The Question of Youth Program Accreditation

Kate Walker, Ph.D., Research Associate, Extension Center for Youth Development
June 2012

A Minnesota funder of youth programs posed this question: Should Minnesota funders require accreditation of out-of-school programs to ensure implementation of high quality learning opportunities? While accreditation systems to endorse afterschool programs exist at the state and national levels, currently there is no widespread consensus in support of youth program accreditation in Minnesota. To explore the implications of youth program accreditation, Greater Twin Cities United Way, the Minnesota Department of Education, and the Extension Center for Youth Development sponsored three invitational forums with a cross-section of field leaders and requested that the Extension Center for Youth Development prepare this issue brief on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

This issue brief aims to build common understanding in Minnesota about accreditation as one approach for a system of accountability useful to the field, funders and policy makers to inform ongoing conversations about investments. It also serves to capture and document multiple perspectives and ideas from the field about accreditation issues and approaches. It reflects both a broad reading of the literature and the ideas discussed at the forums. While there are many stakeholders involved, the primary audience for this issue brief is funders and policy makers.

It is important to recognize the broader context for the forum series and resulting paper—why this conversation, and why now? First, accreditation systems exist in early childhood education, school-aged care programs and formal education to guide investments and provide a common framework for improvement. As these systems are being widely implemented in Minnesota, it would seem reasonable that funders, policy-makers and even the public might expect a similar process in the out-of-school time field. Second, youth program accreditation efforts and conversations are underway nationally and a proactive Minnesota-based conversation could inform how that plays out and ensure that any movement toward accreditation in Minnesota strengthens the field. Finally, given the public funds that support many youth programs, could accreditation help funders and policy makers better define quality out-of-school time opportunities and provide additional justification for increased investments?

For purposes of this paper, the term *youth programs* is used to represent nonformal learning opportunities in out-of-school time. The intent is to use language consistent with an earlier paper (Walker, Gran and Moore, 2009), and to include the rich variety and diversity of learning opportunities that go by various names such as afterschool, youth development, extended learning, complementary learning, school enrichment and community-based youth programs. While there is already some agreement about standards and accreditation processes for early childhood education and school-aged care programs, this conversation targets voluntary participation in programs by young people in their second decade of life.

The next section explores the concept of accreditation, including its history and core components. Then, within the complex arena of youth programs, the value and risks of youth program accreditation as well as stakeholder perspectives are presented. Finally, the paper ends with guiding principles and important questions to address if some version of youth program accreditation in Minnesota is considered.

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation is one possible system response to stimulate accountability, quality and continuous improvement. It is designed to provide quality assurances to stakeholders. It is a public statement that a certain threshold of program quality has been achieved.

The literature describes a variety of different values or goals that serve as driving forces behind any given accreditation system. A primary purpose is to assess and improve program quality. Similar to program evaluation, accreditation typically focuses on judging program quality, and relatedly, encouraging continuous improvement. The process forces a critical external review and heightens awareness of problems and ways these problems can be countered (Walker and Johnson, 2009).

The feature of accreditation that distinguishes it from other strategies to promote and assure quality (like program evaluation, for example) is the consensus implied in shared criteria, a standard process and common tools. Thus accreditation is different from individual programs and organizations electing their own approach for generating evidence to determine their quality.

Because discussions of accreditation are so often full of assumptions and contradiction, there is no easy conclusion about whether it is a beneficial or constraining force in a field. Consider this observation:

> The term *accreditation* is commonly used to mean that certain accepted standards have been satisfactorily met, as judged by some group of competent experts. The purpose of setting standards, conducting evaluations, and making judgments is to determine where acceptable levels of quality are to be found. Yet, at best, quality is an elusive concept; and accreditation, even in this most general form, has never claimed that lack of accreditation signified lack of acceptable quality. The human genius for doing things well cannot be walled in by some predetermined bounds (Young and Chambers, 1980, p. 89).

Accreditation is not a guarantee of quality. It is also not a certification of program staff. Program standards "focus on what programs need to do to provide effective services, while competencies focus explicitly on what staff need to know and do" (Starr, Yohalem and Gannett, 2009). Accreditation involves institutions whereas credentialing involves individuals.

While there is some resistance to the concept of program accreditation in Minnesota, there is general support for the related concepts of evaluating programs, assuring program accountability, assessing and improving quality, and maintaining high program standards. As one forum participant commented, "We buy into the notion but not the term 'accreditation'. Can we rethink the label?"

