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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Special Issue on Current Issues in AACSB Accreditation

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This special issue represents an opportunity for affirmative dialogue about the role of accreditation in management education in developing the next generation of leaders capable of managing the complex challenges faced by business schools and their stakeholders in the 21st century. This discussion is especially salient at a time when it has been observed that “Enrollment and tuition are up, yet the benefits of higher education are suspect” (Brink & Smith, 2012, p. 1). Given the tenor of the ongoing debates about the influence and relevance of business education in delivering a quality education, it seems that accreditation in general has merit as a tool in addressing the issues of quality, value, and relevance of management education.

To frame the articles in this issue, this introduction provides an overview of the evolution of business/management education, including information on enrollment and graduation trends, the intent of accreditation, and the history and evolution of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB International). The introduction concludes with a brief review of the subject matter explored by the authors’ work included in this issue.

Trends in business/management education

Identifying and clearly demarcating the beginning of formal programs of study in business and management education is a difficult task. Early efforts at business education sought to develop what contemporary observers would likely deem to be rudimentary foundational skills in writing, reading, and mathematics, which today are often achieved through engagement in the completion of “general education” requirements at the baccalaureate level or via postsecondary education. Richard N. Rosett, former dean of the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, for example, notes that these efforts were purely vocational, “concentrating on penmanship,

bookkeeping, rapid methods of making computations, and grammatical construction and composition of mercantile correspondence” (Rosett, undated).

Spender (2016), in an attempt to provide some historical context regarding the establishment of management education, notes several key historical dates including 1727 when the first university chairs in administrative science were appointed in Germany and 1750 when similar chair appointments were made in Sweden. Shortly after 1755 the Escola de Comércio was founded as the “first purpose-built” school of commerce with the primary goal of training public administrators to manage taxes and disbursements (Spender, 2016).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries many of the foundational centers and contemporary exemplars of management and business education were established. Examples of some of the schools and institutions that emerged during this time period can be found in Table 1.

Continuing to build upon this initial growth, Hawawini (2005) noted that “since the mid-1990s, the demand for business education has surged worldwide” (p. 770). To illustrate this trend in the United States, Table 2 presents data from the 2015 Digest of Education Statistics (Snyder, De Brey, & Dillow, 2016) that report continuing growth with regard to the granting of bachelor’s- and master’s-level business degrees.

To add to this numerical summary, the Digest of Education Statistics notes the following comparisons with regard to the granting of business-related degrees versus other popular alternatives:

Of the 1,894,934 bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2014–15, the greatest numbers of degrees were conferred in the fields of business (363,799), health professions and related programs (216,228), social sciences and history (166,944), psychology (117,557), biological and biomedical sciences (109,896), and education (91,623).

Table 1. Emergence of business and management education.

Year	School/institution
1819	Founding of the École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris (ESCP Europe)
1881	The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
1898	The precursor to the Haas School of Business, the College of Commerce of the University of California
1898	University of Chicago's Booth School of Business
1902	The Birmingham Business School of the University of Birmingham
1906	The McGill School of Commerce
1906	The Warsaw School of Economics
1908	Northwestern University's School of Commerce; becomes the Kellogg School of Management
1908	Harvard Business School
1909	The Stockholm School of Economics

Table 2. Bachelor's and master's degrees awarded in the United States.

Year	Bachelor's degrees	Master's degrees
1995–1996	226,623	93,554
2003–2004	307,146	139,347
2008–2009	348,056	168,404
2014–2015	363,799	185,222

At the master's degree level, the greatest numbers of degrees were conferred in the fields of business (185,222), education (146,561), and health professions and related programs (102,897). (p. 440)

A 2008 report from the Global Foundation for Management Education casts a more global perspective on this pattern of growth by observing:

All indicators point to continuing increases in the demand for management education. Driven by demographics, economic trends, business expectations, and initiatives that expand access to higher education, future demands will come not only from traditional college-age populations, but also from working professionals who need to retool and reinvigorate their careers. (p. 46)

Based on the information contained in these sources, it appears that we should anticipate that growth in the delivery of and demand for management and business education is poised to continue, especially in the context of the global marketplace. In light of this trend, Hawawini (2005) notes that “because of the relatively low cost of entry into the business education sector, many business programs—not to mention entire business schools—have been established around the world” (p. 770). To this, the Global Foundation for Management Education (2008) adds, “Growth is, of course, a better scenario than decline or stagnation, but how do we maintain quality while continuing to grow?” (p. 46). Thus, we see that demand has created opportunity for growth and heightened concerns about program quality, relevance, and value.

