Accreditation in Kinesiology: The Process, Criticism and Controversy, and the Future

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The question of accreditation has been quite controversial in higher education. Some consider accreditation as a necessary “evil” while others reject it outright. It is a process designed to promote quality assurance and improvement in institutions and programs, yet one mired in various issues. While accreditation is controversial in a number of respects, the major focus of accrediting bodies should be the review of applied professional programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels that are grounded in professional standards and licensure. Basic science programs such as movement, exercise, and sport science should be excluded from accreditation review and subject only to external review by experts within the field of kinesiology. Furthermore, amongst other factors, the association of kinesiology programs with agencies that promote the accreditation of programs that lack professional standards, certification, or licensure should be rejected. Accreditation is here to stay, but how well it serves the academy remains debatable.

Personal History with Accreditation, the Process and Purpose

Accreditation has always been a bit controversial in higher education. Some consider it a necessary evil while others reject it outright. For many, it’s kind of like going to the dentist; you don’t want to make the trip, but you know if you don’t problems may lie ahead. So you endure the visit, you are very glad when it’s over, and the outcome is usually pretty good.

Beginning with the evaluation of medical education programs 100 years ago, accreditation is a review of higher education institutions and programs to assure quality and promote improvement. The primary purposes of accreditation are: assuring quality, allowing access to federal funds, easing transfer of courses and credit among institutions, and engendering future employer and public confidence in the academy (Eaton, 2002). Through self study, peer review, and judgments by accrediting organizations, an accreditation review is an effort to assess the quality of institutions, programs, and services, measuring each against
agreed-upon standards, and thereby assuring that each meet those standards. The ends that are focused upon are those of student learning—the demonstrable learning of the beginning professional and perhaps the outcomes accrued by the professional’s clients. Ultimately, accreditation is a benchmark credential for the public (even if the public has no clue as to what a program or the process entails), and it is the union card or benchmark for institutional and programmatic comparison.

Theoretically, accreditation is linked to the construct of professionalism. Tamir and Wilson (2005) point out that professionalism is grounded in promoting the public good and in promoting professional autonomy. They state: “…professionals...consider alternatives and provide the best answers; professionals make these decisions based on codified knowledge, a common set of procedures to identify problems, consensual agreements regarding ‘best practices’, and the use of professional judgment in the face of inevitable uncertainty” (p. 335). This market approach suggests homogeneity of agreed-upon standards and approaches within the accreditation process. As a consequence, it lies open to criticisms that: (1) only insiders are capable or allowed to be the gatekeepers in the definition of a profession; and (2) a given set of norms imposed on others may be stultifying or perhaps even oppressive. This, of course, has the potential of creating tension among and within professions of a contradictory nature; that is, trying to serve society while “fortifying their privileges” (Tamir & Wilson, 2005, p. 337) may be a sign of the controversial nature of the accreditation process.

Our position on accreditation resides on both positive and negative ends of the scale, but we remain fairly critical of the process due to a variety of issues associated with the process. We recognize that accreditation has the potential to benefit our institutions and more specifically, is good for programs in kinesiology. For example, while not without significant issues, accreditation has the potential to validate the soundness of our programs and particularly those in professional or clinical areas within pedagogy, athletic training, sport management, and health and fitness. In contrast, we are hesitant to suggest that it is critical or appropriate for our core disciplinary programs within kinesiology. We can probably rely on internally driven reviews—both internal and external reviews—without formalized agency-based accreditation reviews for disciplinary areas within the movement, exercise, and sport sciences. Those affiliated with the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) in our country and the Canadian Council of University Physical Education and Kinesiology Administrators Accreditation Council (CCUPEKA; see http://ccupeka/ca/en) that represents programs in 14 kinesiology programs would probably disagree with this position.

Tom’s introduction to and perspectives on accreditation are grounded in his experience at Purdue with the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2006) accreditation process and his role as an NCATE examiner years ago. In fact, his decision to serve as an examiner was born out of: (1) his general dismay with the NCATE process that seemed so labor intensive for the Purdue faculty—grounded in the production of massive documentation—and a “give them whatever they want” mentality; and (2) a process that appeared to homogenize and reduce the autonomy of individual programs. Tom felt if he “went native” or got an insider’s view of the process from an examiner’s perspective he might learn a bit more and maybe see a silver lining to all of this. So he volunteered and started training. In fact, it got off to a pretty rocky start. While attending a training session
in Kansas City, he observed one of the speakers projecting a hangman’s noose with the caption, “Guilty until proven innocent.” The speaker declared that every program was a NCATE suspect and that no one avoided the noose without sufficient and convincing evidence that a program should be accredited or proved innocent. Tom sat there in disbelief and began to boil a bit. Soon thereafter, he informed an NCATE official that he was “out of there” unless there was a retraction of that position. The retraction was made to the trainees and the speaker was sufficiently chastised. Tom became a “trained” examiner and off he went to examine three teacher education programs at Research I institutions over 3 years.