History

Historically, systems of accountability are most commonly run by governmental agencies. In other countries, the responsibility and authority for establishing standards and enforcing institutional and program quality reside with centralized ministries or government agencies acting on behalf of the public. In the United States, federal and state governments and agencies likewise play important roles in determining the standards, requirements and outcomes expected for institutions and programs funded with public resources.

The development of nongovernmental accreditation of institutions and programs is a uniquely American enterprise. The first nongovernmental accrediting activities in America began in 1906 in the field of medicine. By the late 1920s accreditation by private and non-profit systems was commonly associated with places responsible for professional education for lawyers, librarians, architects and other professional fields. Schools were accredited to teach potential practitioners, and licensure to practice required completion of an accredited program of study. Over time accrediting authority has been assumed by professional associations, private businesses, nonprofit organizations and quasi-governmental institutions.

Programs, institutions and schools are free to function with or without accreditation in our free enterprise system. But in reality, there can be strong social and political pressures to encourage participation once an accreditation system has been established. For example, in higher education accreditation has transitioned from voluntary to increasingly mandatory (Lubinescu, Ratcliff and Gaffney, 2001). In many arenas, accreditation has become generally accepted as a public seal of approval (Young and Chambers, 1980).

Core Components

A review of existing youth program accreditation systems identified several core components (Figure 1). A set of *shared criteria* or standards is the foundation for an accreditation system. For youth programs, these practice standards represent effective practices for working with youth (e.g., relationships, safety, health and nutrition, environment, programming and activities, supporting and inspiring learning). Some systems like the Council on Accreditation (COA) also include administrative standards (e.g.,

financial management, risk prevention and management, and ethical practices) and human resources management (e.g., recruitment and selection, training and professional development, support, and supervision). Typically accreditation is an externally guided quality review process that consists of a self-study process that highlights a program's strengths and weaknesses and results in a quality improvement plan.

Figure 1. Core Components of an Accreditation System
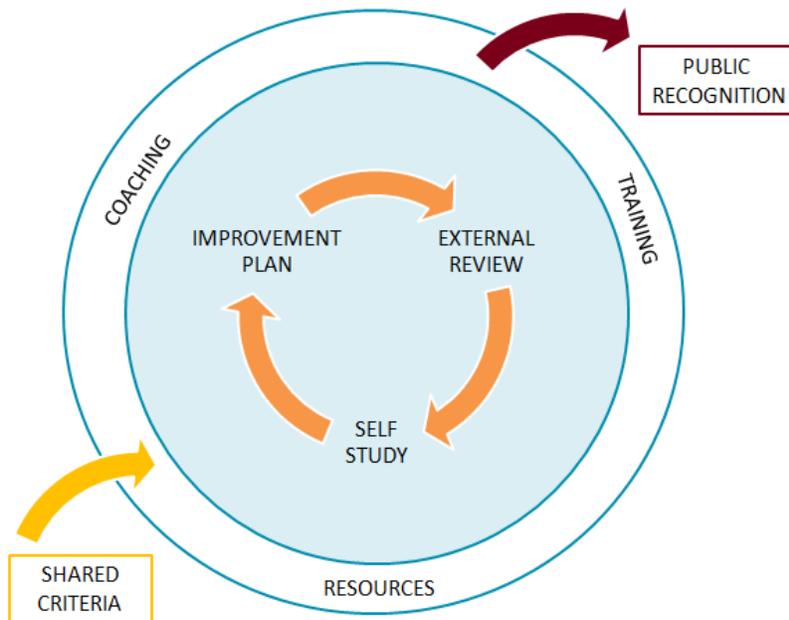
The *self-study* process involves using an assessment tool to rate performance on the shared criteria. Some systems have an online tool; others offer a menu of tools to choose from. Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom (2009) created a useful guide to assessment tools such as the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), the School-Age Care Environmental Rating Scale (SACERS), the Assessing Afterschool Program Practice Tool (APT) and the Program Observation Tool (POT). It should be noted that many assessment tools were created and exist independent of any particular accreditation system.

The *improvement plan* is typically an action plan or a summary report containing a complete set of ratings for all standards as well as program strengths and opportunities for improvement. This is followed by an *external review*, typically a site visit by a trained peer or endorser.

This entire process is supported by *coaching*, *training* and other *resources* (e.g., worksheets, checklists, tip sheets). These components are particularly important if the goal is to improve quality not simply judge it.

Final accreditation typically results in a *public recognition* in the form of a notification letter, plaque, report and sample press release. The accrediting entity gives oversight to the process and endorses the results.

