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[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Finance](#)

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Struggling Colleges Question the Cost—and Worth—of Specialized Accreditation

By Eric Kelderman

In thinking about selecting a new dean for its business school this year, Southern New Hampshire University considered whether the new leader should guide the school to gain accreditation through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, as more than 500 colleges have done.

But after seeing estimates that the costs of meeting those standards could top \$2-million annually, Paul J. LeBlanc, president of the university, decided that approval from the business-college association wasn't worth the institution's time or money.

While accreditation from a federally recognized organization is required for an institution's students to receive federal financial aid, colleges have often sought additional specialized accreditation to meet professional-licensing standards or to bolster their reputations.

But in the uncertain economic climate, some institutions are struggling with whether they can maintain the levels of financial support or the numbers of highly qualified faculty members needed for the associations' stamps of approval. And some campus leaders are deciding that the costs of such endorsements outweigh the benefits.

An Expensive Business

The price of becoming accredited includes annual dues and the expenses of peer reviewers who visit the campus every few years. Annual membership fees for business-school accreditation range from \$2,500 to \$7,300, and one-time fees for initial accreditation are as much as \$18,500.

But a much greater cost usually comes with having to meet an association's standards for hiring a sufficient number of qualified faculty members. This has added to the intense competition for professors in fields such as pharmacology, nursing, and business, where instructors are scarce because jobs outside academe do not usually require a terminal degree, and teaching at a university might mean a big pay cut.

Rather than compete with the nation's best business colleges for a limited number of people with doctoral degrees, Mr. LeBlanc said his institution would be better off creating business-degree programs with practical applications, in areas like supply-chain management. Seeking accreditation would also have tied up the new dean with duties other than running the school, he said.

Jerry E. Trapnell, executive vice president and chief accreditation officer at the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, says that so far, the economic downturn has not led to an unusually high number of colleges dropping out of the accreditation process. But the long-term effect of the downturn is hard to predict, he said.

Other business-school leaders say the costs of accreditation from the business-college association are a problem not just because of the economy. The cost, some experts argue, has "stunted the growth" of continuing-education programs that typically attract nontraditional students who may not have the time or money to pursue a college degree full time.

Business and management courses are indispensable for continuing-education programs, said Jay A. Halfond, dean of Metropolitan College at Boston University, and Thomas E. Moore, dean of the College of Business Administration at Northeastern University, in an article they wrote this year in the journal *Continuing Higher Education Review*. But to meet the accreditation standards, undergraduate programs that have more than a quarter of their courses in business and graduate programs with at least half of their courses in that field must be taught primarily by "full-time, conventional faculty, with advanced research credentials and an active record of ongoing scholarship," the authors wrote.

To keep continuing-education programs affordable for part-time students, some colleges have sidestepped the standards by using "euphemistic" names for their programs, the article said, or by making sure that the proportion of business courses is just under the accreditor's threshold.

Mr. Halfond doesn't think business-school accreditors are "the evil empire," he said in an interview. "But it can be very painful for some institutions to reach their standards, and they're not very forgiving."

A Mark of Credibility

Officials at Georgia Southwestern State University, however, say the business school's accreditation has improved the reputation of its program. John G. Kooti, dean of the School of Business Administration there, said the goal of accreditation inspired greater support from the university and attracted better-qualified faculty

members and more students. "We used accreditation to build a program," he said. "It brought us credibility."

Georgia Southwestern, which earned accreditation from the business-college association this spring, doubled the amount of the business school's budget over the past five years to meet the accreditor's standards, Mr. Kooti said. The school has also increased the size of its faculty to 19 from 11. And Mr. Kooti anticipates hiring two more faculty members next year to keep up with enrollment, which has grown 20 percent over the past two years.

Georgia Southwestern has also spent nearly \$500,000 to renovate the space that the business school uses, Mr. Kooti said. Feng Xu, an assistant professor of management, said potential faculty members look more favorably on job offers from accredited business colleges. Even institutions without that accreditation look for instructors who have degrees from accredited colleges, he said.

International students are also concerned about accreditation because they may have little other information about the quality of an institution before coming to the United States, said Mr. Xu, a native of China who earned graduate degrees at South Dakota State University and George Washington University, both of which are accredited by the business-school association.

Eduardo J. Marti, president of Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, said that the real value of accreditation accrued to students. "The only thing our students leave the college with is a certificate of stock, a diploma, which is worth only the reputation of the college," he said.

"I think a lot of presidents cry about the cost of accreditation and the things they have to do to meet the standards, when what they are really saying is they are concerned about someone coming from outside and trying to run their programs," he said.

However, Mr. Halfond, of Boston University's Metropolitan College, said that whether or not an institution has earned a specialized accreditation is probably not a major concern of most students and applicants. Because of that, he said, some colleges may calculate that the cost of seeking and maintaining accreditation is far greater than that of losing a few potential students.

In fact, Steven F. Soba, director of undergraduate admissions at Southern New Hampshire, said that during his 17 years as an admissions officer he could think of only a couple of instances where parents had inquired about any kind of accreditation.

Accreditors' Concerns

As state budget cuts and other drops in revenue take their toll on colleges, some accrediting groups are trying to ease the financial burdens on institutions or at least give them a chance to wait out the recession without being penalized.

Sharon J. Tanner, executive director of the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, said that losing existing or potential members is a concern for many accrediting bodies, though they are unlikely to admit publicly that it is happening for fear of damaging their reputations.

The nursing-accreditation group is still benefiting from the booming demand for health-care workers, Ms. Tanner said. Forty-one institutions entered the initial phase of nursing accreditation during the past year. At the same time, however, a small number of colleges have asked to delay campus visits by peer reviewers, she said, and several other institutions have sought advice on how to remain accredited while making cuts in their programs.

James G. Cibulka, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, said many of his member institutions accepted the association's offer to delay their accreditation cycle by one year.

The council has also redesigned its accrediting standards to focus more on how well education students perform as teachers rather than on the specifics of the college's academic program. In addition to improving teacher education, the new standards are expected to be less costly for colleges, Mr. Cibulka said.

Cynthia A. Davenport, director of the Association of Specialized & Professional Accreditors, said concerns about the economy and its effect on the quality of academic programs were widely discussed at a recent meeting of her association, which represents about 60 organizations that assess programs such as acupuncture, landscape architecture, and veterinary medicine.

The poor economy, however, is no excuse to let accreditation standards slip, she said. At a time when students are flocking back to college to improve their job skills, the public needs to be assured that colleges are providing quality education, she said.

If the college can't afford to hire the same number of faculty members for an accredited program as they have in the past, for instance, then they could reduce the enrollment in that area, she said.

"Members know that some institutions may be faced with difficult choices," she said, "but if they can't meet the standards, then maybe they shouldn't be offering that program."

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