Accreditation

With the rapid growth and increased interest in business education noted in the previous section, various stakeholders have expressed concern regarding the quality of emergent programs and degrees. One particular fear is the emergence of “degree mills” that “offer credentials based on little study or engagement in higher education activity” (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA]/UNESCO, 2009, p. 1), noting that

Degree mills are the result of the expanding pressure on students to obtain higher education credentials, on employers to hire individuals with such credentials and on countries to expand the knowledge base of their workforce and to meet demands for creative and innovative responses to educational needs. (p. 1)

The emergence or potential emergence of degree mills parallels Hawawini's (2005) observations, as business/management education programs (and even schools) are viewed as “easy to start, difficult to eliminate” and are seen “accompanying the growth of access and participation in higher education worldwide” (CHEA/UNESCO, 2009, p. 1). Put simply, these programs emerge as the result of education responding to demand and leveraging a perceived opportunity to capitalize on the economic side of the business of education. Therefore, the resultant concern should be about the quality of the offerings and about the avoidance of programs in which degree candidates pay tuition with an expectation of earning a degree in return for minimal to no effort (or occurrence of learning) on their part.

One potential mechanism to ensure that existent and emergent programs develop and deliver a quality product is through the use of accreditation programs. Brink and Smith (2012) note that accreditation “is one method of holding a program or institution accountable and demonstrating that the program/institution meets at least a minimum quality threshold” (p. 1). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) adds that “accreditation in higher education is a collegial process of self-review and peer review for improvement of academic quality and public accountability of institutions and programs” (2015, p. 2). To this backdrop, Zammuto (2008) adds, “Business school accreditation is a quality assurance scheme that certifies that accredited schools have the structures and processes in place necessary to meet their stated objectives and continually improve performance” (p. 260).

Thus, accrediting bodies can serve to provide a means of assuring stakeholders that both existing and emergent degrees and schools are established, developed, and maintained in agreement with prescribed processes and structures and uphold best practices in a particular field of knowledge, study, and/or practice.

To this end, business/management education has three primary accrediting bodies: the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB International), the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE). It has been observed that while each of these entities accredits business programs they generally fill that role in different niches of the broader marketplace (see, e.g., Brink & Smith, 2012; Zammuto, 2008). Additionally, these programs may supplement other regional or national accrediting bodies (e.g., in the United States there are various regional accrediting bodies such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education [MSCHE] and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACSCOC]).

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB International)

In 1916, AACSB International was founded as the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (ACSB) and its constitution was adopted on June 17 of that same year. Founding members included Harvard University, University of Chicago, Northwestern University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, New York University, Ohio State University, Tulane University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Illinois, University of Nebraska, University of Pennsylvania, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Yale University (AACSB International, undated). All of these original founding members continue their membership to this day.

A central foundational tenet of the AACSB International was to ensure the “improvement of collegiate education for business” (Flesher, 2007, p. 10) through the development of standards and the accreditation of business schools offering bachelor and graduate degrees. In 1919, the minimum accreditation standards for schools seeking membership were approved (AACSB International, undated). By 1925, ACSB changed its name to the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and developed new standards for admission to the association (AACSB International, undated).

At that same time, an outline for a set of subjects expected to be covered in business programs emerged. The prescribed subjects included accounting, statistics, business law, finance, and marketing (Flesher, 2007). AACSB later expanded the list to include economics and production or industrial management in 1949 and introduced several additional subjects over the next 30 years (i.e., international, behavioral management,

ethics, management information systems, computer science). For many years, the subjects just listed served to guide the curricula of both undergraduate and graduate business programs. In 1991, AACSB developed a set of curriculum standards for master’s in business administration (MBA) programs (Herrington, 2010). Standards for accounting programs were approved in 1980 (AACSB International, undated).

Today AACSB International accreditation is known worldwide as the longest standing, most recognized form of specialized/professional accreditation an educational institution and its related business programs can earn. AACSB International accreditation is viewed as a benefit to accredited schools, as it is seen as a major recognition that adds to an institution’s and program’s stature and differentiates it from non-accredited programs (Trapnell, 2007), improves the “brand” of programs and/or schools, which in turn aids in the recruitment of talented students and the attraction of qualified prospective faculty (Hunt, 2015; Trapnell, 2007), forces schools and programs to plan and manage their resources (human, financial, and physical) in the pursuit and fulfillment of programmatic missions and objectives (Hunt, 2015; Trapnell, 2007), can provide students with greater educational resources (Trapnell, 2007), and can assist students with employment opportunities and provide prospective employers a signal of the quality of education a graduate has received as a result of completing her/his studies at an accredited institution (Hunt, 2015; Trapnell, 2007).

While the aforementioned benefits may result from the attainment of AACSB International accreditation, Heriot, Austin, and Franklin (2009) note that schools “seeking initial accreditation may need to change programs, curricula, staffing, administration, and facilities, any of which may entail significant costs” (p. 283). Thus, while significant latitude is given to accredited organizations and those pursuing AACSB International accreditation, it is important that members and non-members understand that the process of maintaining and obtaining “accreditation is a major undertaking. It takes time, diverts a lot of administrative and faculty time from other activities, is fraught with uncertainty, and takes money” (Roberts, Johnson, & Groesbeck, 2004, p. 111).

The articles in this special issue examine several challenges and issues that AACSB International accreditation presents and propose some suggestions for addressing these challenges and issues. While the articles likely will not provide off-the-shelf solutions to the issues they examine, they can serve as launching points for further analysis and discussion, with the goal of providing a collegial environment in which to explore, share, and

even debate the means and approaches to assuring a quality management/business education and pursuit of continual programmatic improvement.

