. Students of Hinduism will know that the word "yoga" derives etymologically from the Sanskrit "yuj" which means "to bring together." Our cognate English word "yoke" (as in a yoke of oxen) is rooted in the Sanskrit term, and illustrates the point, namely, that two animals, each inclined

to go its own way, are harnessed, yoked together, to move in one and the same direction. While the Hindu understanding of “yoga” is the religious discipline of bringing together the mind and the body as for the two to act as one and thereby transcend ordinary human experience, we might reasonably employ it as a metaphor for the bringing together of two usually independent activities -- strategic planning and accreditation -- for the furtherance of institutional mission. Simply put, the requirement of the latter can validate the desirability of the former. But there is a further benefit.

The new Standards and the Seven-Year Accreditation Cycle promise not only to yoke internal institutional values, resources, and processes with external accreditation requirements, but they also offer the opportunity to develop a **shared language of expectation**: a language with which to engage both internal campus constituencies and an institution’s several external publics. The need for this today is so obvious that it requires no defense, but it does, we would all agree, require prudent measures.

In its 2005 report, Accountability for Better Results, the State Higher Education Executive Officers organization, SHEEO, acknowledged that regional accrediting associations have “...expanded their traditional functions in efforts to contribute to institutional improvement and communicate to the public the results of the accrediting reviews,” but it urged careful navigation of these waters:<sup>6</sup>

A degree of privacy promotes candor in accreditation reviews. And full disclosure of accreditation review details could expose accreditors to civil liability, especially for private non-profit and for-profit institutions. Such issues warrant consideration in the development of disclosure policies and procedures. **Nevertheless, more substantive**

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<sup>6</sup> Accountability for Better Results – A National Imperative for Higher Education, SHEEO, March 10, 2005, p. 22.

**public disclosure of feedback to institutions would help motivate improvement and build public confidence in the integrity of the accreditation process.**

I respectfully ask, might a blending of an institution's ongoing strategic planning exercise and the new accreditation cycle not offer a way to engage in a type of "continuous assessment," key results of which would be selectively disseminated by the institution to its several constituencies? Does not the new Standard Five itself set the stage for such a possibility? And I quote: "Based on its definition of mission fulfillment, the institution uses assessment results to make determinations of quality, effectiveness, and mission fulfillment and communicates its conclusions to appropriate constituencies **and the public**."<sup>7</sup> Given the ongoing "dialogue" between the institution and the Commission (structured by the regular interactions stipulated in the seven-year cycle), might there not be opportunity, at the institution's discretion, voluntarily to incorporate "more substantive feedback" from the accreditation review in its public disclosures?

Internally, the process by which the strategic plan (with its Vision, Core Themes, specific objectives, identified goals and outcomes) could include the assignment of specific Commission standards to such existing campus committees as are already charged with the development of and/or monitoring of key priorities of the institution's strategic plan. Preparation of required reports to the Commission (that document how well the college or university is fulfilling its mission, core theme objectives, and stated expected outcomes) might be added to their portfolio of responsibility, further reinforcing greater continuity (than is usually the case at present) not to mention a keener sense of collective ownership. Following submission of

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<sup>7</sup> Standard 5.A.2

required reports to the Commission in the first, third, fifth, and seventh years, and subsequent feedback from the Commission, the same committee(s) might be charged with the drafting of the conclusions to be shared, after appropriate presidential review, with appropriate constituencies within the campus community and publics outside. The feedback loop envisioned for continuous review and improvement having been supplemented now by the findings of the Commission evaluator panels and site visiting committees.

One institution with which I have worked, published its Self Study Report on its website, reported the purpose, composition, and schedule of the Evaluation Committee, invited the entire campus community to the Committee's exit interview, and then published to the site the commendations and recommendations of the Committee, and, finally, established a wiki and invited all constituencies of the university to post comments regarding the strategic plan and the Committee's findings.

Externally, the new accreditation standards and cycle offer the institution itself an added incentive to make its strategic planning and subsequent monitoring even more public, engaging relevant parties in an exercise that formerly may have had a relatively low profile after the initial burst of purpose, fanfare, and enthusiasm. The dynamic interchange between the institution and the Commission may well help keep the dialogue with key external stakeholders and publics fresh and still more credible. An additional value – witnessed by yet another institution with which I worked – was to bring the Evaluation Committee Report into the Governing Board's deliberations regarding clarification of the institution's mission within a university system.

But to pose a contrary case, I would recount – again anonymously – the institution that restricted preparation for the decennial visit to a carefully selected number of individuals, only perfunctorily made it available to the campus community, limited to a small invited group persons attending the Committee’s exit interview, and has kept the whole process essentially under wraps. As Cicero would have asked, “Cui bono?” “To whose advantage?”

Lest you dismiss these proposals as overly idealistic, allow me readily to acknowledge that the culture and circumstances of any college and university are at any moment what they are and that the expectation that such a blending of internal institutional initiatives and the external requirements of accreditation will depend entirely on how that culture and circumstances are reconciled. But I do have faith! Rather than an exercise that heretofore has often been perceived as ectopic to the campus, these new standards and cycle hold great promise. As one who has served on the Northwest Commission, who has had the opportunity to work with many of you, and who now cheers the Commissioners, president, and her senior staff for their fine work, I believe we have a truly unique opportunity to turn the page and start anew. And that we do so at a time when expectations are running so high as to border on unrealistic at times.

As I began this little meditation by citing a third century patristic, I might end by citing for our mutual encouragement an even more obscure commentator on higher education, the Italian Renaissance philosopher, Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who wrote, “In matters of great moment, daring high accomplishment is in itself great achievement.”