

Avoiding the "Education Mills"

Continuing education (CE) whether it is pursued formally or informally is important to all professions. The medical profession is an example where CE has been a staple. Varetto & Costa (2013) coin the term continuing professional development (CPD) as a better description of how lifelong learning integrates and complements a professional's career, especially in the health field. Education is like a continuum and CPD is "the educative means of updating, developing and enhancing how doctors apply their knowledge, skills and attitudes required in their working lives" (Varetto & Costa, 2013, p. 470).

The quality of education (CE, degree, certificate, or otherwise) is a concern, and the rigor of the overlapping processes of assessment, accreditation, and accountability (the A-list) help to ensure a robust educational framework (Reeve, 2010). The concept of assessment has evolved from a more evaluative meaning (e.g. focused on testing, grading, levels) to student-oriented goals setting. Assessment as defined by Miller is "a combined process of measuring, evaluating, and conveying performance results of a particular unit of analysis over a set period of time for a specified assessment user group" (as cited in Reeve, 2010, p. 18). The application of Miller's "assessment" is evidence-based, and evidence-driven (Reeve, 2010).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the United States Department of Education (USDE) are the governing bodies in the United States who "recognizes" or "accredits" accrediting organizations (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002). Accreditation is "a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement" (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 1). Accrediting organizations operate on the regional, national, and specialized (e.g. program-level, non-institutional) levels. The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) is recognized by CHEA and the U.S. Secretary of Education as the national governing body of postsecondary distance education institutions that offer distance education (Distance Education and Training Council, n.d.). The five stages (self study, peer review, site visit, action/judgment, monitoring/oversight) of the accreditation review is on-going and subject to renewal (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 2). Accreditation is a system of checks and balances to help ensure the value and robustness of education. Accreditation shows the consumer of education that the educational entity is mindful enough to seek outside accountability to better itself. While accreditation does not prevent poor instruction or "bad" programs, it is a checkpoint at least.

Accountability [of an educational entity] is not dependent on accreditation. Accountability is evidence-driven, "the mission and goals have been achieved in an effective and efficient manner" (Reeve, 2010, p. 24). Stakeholders in education need to see the proof that the education is working. Accountability is also being and operating transparently. Accountability is governed by the stakeholders (e.g. institution/program, students, parents, board, etc.).

Assessment forms the basis of the relationship between these "A-listers" (Reeve, 2010). With the results of assessment, accreditation becomes possible and the long-term cyclical process of accreditation depends on re-assessment (Reeve, 2010). The information gained from

the process of assessment can be used in accountability; the process is again cyclical with accountability requiring re-assessment (Reeve, 2010). Accreditation is another way to provide accountability to the stakeholders (Reeve, 2010). Assessment, accreditation, and accountability are all interrelated and are dynamic processes.

CHEA warns against "diploma mills" and "accreditation mills" (CHEA, n.d.). These "mills" confuse the student and public about the quality of education and these "mills" may allude to some kind of "accreditation" or endorsement, but they really are not accredited (CHEA, n.d.). It is difficult to identify some of these "mills" as they can look very official. CHEA's webpage on "Important Questions about 'Diploma Mills' and 'Accreditation Mills'" lists many questions a potential consumer of education ought to ask in order to avoid such "mills".

Interestingly, the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) which certifies many established and recognized organizations (e.g. including American College of Sports Medicine, American Council on Exercise, National Academy of Sports Medicine, National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, and National Strength and Conditioning Association) is not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education or CHEA to grant accreditations. NCCA only accredits examinations but not institutional/educational programs (International Sports Sciences Association, n.d.). Also, NCCA is not recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense and programs relying on NCCA accreditation are ineligible for the Armed Forces Tuition Assistance (International Sports Sciences Association, n.d.).

With so many venues for the lifelong pursuit of education and self improvement, one must carefully choose the best education that suits one's needs. An "accredited" program is not failproof, but it is a gesture that the educational entity is moving towards accountability to its educational consumers.

References

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