The four articles in this issue

In the opening article of this special issue, Charles J. Fornaciari and J. B. Arbaugh examine several challenges of working at a non-elite AACSB-accredited institution in light of their observation that the AACSB International literature and ideology is geared toward the experiences of the academic elites of its membership. In particular, the authors express concern regarding the potential impact of this perceived reality on defining, measuring, and ensuring student success at non-elite institutions and question if the experience and reality of non-elites is aligned with those of the elite institutions. Fornaciari and Arbaugh believe the challenges and implications of the differences between elite and non-elite schools deserve more attention, particularly when those differences might impact outcomes such as how we understand and measure student success and related outcomes.

The second article, authored by Amy Foshee Holmes, Michael Wilkins, and Shage Zhang, describes the process undertaken by one university toward the collection of information related to faculty engagement, innovation, and impact. Information on faculty engagement facilitates the production of self-evaluation reports (SERs) and continuous improvement review reports (CIRRs). To aid in understanding the process, the authors have included a sample document, populated with hypothetical data and experiences, for the purpose of assisting accreditation directors, associate deans, and deans across a wide range of universities to prepare initial accreditation or maintenance of accreditation documents under the 2013 AACSB standards.

AACSB International requires students to demonstrate a commitment to understand, engage, and respond to current and emerging corporate social responsibility issues, including diversity and the globalization of economic activity across cultures. The third paper, authored by Kathleen J. Barnes, George E. Smith, and Olivia Hernández-Pozas, explores the nuances and challenges of teaching students about cultural diversity in an environment supportive of multiple cultures (e.g., national, regional, local, corporate, etc.). They also present a framework to assess and develop cultural intelligence; their framework includes a cultural intelligence pre-assessment with feedback, cultural intelligence transformation activities, and a cultural intelligence post-assessment with feedback.

The final article in this special issue, “A Focus on Engagement: Defining, Measuring, and Nurturing a Key Pillar of AACSB Standards,” written by Isabelle Dostaler, Melanie A. Robinson, and Thomas J. Tomberlin, discusses the assessment of student learning (AOL) and student engagement within AACSB International-accredited programs. As noted by the authors, one of the primary goals of performing assessment is to “close the loop” or to evaluate the learning that is occurring and develop means to enhance future student learning and instructional practices.

The authors suggest the facilitation of student engagement as a means for improving student learning. One of the initial challenges faced in developing this article was to define “engagement.” While noting that the term appears in most of AACSB International’s 15 standards, the authors realized that the term lacked a clear definition and turned to the literature on student engagement, an effort that resulted in the development of a framework for studying student engagement. Clearly, one key “take-away” of this article is the recognition that institutions need to develop a clear statement and understanding of AACSB terminology and language. Through the effort of these authors, we are again reminded of the complexity institutions face when aligning the requirements for accreditation as adopted by AACSB International with the practices and policies of our respective institutions.

Conclusion

Several observations resulted from the review of submissions for this special issue and are reflected in the published articles. First, it became apparent that there is not only a need to understand the 2013 AACSB standards, but also a need to consider and reflect upon the connection between the standards and the development and sustainability of quality business programs. General knowledge alone of a standard or standards is not sufficient, since institutions vary greatly in terms of mission, resources, and even prestige. As a result, institutions need to recognize that a key outcome of the accreditation process is for schools and programs to gain an understanding of who they are and what they are capable of delivering—while remaining in harmony with the accreditation standards.

Second, it became apparent that lessons can be learned from sharing accreditation experiences, policies, and practices. Each submission had a tale to tell and a contribution that could be made. While AACSB International does use mentors in the accreditation process, there is still more that can be done to develop a supportive and vibrant network for those pursuing initial accreditation and those reaffirming their accreditation. It is through special issues such as

this that we begin to tap into beneficial experiences and collective wisdom. There remains much to be learned from the sharing and disseminating of these ideas and experiences.

Finally, there is a need to continue to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with AACSB International accreditation and the accreditation process. If we return to the initial observation, there are many different shapes and sizes of accredited and non-accredited organizations. These differences likely create a variety of trade-offs. Some institutions have great wealth or prestige or location, while other institutions are of less renown, located in less desirable locales or perhaps hamstrung by the mechanisms that fund them. These challenges are likely to continue to exist as we move forward. As a community we need to explore these challenges and embrace the opportunities that present themselves. One such opportunity, for example, may be to extol the benefits of accreditation to those stakeholders who are seeking quality educational opportunities but may also be concerned about the return on their educational investment.

When taken together, the articles in this issue and this introduction begin to scratch the surface of many of these issues and in some cases raise compelling questions and concerns. The reality is, there are benefits, costs, and trade-offs that will need to be considered and made in the pursuit and reaffirmation of accreditation. The good news is that there is a wealth of knowledge available to be tapped into as we weigh the costs and benefits and make related commitments and decisions.

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