

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

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Dear Colleagues:

The basic message of this letter is that results or “outcomes” have always been central to higher education and accreditation, and that understanding comprehensively what is necessary to sustain the perpetuity of this centrality, especially in terms of student learning, is critical in the formulation of effective policy at all levels, from individual programs to the federal government. Please read on to find out why, and why understanding these issues is important for you and your institution.

All results depend on a relationship between ends and means. Ends and means may vary greatly, but each is necessary. Higher education in the United States has excelled because it pursues this relationship constantly and effectively across a wide range of content. Our society is rich with achievements that would not be possible were it not for the resources higher education provides. Institutions of all sizes, types, and reputations continue to make tremendous contributions.

The achievements of higher education are so ubiquitous that they are taken for granted. We all just expect technology to advance, our aesthetic needs to be satisfied, our engineering to work, our complex systems to function, and so forth. But none of this would happen on the scale that it does if many, many students had not learned in the past or were not learning now, or if, as some assert, no one in institutions or accreditation cared about student learning.

What do these facts and conditions mean for accreditation and its relationship to higher education? One place to begin is by stating the obvious: accreditation has never tried to separate ends and means, or parts and wholes for that matter. In fact, it has done the opposite. It has fostered improvement in and synthesis of ends and means, and parts and wholes relationships, all to support student learning and disciplinary advancement. Ends are different depending on content and specific goals for addressing it; means are far more than dollars and what they buy, and include intangible resources such as will, commitment, reputation, and public trust. Accreditation has always addressed these means and ends relationships on a case-by-case basis, using standards as common frameworks, and recognizing the individual mission and context of each institution and program.

To deal with all these case-by-case complexities effectively, accreditation of all types, traditionally conceived, favors artistic approaches over technical ones. Artistic approaches are indigenous to decision making in all sorts of dynamic situations where there is no standard answer, or where answers have consistency but are not identical, or where the answer constantly changes, even when operating within a framework. Investing, negotiating, and indeed, teaching are three non-arts examples of this composition- or design-based approach at work. Of course, there are many techniques associated with accreditation reviews and with other fields that rely primarily on artistic approaches, but techniques are chosen for their suitability and applied selectively and creatively with respect for the specific arrangement of factors and conditions in a specific time and place. The artistic approach is judgment-based and can proceed under common

frameworks but is not amenable to detailed central control. Each specific result is different, and expected to be.

The technical approach works where there are universal solutions, where a single answer remains constant, or can remain static for significant periods of time. The technical approach is formula-based, obviating the need for individual judgment, and it is a natural partner of detailed central control.

The artistic approach easily encompasses and uses the technical approach, but the technical approach can't encompass the artistic because to do so undermines its imperative and its purpose: a single solution, a single answer, always, in every circumstance.

Clearly, each approach and various proportional mixes of the two are necessary for different purposes or circumstances.

Both institutional and specialized accreditation, traditionally conceived, have used primarily the judgment-based artistic approach to work comprehensively with individual institutions and programs. In doing so, accreditation has been a catalyst for results of all kinds, but student learning first of all. Accreditation does its work acknowledging the fact that results and resources, or ends and means are inextricably tied together, and that resources serve, provide opportunities for, and nurture results but cannot guarantee them because the number of variables is too great. There are no illusions that equal resources can guarantee equal results, that data about results are the same as the results themselves, that all of what is important about learning can be captured by numbers, or that institutional data can predict with certainty what any future student will learn. And, there is a realistic understanding that the greatest motivation for results comes from individual interest or passion for achievement in subject matter or content combined with requisite levels of individual capacity to reach specific goals. Innate ability and commitment do matter; they are critical resources for success.

Accreditation also does not pretend that any part is the whole. A part may be vitally important and critical to meeting threshold standards, but still, it is not the whole. And so, accreditation, traditionally conceived, considers assessment and evaluation a critical and necessary part, but not the whole, not the center, not the first purpose. Disciplinary and professional content is the center, and assessment serves that content; content does not exist to serve assessment. For example, a great evaluation system means nothing if a curriculum is poorly conceived. Assessment techniques and formulas can actually impede progress if they are not consistent with the nature of the content being assessed, or take more time than warranted by the results they provide. Accreditation understands both the relationship and the difference between overall institutional or program quality and individual student achievement, and that the student shoulders a large portion of the responsibility for learning. The greatest teaching is to no avail if the student will not study, or is not prepared to work at a given level.

In terms of results, accreditation assures students that resources necessary for their education are in place, if they are prepared and will do the work required, and that this assurance is based on professional judgments concerning institution-specific relationships among ends and means and parts and wholes, including evidence that current students are learning and that previous students have learned successfully, all consistent with published standards.

In past days, those responsible for disciplinary and professional content were fundamentally responsible for results. They still are. But back then professors and local academic systems were trusted to produce and evaluate those results with minimal external interference, and a major goal

was to do as much as possible to ensure that these professional teachers and their students had the resources necessary to succeed, and under the best of circumstances, to thrive. This goal remains and is more to the forefront than ever. One funding campaign ends and another begins. There is fervent, often manic competition for the brightest students and the most accomplished faculty, two of the most important resources for building institutional reputations. But outcomes rhetoric notwithstanding, concerns about resources do not signify a lack of interest in results, but just the opposite. They reflect the deepest commitment to student learning, because, in reality, the institution provides constantly improvable resources of all kinds, including content, teaching, and evaluation, but it is the individual student who benefits through being given the opportunity to learn.

During the past twenty-five years, a set of views about education has been promulgated with great public relations and political success: ends are not dependant on means; resources or “inputs” do not matter; only results or “outcomes” matter; institutions are 100% responsible for student learning; the students are just consumers; no one involved in delivering education can be trusted, and so forth. In this scheme of things, since study is an input, not an outcome, it doesn’t matter; since employing qualified teachers is not an outcome, that doesn’t matter; since experts in content cannot be trusted, the evaluation systems of their disciplines are not valid and must be standardized with other disciplines, and so forth.

Consideration of this last set of views gives yet another perspective on why the accreditation system and its fundamental values are under attack. With regard to results or “outcomes,” accreditation is holistic, artistic in its approach, judgment-based, tailored to specific dynamic circumstances and local control, and thus able to work with standards, various content, resources, results, and the ends and means relationships among these elements as the basis for virtually unlimited student accomplishment and institutional advancement over time. It supports competition among institutions in terms of achievement in content within frameworks of common purpose.

Many values and approaches being proposed for evaluation in American higher education are just the opposite. They are narrow, technical, formula-based, organized to support detailed standardization and central control, and thus focused on reducing everything to numbers. These attributes manifest themselves in external regulation systems that replace local responsibility with one-way accountability and push institutions and programs toward public-relations driven, divisive, content-free competition based on the images that numbers and their resultant symbols provide.

In our next letter, we will explain to some extent how this last set of values and approaches became so powerful.

Thank you for your continuing consideration and best wishes.

Samuel Hope
NAST Executive Director