Tom observed some really great things about each university and program, but generally confirmed that these institutions were eager to get through the process as quickly and painlessly as possible; hence, they had their “ducks lined up” almost perfectly to do so. The same thing seemed true for the review or examining team. After hours of reading reports before and during the site visit, conducting interviews, and crafting the team’s evaluation, Tom recalls asking himself why he had elected to engage in the review even with his desire to engage in an ethnographic exploration of the accreditation process. Clearly there are few individual faculty rewards attached to process as an examiner or examinee especially relative to promotion and tenure. Tom wondered if the genuineness and true quality of teacher education programs became trivialized by such a labor intensive and document-filled process (Allington, 2005). That is, in order to get through, programs seemed to develop elaborate theoretical models as the foundation of their programs surrounded by tons of documentation. According to Tom, “I thought if I saw another poster or heard that ‘our program is grounded in reflective praxis’, I was going to get sick!” Reflective praxis was the buzz term of the day and apparently most thought it was the ticket to accreditation. Furthermore, it was interesting to meet with students who had little insight into how their programs were being represented, and oftentimes, these undergraduates characterized their programs in very different ways from those described by administrators and faculty. The inconsistencies were telling, indeed, but never provoked the guilty verdict.

After this 3 year stint, Tom retired as an examiner and concluded that the process was overly burdensome and needed help. Yet those of us in teacher education will probably have to endure periodic accreditation reviews until our retirement. Accreditation, whether good or bad, is here to stay and university administrators on an institutional and programmatic level typically value accreditation and want that seal of approval. One central Purdue administrator (C.M. Ladisch, personal communication, September 1, 2006) recently wrote to Tom and stated, “Accreditation does have its merits. The self study typically required by an accreditation review focus us to ask questions about ourselves that we might not otherwise ask. We learn a great deal from this exercise. We also become more aware as to how external constituencies view us. I often observe that the significant preparation we undergo for a review refreshes or re-instills our pride in our program or department or university. Often, the feedback we receive from an accreditation review drives us to do new and better things. Is it valued? Definitely!”

In the United States during 2004-2005, nearly 3,000 public and private, mainly non-profit and degree-granting, 2- and 4-year institutions engaged in and were accredited by one of 19 recognized regional institutional accrediting organizations, while 18,000 programs were accredited by one of 62 specialized accrediting
organizations (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2006b). The CHEA and/or the U.S. Department of Education serve as the overseeing bodies for the review of the accrediting organizations. The oversight process is called “recognition.” Hence, organizations like NCATE and the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) are recognized bodies. Furthermore, many of these accreditors have partnerships with state agencies or professional associations, such as state departments of education or associations like the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) or the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM).

To our knowledge, there are five primary accreditation bodies directly connected to our field in the U.S., some of which have affiliated with NASPE and undergo an electronic portfolio review process:

- NCATE/NASPE;
- Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE);
- North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM)/NASPE;
- National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education (NCACE)/NASPE;
- Committee on Accreditation for the Exercise Sciences (CoAES); and
- ASEP.

As the data reveal, these bodies have accredited over 600 programs across these areas within our departments, the majority being in athletic training and physical education teacher education (ASEP, 2006; CAATE, 2006; CHEA, 2006; CoAES, 2006; NASPE, 2006; NCATE, 2006). Additionally, ASEP has accredited six programs (n.d.). We note that the total number of programs connected to NCATE relates to those that have undergone the NCATE/NASPE specialized professional association (SPA) electronic portfolio accreditation process. We are sure there are countless other programs, including Purdue, that are accredited through “the older” NCATE accreditation process and will be subject to the NCATE/NASPE electronic review in the future. We are preparing for our review in 2010, even attending special workshops to discern the expectations that will be placed upon us.

