

# Who We Aspire to Be

## *Transformation Through Accreditation*

BY JUDITH SHERIDAN

Driven in part by economic realities and changing demographics, the beginning of the 21st century may well be characterized as a period of tumultuous and prolific change in independent schools, equivalent to or greater than that at the start of the 20th century, which brought the reforms of the progressive era.

Many of the challenges of our time are financial. The tuition for independent schools has grown disproportionately to incomes. Financial aid budgets have increased as a result of the commitment of schools to student diversity, reflecting the demographics of the greater school communities and the reality that children from traditional independent school families no longer guarantee full pay and full enrollment.

Linked to the financial questions are questions of identity. The question, “What is a school?” has become commonplace today, as has the language of “disruptive innovation.” Brick-and-mortar classrooms and libraries are increasingly viewed as old school. Instead, there are new schools without walls, online and blended-learning programs offering synchronous and asynchronous teaching, and information and media centers that give students more agency in their own learning. With tablets in hand, many students independently complete their academic work, no longer depending on a teacher in front of the classroom or even beside them in a learning circle.

Schools are also becoming far more globally minded. Day schools that once relied on students in close geographic proximity are now recruiting international students and housing them in homestays or acquiring buildings and initiating boarding programs. Established schools with storied histories are considering expansion in a very different way from the past. Their strategic initiatives include campuses abroad — mainly in China and South Korea — or multiple campuses in adjacent states.

Notable, too, is the emergence of for-profit schools. Many are international schools with more than one campus or schools employing new technologies in innovative ways. These are funded by private equity banks and high-tech investors and compete for students aggressively with slick marketing strategies. Competition and diminishing student admission pools have led to speculation

that many independent schools, day and boarding, may soon go the way of Blockbuster video rental stores.

In the face of these trends, from where I sit as one of two people charged with organizing the accreditation process for the New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYS AIS), accreditation has become even more important than in the past. Why? Because, when understood, accreditation inspires confidence that independent schools, as varied as they are, remain a true “value proposition.” Furthermore, for the schools themselves, the accreditation *process* is critical in understanding not just who they are, but where they are going. In other words, the process helps schools not only to survive, but also to lead the way in transforming education for our changing times.

### Cautionary Lessons from Higher Education

The skepticism surrounding accreditation in the world of higher education provides a cautionary tale for independent schools in understanding the need for a meaningful and robust accreditation process.

In brief, the regional higher education accreditation associations, a number of which accredit independent schools as well, have been characterized by leaders of higher education in community colleges and elite universities, as well as by critics of for-profit colleges, as too lax in applying standards of excellence and in accrediting colleges and universities that, in reality, do not prepare students sufficiently to secure for them a stable future. The associations are also being held responsible for enabling higher tuition and higher student debt. At the same time, the associations are viewed by political figures from both the right and the left as obstacles to lower-cost higher educational alternatives focused on preparing students for the job market. The *Wall Street Journal*, in reporting Marco Rubio’s attack on these associations, called them a “cartel” that “stifles innovation.”

Without confidence in an objec-

tive and meaningful process for the accreditation of higher education, the question of how to assess the value of a collegiate education has led to widely differing perspectives on what matters most, no doubt confusing families and students. President Obama has even gotten involved, suggesting that the rating of schools be based on “who’s offering the best value so students and taxpayers get a bigger bang for their buck.” For many families, that means that the worth of education is calculated as the return on investment and is understood in terms of future earnings.

An alternative view expressed in a recent article in the *New York Times*, by David Breneman, a professor of economics at the University of Virginia who has written widely and over time on the subject of liberal arts education, defends a liberal arts education and decries “turning college into a trade school.” Moreover he argues that a liberal arts education prepares students “for citizenship, for enlightened leadership” and enhanced creativity. He concludes, “If we lose an educated populace, we’re open for demagoguery.”

To avoid the morass of uncertainty surrounding the evaluation of the merits of the institutions of higher education and the related claim that the process is an inhibitor to innovation, exploiting the practice and promise of the accreditation process as it applies to independent schools is critical. I would argue that, without the accreditation process, many independent schools risk hastening toward obsolescence. With the process, schools are positioned to effectively evaluate their current circumstances and strategically plan for a healthy future.

### Practice and Promise of Accreditation

The essence of the accreditation process is the school’s self-study, which takes more than a full year to complete and begins with the revisiting of the school’s mission and core values to determine their currency. This first step is a significant opportunity for transformative thinking.

Recognizing that the future of a school relies on the application of the most rigorous standards in governance and finance, the process moves to self-reflection that addresses the viability of the institution by examining the practices in these areas. Five years ago, NYS AIS strengthened the reporting in these areas and now requires thorough and complete reports both for its 10-year full accreditation process and the progress report that follows five years later. Entrusted with providing a strategic vision or plan, the school’s governing body must demonstrate that trustees understand their roles and responsibilities, embrace the mission and values of the school, function ethically without conflict of interest, and are fully informed about the school’s financial documents — audits, management letter, projections, and data collection — so that they can ensure adequate financial resources are provided and goals are being met. The practice of clearly articulated and transparent governance is a key indicator that a school is functioning well.

