

A Thought on the Upcoming Middle States Conference

By Don Sutherland

As Amtrak's Northeast Regional speeds toward the nation's capital, site of this year's Middle States Annual Conference, the landscape is sometimes a blur and always changing. One minute, one sees busy scenes complete with people, cars, and buildings. Another, expansive farms now silent and still as winter takes hold. Yet another, running streams with a seemingly endless supply of water in seemingly ceaseless motion. Nothing is ever the same.

Perhaps that view is a good way of describing the Higher Education landscape. Things have changed greatly in even a few years. Even the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (MSCHE's) fourteen standards—perhaps once viewed as eternal and everlasting keys to accreditation—have now been replaced by a set of seven new standards. In this year's Periodic Review Report cycle, Standard 3 (Institutional Resources) was the second most cited standard when it came to follow-up reports, a distinction that had previously been held exclusively by Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment) and Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning). On campuses everywhere, technology and teaching have become ever more intertwined.

Change is everywhere and it is occurring all the time. Moreover, it is sometimes occurring at a dizzying pace.

With this theme in mind, perhaps it is fitting that the opening plenary session at the Conference concerns the changes affecting Higher Education and their implications for accreditation. Francisco Marmolejo, Tertiary Education Coordinator and Lead Tertiary Education Specialist at the World Bank, will launch the conference with a presentation entitled "Issues and Trends in Global Higher Education: Implications for Accreditation."

The "global" focus is not accidental nor is it unrelated to the MSCHE region. Courtesy of the rapid fall in trade and travel barriers and explosive growth in information flows has transformed the academic enterprise into a global one. Graduating students' lives and opportunities are shaped by economic and geopolitical events and trends that occur all across the world. Whether one is dealing with the shifting balance of power in East Asia, financial and macroeconomic events in Europe, or rapid economic development in parts of South and East Asia and Latin America, one's life will be impacted directly or indirectly by those developments. Today, international students from all parts of the world are a regular and welcome presence on campuses. Some may remain in the United States after graduation and then build on the successes and achievements of earlier generations. Others may return to their home countries, bringing with them ideas and experiences that will contribute to the destiny of those nations. Colleges and universities increasingly collaborate—in programs, research, and other activities—with a growing range of global partners.

Where does accreditation fit in this dynamic, global context? That question will be among the issues Mr. Marmolejo discusses.

Later, the Conference will take on a host of issues related to accreditation, assessment, and continual improvement. Early details on MSCHE's new standards will also be provided. All in all, the Conference has the potential to be an informative and perhaps pivotal one.