**Criticism and Controversy in Accreditation**

As suggested already, the accreditation process has been the target of various critics. The key criticisms of the accreditation process include (Allington, 2005; CHEA, 2006a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2006):

- It is required by some institutions and not so voluntary.
- It is not well understood by the public and by constituents.
- It is characterized by narrowness and “guild mentality” among specialized accreditors.
- It is perceived to have a “check the box” mentality among some accreditors.
• It threatens programmatic autonomy and creativity by the imposition of external standards—some too difficult to achieve and some too low in expectations.
• The process is perceived to be a bureaucratic hurdle that is time consuming and expensive—it takes away from our primary mission and alternative activities that might serve our departments and students better.
• The current system of state requirements that are linked to accreditation have a “stultifying impact” on program improvement.
• Visitation teams often have uneven and inconsistent quality.
• The effectiveness of the process is tied to leadership—is it framed as a benefit or a burden?
• There is a proliferation of accrediting bodies—rather than providing a meaningful experience there are simply more experiences.
• There is little existing research that links program accreditation with impact measures, including student learning and effective practice.

The most prevalent criticism—the labor intensiveness of the process—is very real to us and probably for many of you. And it’s never-ending. Just as a department or program catches its breath after a major review, one must begin preparing for the next review. Purdue hires staff members to focus almost exclusively on the accreditation review process and are responsible for assembling the data for each teacher education program. Accounting for each NCATE task entails countless hours and takes time away from our work in research and teaching. Those responsible for collating the data from all teacher education programs at the college level spend thousands of hours putting together the necessary documentation for the examiners. Our Purdue report was over 100 pages long and was appended by countless electronic and hardcopy documentation. The examining team’s assessment was nearly 100 pages long followed by a lengthy rejoinder. As we transition to a specialized review for NASPE, we wonder what the cost will be in human labor as well as dollars. What is the trade-off of receiving the union card? Ken Zeichner (2006), a leading scholar within teacher education, offers the following:

…if the thousands of dollars [we would add hundreds of thousands of dollars] that are now being spent on aligning hundreds of courses with standards in teacher education institutions and on preparing elaborate accreditation portfolios were spent on supporting such things as professional development school partnerships, paying cooperating teachers a decent wage for their important role in mentoring student teachers, or funding expert K-12 teachers to spend time on college and university campuses working alongside university faculty in teaching methods and content courses, we might get more quality in teacher preparation than we are now getting from some of our hyperrationalized accountability systems that we have been required to create as part of state and national approval and accreditation processes. (p. 331)

We can’t help but agree with Zeichner. The rub is as we fight to maintain accountability to standards, what are we sacrificing through the accreditation process? So whether it is teacher education, athletic training, or other programs within
kinesiology, again one must ask about the trade-off—what is gained and what is lost? We suspect to some degree we have become bureaucratic functionaries through our engagement in this process. Again, we believe accreditation is here to stay at both institutional and programmatic levels. In many ways, it’s a real “Catch 22.”

As we navigate long existing programs of accreditation, new accreditation agencies have appeared—not without controversy. In the fall of 2004 an accreditation controversy within kinesiology was born. That fall, CoAES was organized and affiliated with CAAHEP—the accrediting organization for over 2,000 programs in 20 health science related fields (CAAHEP, n.d.b.). This came with the sponsorship of eight organizations including the ACSM, the American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD), and the Cooper Institute (CoAES, n.d.). The committee proposed accreditation of programs of exercise science and exercise physiology. Under these labels, the primary role of CoAES is to establish guidelines for academic programs that facilitate the preparation of students seeking employment in the health, fitness, and exercise industry. It has as a secondary role the establishment and implementation of an accreditation process that is specifically intended for exercise science. There are two programs with initial accreditation in exercise physiology and six with initial accreditation in exercise science (CAAHEP, n.d.a).

While the development of standards and subsequent certification and accreditation processes is probably admirable in an area where thousands of unqualified individuals pose as trained health and fitness experts and likely endanger countless clients, nonetheless the proposal stirred emotions and brought about objections. With all due respect, we think this was mostly due to the lack of care taken by the leaders of CoAES in developing its proposal and how various areas were defined.

When first hearing of this proposal, our colleagues in the Big Ten who serve or served as chairs, heads, directors, and deans of kinesiology programs, cited numerous and familiar problems with the development (personal communications, Big Ten directors, July 1, 2004):

- Exercise science and exercise physiology are grounded in disciplines and are not professionally based.
- The standards and guidelines for accreditation for both areas provide vague reference to the knowledge, skills, and abilities expected of graduates (e.g., are skilled in conducting fitness assessments, skilled in evaluating health behaviors, etc.).
- Programs lose autonomy and academic freedom via external review.
- The narrowness of defining accreditation targets within kinesiology: Why is exercise science defined in terms of health and fitness? Why has exercise physiology been singled out? As we know, it represents but one subdiscipline within kinesiology. Why has it been defined in terms of individual and group exercise programs?