The analysis of financial documents is a crucial section of the self-study. The visiting committee of peers almost always consists of both a head of school and a financial officer. Both review the documents and respond to the analysis. The capacity of schools to provide meaningful interpretation based on data collection has been dramatically improved by the NAIS data service, Data and Analysis for School Leadership (DASL), which replaced StatsOnline. Accompanying the self-study are required data sheets designed to support a school’s analysis.

The completion of DASL data questions allows a school to go beyond the requirements of accreditation to benchmark and compare itself with peer schools in its region, and nationally (if the school is a member of NAIS). As Russ Friedson points out in a recent *Independent School* magazine blog, benchmarking and comparing budgetary drivers such as tuition, financial aid, and faculty compensation along with enrollment, annual giving, and draw on endowment, provide

“a more in-depth understanding of the marketplace... enhancing a school’s ability to make better decisions about its competitive positioning....”

Additionally, data collection in DASL provides valuable detail extending to demographical information about the race/ethnicity and gender of students and faculty enrolled and retained, as well as such matters as class size. The self-study requires reporting this information over a period of years. This data tests assumptions a school may have relating to the fulfillment of its mission and core beliefs. The examination of data and what is revealed in terms of trends and comparisons present the facts that are often the imperative and impetus for change and the basis for transformative strategic planning.

The teaching and learning environment (the educational program) is the heart and soul of a school, and the place where the mission is most fully realized and where strategic initiatives make their most meaningful impact. In the course of the self-study, the necessity for transformative thinking is influenced by answers to questions regarding a number of formative issues. Among these are the degree to which the program is informed by researched best practices and emerging trends (*i.e.*, online and hybrid learning, global fluency, and brain research); the school’s commitment to the faculty and administration’s professional learning; the extent to which the educational program develops the skills students need to succeed in the coming decades of the 21st century; the adequacy of resources such as new technologies; the commitment to a classroom environment that has a diverse community of learners; and a belief in a curriculum that encourages civic responsibility that fosters global learning, equity and justice, and environmental sustainability. Challenged to respond to such queries, the school community examines the program from the viewpoint of “what is” to “what could be” and, significantly, to “what it aspires to be.”

Unless the opportunity is squan-

dered, the accreditation process for schools leads to a serious consideration of what constitutes the current understandings and possibilities in educational programming and related teaching and learning. Supported by data gathering in strategic areas, it also reveals the school’s financial well-being and position in the marketplace. The most desirable outcome is that the response of the visiting committee of peers verifies the accuracy of the school’s self-assessment and lends credibility and authenticity to the process and its conclusion. In all cases, commendations and recommendations are stated that support the school’s initiatives and the goal of school improvement. These provide incentives and reinforcement for change. In very few instances schools are denied accreditation. Not infrequently, however, schools are given stipulations to be met during a shortened time frame if accreditation is to be continued and asked for progress reports in meeting the stipulated requirements. Such stipulations compel change.

### Accreditation and Aspiration

The burden of responsibility to efficiently and meaningfully accredit schools in these changing times is not lost on the associations. The 32 member associations of the NAIS Commission on Accreditation have developed its own self-study process for the purpose of quality assurance and improvement, which broadly replicates the accreditation process itself. Without NAIS prompting, many associations have examined and transformed their process in order to place greater demands on schools in the writing of the self-study. Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, associations have moved in the direction of fewer standards (criteria) and fewer, more probing questions to achieve deeper analysis, which has resulted in a more demanding and challenging self-study process.

While too often the response by members of a school community to accreditation is dread or eye-rolling,

accompanied by the vision of a committee of scribes like Melville’s *Bartleby* working in a back room with a long checklist, the reality is that the accreditation process demands that the school community explain its choices with intentionality, as well as verify its results.

When understood, the process inspires confidence in the value and relevance of independent schooling in the wider community of families considering schooling for their children. Because independent schools have the ability to be agile in responding to the imperatives of school improvement, the result of the process is greater purpose driven by of the mission of the school, accompanied by the advancement of effective governance. Clarity emerges concerning the realities of the school’s finances and the school’s place in the market and among peer institutions. The thorough and inclusive review of the educational program, which considers the school’s educational philosophy and pedagogy as well as emerging trends, often culminates in aspirational goals that lead to new ways to provide a richer education for students, such as online learning and global outreach.

The amalgam of considerations and evaluations, which define the accreditation process, becomes a force that leads to change, at times to “disruption,” and often to innovative, strategic initiatives that better educate our children and prepare them for a dynamic future.

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## **Emerging Trends in Independent Schools**

The accreditation process not only guides schools in clarifying who they are and what they do, but it also reveals shifts in thinking about the work of schools. The following are among the emerging trends in independent education:

- Changing demographics in the independent school community
- Online and/or blended-learning programs and practices
- “Schools without walls” initiatives
- Information and media centers replacing libraries
- Customized educational programs delivered through technology
- Increased attention to the emotional well-being of students
- Global outreach leading to both day and boarding school recruitment of international students
- Satellite campuses established overseas, especially in China and South Korea
- Multi-campus established in adjacent states
- For-profit schools with international networks