

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE**

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that preserving the fundamental values underlying the work of NAST and the other arts accrediting associations must guide our next steps as the policy struggle over accreditation continues. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding this issue is important to you and your institution.

This is the eleventh and last of the briefing letters in this series. A common theme in these letters has been distinctions and commonalities among parts and wholes. In each letter, we have addressed a major issue in higher education and accreditation policy. Each is a part of a larger whole. The parts and the wholes that we have described are interacting to produce proposals and counter-proposals that are featured in a series of events: hearings, negotiations, regulation writing, legislative action, and so forth, all associated with federal law and policy affecting higher education. Press reports normally emphasize what happened in specific events. However, what happens overall is deeply influenced by various sets of ideas and values. Federal accreditation policies and debates about them reflect values and belief system differences that are deep below the surface.

The values underlying arts accreditation as developed by NAST and its arts counterparts are codified in several long-standing documents. "A Philosophy of Accreditation in the Arts Disciplines" and our "Code of Good Practice for the Accreditation work of NAST" are two primary examples. The legal organizational documents of the association, its membership standards, and its procedures for institutional reviews all reflect the values held and developed by member institutions of the association and the association itself during decades of effort. These values are consistent with those of most other reputable accrediting organizations.

Discussions about these values have permeated this series of briefing letters. Some of the most important are consistent with many of those critical and central to the operation of the government of the United States. These include a relationship between community standards and individual freedom that favors individual freedom, consent of the governed, public participation in the formation of standards and policies, and mutual responsibility not one way accountability. Checks and balances are built into all systems and processes. There are separations of powers. There is the concept that individuals and institutions can be a part of something but not under it. Powers are limited and operations are conducted on rule of law principles.

These and other values about powers are important because they normally produce an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual support that facilitates local advancement and healthy competition. But in NAST accreditation, all of these philosophical, organizational, and operational values are used to keep the best possible focus on a body of content, in our case theatre. The values we have been describing could hardly be more conducive to or consistent with the nature of work in the arts, which is always playing out and revealing a magnificent tension between structure and freedom. Our discipline constantly teaches us about distinctions and relationships between content and

process. We know in our souls that process or technique alone is never enough. We know a great deal about the conditions necessary for creativity and innovation, and thus we are reluctant to embrace values that harm those conditions. We recognize that our fields are more like farms than factories. We tend our territory with the best stewardship we can muster, and we do so with faith that such an approach will continue to produce outstanding results, as it always has over time. Values help us to consider imperfections in context. We know how to reach for perfection in non-destructive ways. It is not natural for us to use the existence of imperfection to deny what is obviously good, right, or true in an overall sense. We are able to identify possibilities and work for improvement sensibly. We don't use the fact that improvement is possible as a basis for saying that everything done previously was wrong. In many ways, being centered on our content humbles us. When we work with our field in all its fullness, we never face a purely technical exercise, and never have a complete or final answer. Our bottom line moves as we work toward it.

In addition to the values and perspectives just mentioned, we embrace many associated with service to others, including the public, government, and the broader academic community. Helping students gain a better education is central. Enabling systems of mobility, providing information to the public, and serving governmental needs with professional analysis reflect values of professional and public service. Volunteerism and expert peer review also describe values critical to the operation of traditional accreditation.

In providing this partial list of values and perspectives, there is no intent to imply that the accreditation system operates perfectly, or that in every instance it satisfies every expectation. However, the policy struggle that all of higher education is in now is not about incidents or flaws in the operation of the accreditation system that occur from time to time, even those that are catalysts for adjustments to make the system work better. What we are confronted with now is a fundamental attack on basic values. Results of the struggle will have a serious impact on the extent to which institutions of higher education remain as free and independent as they are today, especially with regard to academic matters. The overall goal of the reformers is not to improve accreditation, but to change its meaning. One goal is to remove its independence and make it an arm of the federal state, at least for those accrediting agencies that serve a federal purpose by providing one criterion necessary for various connections to federal funding. The accreditation organizations in this category cover almost every institution in the United States.

For reasons we have shown in this set of briefing letters, many of the proposals for change would remove many of the features that have enabled the strength of American higher education to grow. It is as though the reformers believe that higher education is a small set of factories turning out a set of interchangeable, easily measurable, and comparable products, while in reality it is a huge system of farms that grows thousands of different products in hundreds of fields, where each field requires high levels of specialist knowledge to grow and evaluate anything at all. The reformers' goal is centralization, a major change in power distribution arrangements that reduce the authority, freedom, and independence of local institutions.