*Since the time in which this presentation was delivered to the Academy, CoAES expanded its accreditation areas beyond exercise science and exercise physiology to a proposed third area, personal fitness training. A public hearing has been scheduled for the end of January, 2007 and public comment has been solicited relative to the standards and guidelines for this third area. Refer to the CoAES website (www.coaes.org) for further information.*
• More broadly, what is the rationale behind these designations and what is the value of the accreditation program?
• These designations could result in redefinition of discipline-based exercise science and exercise physiology programs.

Subsequently, the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education (AAKPE) was opposed to the proposal by CoAES/CAAHEP on similar grounds. A committee was established to study the problem. Subsequently, the concerns just cited were discussed in a teleconference with representatives from the Academy, CoAES, and ACSM (W. Chodzko-Zajko, personal communication, January 15, 2005). An agreement was reached to change the titles for the accredited programs to applied and clinical exercise physiology. Additionally, they agreed to provide clearer definitions of the roles and job descriptions that graduates would play within the health and fitness field. While certification and licensure requirements were proposed by AAKPE representatives as a foundation for accreditation, no consensus was reached on this point. This was also true of the Academy’s opposition to CAAHEP’s oversight of the accreditation process.

While these arguments presented by the Big Ten directors and the Academy seem quite valid and the agreement reached with CoAES seems a good first step, it appears that the largest problems linked to accreditation continue to center on nomenclature and certification and licensure. The AAKPE committee’s recommendation to inform CAAHEP that the Academy will not co-sponsor the initiative appears sound for now. We suspect, if terminology or title were changed significantly from exercise science and exercise physiology, support would be forthcoming.

In our opinion, defining health and fitness professionals as exercise scientists or exercise physiologists or even as applied and clinical exercise scientists or physiologists is perhaps a façade. Why not call the roles exactly what they are? They are health and fitness professionals. Teachers don’t call themselves applied or clinical social or learning scientists or pedagogical scientists. Athletic trainers don’t call themselves applied sport medicine scientists. If you review the various accreditors affiliated with CHEA, you will find that there is no “hocus pocus” in their use of terms. Engineers are engineers, nurses are nurses, architects are architects, and so on. It is interesting to note that the heading in the CoAES newsletter of October, 2004 reads, “COAES to Set Academic Standards for Personal Fitness Trainers.” They didn’t write about setting the standards for applied exercise scientists or applied or clinical exercise physiologists. How many personal trainers do you know who call themselves applied or clinical exercise physiologists?

Moreover, this nomenclature, intended or not, appears to disrespect the disciplinary grounding of our field, as suggested by our colleagues in the Big Ten. We suspect Franklin Henry is probably turning over in his grave.

While none of us want to make a “mountain out of a mole hill,” the integrity of an established discipline and subdisciplines within the academy becomes threatened through mindless connections to accreditation processes. CoAES and its sponsors should have better defined this area with something like the Committee on the Accreditation of Health and Fitness Professionals or the Committee on the Accreditation of Personal Training Professionals, or something
within this realm. To state that these degrees are grounded in exercise science or exercise physiology is one thing; to define them in these ways is quite another thing. If a program was to pursue accreditation related to our traditional sport and exercise science disciplines within kinesiology, the Canadian accreditation council model would serve others well. Accreditation standards center on four general education objectives and four standards embedded within the objectives linked to: the disciplinary and applied preparation in kinesiology, knowledge of disciplinary content, knowledge of scientific inquiry, and application of disciplinary knowledge.

Also, certification and licensure are important links to the accreditation process. In the case of teaching, individual states are responsible for certifying and licensing teachers; most states award an initial teaching certificate after successful completion of an approved program. All states require that teacher candidates possess a bachelor’s degree in education or content area. Furthermore, 42 states require teacher testing that includes tests of basic skills, general knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge.

In addition, most states have a staged licensure process. Thirty-one states require an initial license that is valid for 2 to 5 years, with a permanent license to follow when additional requirements are fulfilled (e.g., completing advanced degrees or continuing education credits/units). Parallel, but not identical processes are linked to athletic training certification and licensure.

It is our belief that similar certification and state licensure processes should be linked to those serving as health and fitness professionals who have graduated from four-year programs, CoAES accredited programs or not. Independent certification processes that exist now through ACSM and NCSA are good, but one wonders if state certification and licensure will follow in the future.

In summary, the controversy may have been unnecessary if the players in this accreditation game had been more studious, strategic, and sensitive to the traditions of kinesiology, especially to our disciplinary traditions and history. Importantly, we believe support for accreditation in this area would be forthcoming if this organization moved away from long-standing disciplinary terminology for those aspiring to become health and fitness clinicians.

