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Breaking the Cycle: Building Accreditation Resilience in Public Higher Education

By
Angelina "Angie" Hines, University of Maryland Global Campus

Higher education institutions in the United States face growing scrutiny from regulators and accreditors, even as they grapple with internal challenges that undermine their operational stability. This research was motivated by an observed disconnect — while accreditation is treated as a high-stakes outcome, its supporting infrastructure— people, systems, and organizational memory—is often neglected. A state-level public university system comprising multiple campuses, research institutions, and regional centers under centralized administrative oversight served as a bounded case to explore how operational instability, namely, workforce turnover, outdated infrastructure, and knowledge loss—interacts to disrupt accreditation readiness.

How universities can break the cycle of internal disruption to sustain accreditation readiness

This study asked: How do these internal stressors collectively affect an institution's ability to maintain accreditation? And what can be done to mitigate these effects in a sustainable way?

To answer these questions, a hybrid systematic-qualitative approach was employed. A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was conducted using PRISMA protocols to filter high-quality literature. Thematic analysis was applied to 12 peer-reviewed studies (Bagley, 2023; Dickson & Taylor, 2021; Duncan et al., 2024; Emory et al., 2017; Essa, 2024; Koser, 2017; Malcom et al., 2020; Maxey & Kezar, n.d.; McNaughtan et al., 2022, 2023; Pascoe et al., 2021a; Pascoe et al., 2021b; Rajab & Eydgahi, 2019), yielding 397 coded data excerpts. These findings were interpreted through the lens of Dynamic Capabilities (Teece, et al., 1997) and Institutional Resilience (Eaton, 2021), providing a practical framework for understanding how institutions can adapt under pressure. The result is a grounded, practitioner-focused analysis of how strategic planning, leadership development, and digital modernization intersect to influence accreditation outcomes.

Findings

This study found that workforce turnover, outdated infrastructure, and institutional memory erosion do not operate in isolation, but interact as interdependent forces that converge to amplify one another's effects, where turnover disrupts knowledge retention, outdated systems hinder continuity, and leadership instability erodes organizational memory. Together, they form a self-reinforcing cycle that destabilizes institutional infrastructure and weakens accreditation readiness.

The thematic analysis revealed leadership instability, governance rigidity, outdated systems, and knowledge loss do not operate in isolation but instead form an interdependent cycle that undermines accreditation readiness. Frequent leadership turnover disrupts the consistent application of accreditation standards and delays reporting processes. When senior personnel exit, they often take tacit knowledge with them, leaving remaining staff overburdened and critical compliance efforts stalled (Emory et al., 2017). Compounding this instability, outdated

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governance frameworks alienate faculty and staff, diminishing morale and increasing attrition. These dynamics reduce institutional capacity to sustain long-term engagement with accreditation requirements (Dickson & Taylor, 2021; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Systemic resistance to change, often reinforced by legacy leadership, further exacerbates institutional inertia. Leaders who once offered continuity now frequently delay needed reform, discouraging innovation and adaptability (Malcom et al., 2020; McNaughtan et al., 2022). This resistance is mirrored in faculty disengagement, where low morale and limited participation in governance weaken critical feedback loops that support continuous improvement (McNaughtan et al., 2022).

Finally, infrastructural deficits and knowledge loss pose serious operational risks. Legacy IT systems hinder audit readiness by restricting access to real-time data, impairing documentation workflows, and increasing the likelihood of missed deadlines (Rajab & Eydgahi, 2019). Without structured knowledge retention mechanisms, vital accreditation-related information is lost when experienced staff leave, leading to duplication of effort, recurring errors, and a breakdown in institutional memory (Feiz et al., 2019). Together, these interlocking factors destabilize institutional resilience and elevate the risk of accreditation failure.

Implications

The implications of this study center on three critical domains: leadership, systems, and culture.

Leadership

Institutions must prioritize proactive resilience by cultivating leaders who are not only compliance-aware but change-capable. Term limits, structured succession planning, and leadership mentoring programs can help break cycles of inertia while ensuring institutional agility. Leadership development should emphasize the ability to sense risk, seize opportunities, and reallocate resources strategically- core tenets of dynamic capabilities theory.

Systems

Sustainable accreditation readiness depends on operational continuity, integrated data infrastructure, and institutional knowledge retention. Modernizing IT systems to support real-time monitoring and centralized documentation enables faster response to compliance requirements and reduces fragmentation across departments or campuses. Institutions should also embed accreditation into their long-term strategic plans to ensure it is not treated as a periodic task, but as a constant organizational priority. Shared compliance platforms and digital knowledge repositories are especially critical in multi-campus systems.

Culture

Institutions must confront resistance to change and foster deeper engagement among faculty and staff. Legacy governance models and disengaged workplace environments often create barriers to reform. Building a culture of trust, autonomy, and shared responsibility can enhance staff retention and strengthen the institutional memory needed for consistent accreditation performance. Inaction in this context is itself a risk: delayed or half-hearted reforms increase the likelihood of compliance failures and long-term instability. Institutions must therefore treat accreditation not just as a technical process, but as a reflection of organizational health.

Limitations

This study's reliance on secondary data and a single, centralized university system may limit the generalizability of findings, particularly for institutions operating under decentralized governance models. Although the Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) approach enhanced efficiency and methodological rigor, it excluded gray literature and practitioner perspectives that could have added valuable contextual insight. Additionally, independent coding and appraisal by a single researcher may introduce interpretive bias. Future research could strengthen this foundation by employing mixed methods, incorporating practitioner narratives, and examining a broader range of institutional contexts to enhance both applicability and real-world relevance. Despite these limitations, the findings yield meaningful insights for similarly structured public higher education systems.

Conclusions

Accreditation readiness reflects more than regulatory compliance—it is an indicator of organizational stability, leadership continuity, and information integrity. This study concludes that unless institutions take strategic steps to interrupt the self-reinforcing cycles of operational disruption, they will remain at risk of regulatory penalties, delayed approvals, and reputational damage.

To strengthen resilience, institutions should:

- Implement structured succession plans;

- Modernize IT systems for real-time compliance monitoring;
- Centralize and maintain digital knowledge repositories;
- Promote staff engagement and retention through autonomy and leadership trust;
- Embed accreditation into long-term strategy and resource planning.

By viewing accreditation as an organizational capability- anchored in leadership continuity, resilient infrastructure, and retained knowledge- rather than a periodic hurdle, institutional leaders can shift from reactive compliance to proactive sustainability.

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Where to Find Out More

This research, conducted independently as part of a doctoral program at the University of Maryland Global Campus, examines how workforce turnover, outdated infrastructure, and institutional memory erosion interact to undermine accreditation readiness in U.S. higher education. For access to the full study, to include supplemental materials (coding outputs, frameworks and theoretical frameworks) contact the author, Angie Hines, MBA, at ahines15@student.umgc.edu.

Review

This article was accepted under the ***constructive peer review*** option. For futher details, see the descriptions at:

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Author

Angelina "Angie" Hines, MBA, is an accomplished academic administrator and doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland Global Campus, where she is pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, she currently serves as Director of Academic Administration at the University of Maryland School of Nursing. Hines specializes in accreditation strategy, institutional resilience, regulatory compliance, and cross-functional project management. Her work bridges strategic planning and operational innovation, and she has led multiple initiatives to modernize academic infrastructure, enhance knowledge retention, and align compliance efforts across complex university systems. She holds certifications in Project Management, Human Resource Management, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace, and Mental Health First Aid. Hines is passionate about advancing sustainable accreditation practices and operational innovation in public higher education.