When looking at this situation from the perspective of a local institution, it is extremely important to separate (a) views about the way accreditation operates under its values, and (b) views about the importance of the values underlying accreditation. If the latter are replaced by new, often-opposite views imposed and linked to federal funding, local institutions will lose significant control or influence over the criteria or procedures used to evaluate them, especially with regard to academic matters. In many ways, it will not matter whether an institution is famous, heavily endowed, or productive. Centralization-driven values will do their usually destructive work. And so, in these circumstances, it is imprudent to be distracted away from larger strategic questions by

imperfections any of us see in institutions, accrediting organizations, or accreditation actions. Imperfections will always be with us. As we address them, we need to take extreme care with the means we choose. The larger and critical strategic question concerns the values underlying the systems we use to deal with imperfections, to debate issues, to make improvements, and to tend the fields of specialized endeavor to the benefit of our nation and the world.

What does this values struggle mean to NAST? The full answer to that question cannot be known or predicted at this time. In the recent past, two wise friends who are good at formulating ideas made statements that I find useful. First, obsession with assessment and rankings is an indicator that a society or group has lost its vision for advancement in terms of content. Second, the world we have known seems to be shattering, at least in some ways. It is worth pondering seriously the extent to which the obsession with assessment is one of the shattering forces. To the extent that these observations have complete or partial utility, they provide an interesting background for considering the values struggle question.

By their very nature, the arts disciplines use assessment continuously, at least as much as any other field of endeavor. But the arts cannot use the artistic mode of thought to full advantage, fulfill their various functions, or focus on the creative or the visionary if those who create and produce them are focused on assessment alone; the same applies to arts programs in higher education. Indeed, in most cases, assessment is calibrated against particular visions or goals, and not the reverse. And what about shattering? Do we really want all of the intangible and tangible resources that enable us to pursue the arts and the preparation of future arts professionals to be the subject of a shattering force? We must ask ourselves where we would be, and where we will be, if the basic values associated with traditional accreditation described earlier in this letter and in the previous briefing letters are denied power to influence evaluation or serve as the conceptual basis for the relationship between institutions and government. We may be interested in improvements, new directions, the incorporation of new ideas and possibilities, and so forth, but are we truly interested in shattering?

NAST has four functions: accreditation, statistical services, professional development of theatre executives, and policy analysis. The term accreditation in the NAST context encompasses relationships among a set of values, a consensus-based set of operational rules and standards, and an expertise- and judgment-based peer review system. The values are the key to success in everything else. We have the lessons of history to teach us what happens when these values are not present or when they are abandoned. Our commitment to our disciplines, our students, the public, and ourselves necessitate retaining these values as the basis for our work with each other, and as the basis for constant improvement in what we do.

These letters make no argument for stasis, but rather note that wise individuals and groups make the right decisions about what should change and what should not. For example, as a number of people have said in different ways, the wise do not trade freedom for security because if they do, eventually they will lose both freedom and security. They do not allow what is happening on the surface to corrode their understanding of what is fundamental to their success. In other words, they understand that if they want freedom and security for themselves, they must work with others to ensure that freedom and security are provided to all.

NAST has been operating since 1965. Its values have enabled it to serve the growth and development of theatre and the other arts in higher education in so many ways that no individual or even an extensive research project could reveal them all. Of course, many people have worked to create this result. But the most important decision underlying all of this service and success,

including the ability to see and act on the need for improvement are the decisions to embrace and infuse a set of values that enable all else.

Whatever happens in the larger public policy arena, or what specific decisions are taken at the federal level, there is a sense of transcending commitment to these values among the members, elected officers, and staff of the association. One visionary focus is our discipline, its connections with other disciplines, and our service to others through that discipline. We have discipline-centered visions that we wish to pursue individually and institutionally. Another is our students. A third is the relationships between students and our discipline. The values and operations of NAST exist to support the realization of such visions and to protect the conceptual framework conducive to freedom in the development and pursuit of efforts at the local level. Our time-tested values and the principles derived from them are the base from which we work to make wise decisions in the days and years ahead.

As the next period unfolds, our values and principles must be our anchor as we do whatever we can to ensure that those values inform relationships among accreditation, higher education, and the federal government. To paraphrase a former U.S. President, we must make sure that what is wrong about America is corrected with what is right about America. The same formulation applies to the field of theatre, NAST, and American higher education. None of us knows when, if, or how our values and principles will be challenged more than they already are, but whatever happens, it is important to be prepared, particularly in the sense of thinking about the ideas that provide a foundation for what we are doing and enable it in an overall sense to be successful. It is for this and a number of other reasons that the officers of the arts accrediting associations asked me to communicate with you during this past semester. A deeper understanding of our conceptual foundations and their meanings for policy has never been more important.

Thank you for your continuing and thoughtful consideration and for the contribution you and your colleagues make to the growth and development of the future of theatre.

Best wishes,

Samuel Hope  
NAST Executive Director