Allow us to make a final comment about ASEP. Small in membership, this group was born in 1997 to “unite exercise physiologists and promote the professional development of exercise physiology.” In 1999, accreditation guidelines or standards (see www.asep.org/programs.htm) were approved by its board of directors. As stated on the ASEP website, “the Accreditation Committee of ASEP desires to work with your academic program to ensure that standards are met and graduating seniors are worthy of the title ‘exercise physiologist.’” However well intentioned this group is, only six programs have been accredited through this organization. In contrast to the Canadian council, we sense this group lacks the political clout or backing of the majority of members in this discipline or across kinesiology departments in general. As far as we know, it is the only specifically defined core disciplinary area connected to accreditation, and we predict few Research I institutions will seek accreditation from this body. We refer you to an interesting commentary by Professor Boone (2005) of this organization who argues that “Exercise physiologists need…their own professional accreditation.” We disagree and furthermore, unless the Academy promotes accreditation in kinesiology
much like the Canadian model, we don’t see this initiative leading to the evolution of accreditation agencies within specific disciplines such as biomechanics, motor development, and motor control, among others.

The Future

In closing, accreditation, like going to the dentist, is not necessarily a bad thing for our future in kinesiology, but it has its trade-offs. We certainly believe that accreditation is here to stay especially for our clinical or applied programs. The typical review process is very labor intensive and expensive, perhaps at the expense of other very desirable activities in which we might engage in the preparation of our students and in the productive use of our colleagues’ time and efforts. However, on the plus side, we acknowledge that the self-study portion of the process forces us to ask questions about ourselves that might not otherwise be asked if we are complacent or not overly introspective relative to program improvement. As our colleague at Purdue stated, we become more aware of how peers view us and hopefully, their review brings about improvement.

On the other hand, do we need accreditation to conduct self-study or gain insights from external constituents or to improve our lot? Indeed not—other forms of internal and external reviews can serve these functions. For instance, the physical education teacher education faculty at Georgia State University have conducted a comprehensive, research-based, on-going, internal assessment of their program for 13 years now (Metzler & Tjeerdsma, 2000). Do we have to be accredited to maintain excellence or professionalize our programs or students? Again, probably not. The University of Wisconsin and the University of Illinois seem to be doing very well without NCATE accreditation and we suspect other forms of external review serve them well. At Purdue, our president, provost, and trustees value the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Accreditation Approval” on both institutional and programmatic levels, and these processes won’t likely go away across varied disciplines. Accreditation processes certainly will endure in our clinical programs in kinesiology, but it is our hope that they won’t become the norm in our foundational exercise science programs.

Finally, from a research perspective, we need to have data or information beyond mere descriptions of the accreditation process that gives us confidence about the impact of accreditation. Does it assure quality and improvement? Does it lead to a data set or portfolio from which we can learn about the effect of our accredited professional preparation programs (e.g., scores on licensing exams, grade point averages, program completion rates, employer evaluations, alumni follow-up, professional recognition of alumni, professional activities of alumni, academic achievement of graduates)? There is very little known on these accounts within teacher education. Only two studies (Goodlad, 1990; Wilson & Youngs, 2005) suggest a positive relationship between accreditation and certain outcome variables, with the following findings: (1) that the teacher education graduates of accredited institutions score higher on teacher tests; and (2) regional institutions appear to value NCATE more highly than those from flagship or major institutions.

As teacher-educators within a major institution, we believe we prepare our future teachers well, but we really don’t have much empirical insight into whether
our association with NCATE is all that important relative to what we do on a daily basis. We adhere to standards for teacher preparation, offer a thorough set of courses and experiences, monitor our students as they progress in the program, and delight in our high placement and success of our graduates in the teaching ranks. We work hard at preparing teachers and unless we are forced to do so, we think very little about our association with NCATE accreditation. In fact, all of our physical education graduates were hired last year, and our guess is that our accreditation status did not play a role in their employment. We suspect the same is true for our students in our accredited athletic training program. We wonder what the future will hold for our health and fitness program and its students relative to CoAES accreditation. This could be a bright future, and full support for accreditation should be forthcoming if the changes suggested above are employed. Independent of accreditation, we have an obligation to our students and our field to prepare future professionals well. Equally, we have an obligation to make sure our faculty colleagues aren’t mired in activities that detract from their scholarly endeavors. The same obligation must be maintained with our students and faculty members in our exercise science curriculum as well.

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