THE COMPLEX UNIVERSE OF YOUTH PROGRAMS

The complex nature of youth programs is both a virtue and a challenge. A strength of youth programs is the rich variety of ways they engage young people. Youth program participants are involved in a host of different types of learning opportunities: from arts and media to science and technology, from sports and recreation to tutoring and mentoring, from service learning and civic action to college and career preparation.

These youth programs take place across rural, suburban and urban communities, are led by paid staff and volunteers, housed within large and small organizations, and funded by a diverse mix of public funds, private and corporate grants, donations and fees. Youth programs sometimes serve youth from a particular ethnic group, or are gender specific.

A hallmark of youth programs is hands-on, project-based learning where young people work together to build a robot, run a bike repair shop, lead a campaign, restore a wildlife habitat or create a community mural. Within these programs, young people are learning "21st century skills" like communication, critical thinking and initiative that are linked with academic measures (Durlak and Weissberg, 2007).

Applying accreditation—a shared criteria, common assessment tools—to the vast universe of youth programs is a challenge. It is also one reason some people believe accreditation could serve to unite the field.

Both the literature review and the forums surfaced a range of potential benefits and limitations associated with youth program accreditation as well as different stakeholder perspectives. Often these values and risks represent two sides of the same coin (Table 1).

Table 1. The Value and Risks of Program Accreditation	
VALUE OF PROGRAM ACCREDITATION	**RISKS OF PROGRAM ACCREDITATION**
Program accreditation provides standards and indicators for quality.	There is no evidence that accreditation leads to higher quality programs.
The primary purpose of accreditation is a quality improvement process not the results.	The results of accreditation can be misused for other purposes.
Accreditation systems are set up to safeguard the public interest.	Accreditation systems are set up to serve a gatekeeping function.
The process provides staff with tools to assess, reflect on and improve their programs.	The process can be burdensome and shifts the focus from youth work to paperwork.
Accreditation provides a unifying framework for disparate youth programs.	Standardization inhibits innovation and rewards mediocrity.
Accreditation involves a neutral set of procedures to gather evidence.	Accreditation is neither neutral nor apolitical.

Value of Youth Program Accreditation

Youth program accreditation can contribute by providing one or more of the following:

1) A set of tools to inform program planning, implementation and evaluation. Program staff are looking for tools (e.g., measures, resources, trainings) to help them assess, reflect on and improve their programs.

2) An aid or shortcut for funding and policy decisions. Accreditation systems are sometimes set up to safeguard public interest and investment. At the policy level, decision-makers want to ensure that resources are allocated to programs most likely to have an impact. Funders are also "allocating resources for capacity building purposes and, in some cases, specifically helping to seed the development of data-driven continuous improvement systems" (Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010, p. 355).

3) A guide for youth and families to make informed choices. Accreditation could act as a common, transparent documentation of key elements for potential users. This is important because over half of Minnesota parents (55%) report that they struggle at least occasionally to find things for their youth to do when they are not in school (Lochner, Allen and Blyth, 2009).

4) A way to market and promote youth programs. Accreditation can serve as a marketing device and be attractive to clients. For child care programs it appears accreditation helps enable programs to promote and sell their offerings to consumers as well create public value for the field of early childhood. The seal of accreditation can increase brand recognition and consumer interest (Urgel, 2007).

5) A unifying framework and common language for the rich variety of youth programs. The accreditation process has been found to motivate the development and documentation of policies and procedures, enabling greater consistency in the standard of what is provided (Walker and Johnson, 2009).

6) An opportunity to highlight the strengths and commitments of the larger organization as a way to capture elements of quality beyond point of service. Recognizing that program quality is impacted by administrative practices and operations at the organizational level like human resource management and financial management provides a framework useful for organization-wide implementation.

Risks of Youth Program Accreditation

Without a clear sense of purpose, accreditation risks becoming an end in itself. Depending on the goal, accreditation may or may not be the most appropriate strategy. Is an accreditation system created to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the public, to serve as an assurance that funders' investments are warranted, to encourage continuous program improvement, or to give consumers a basis for choosing one program over another? As one forum participant put it, "It needs to be considered part of a broader strategy. Hopefully this isn't a solution looking for a problem."

Below are some of the additional concerns or challenges associated with youth program accreditation:

1) There is a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of youth program accreditation (Madzey-Akale, 2011). In teacher education there is no evidence that accredited institutions prepare teachers who are more effective or more knowledgeable than teachers prepared in non-accredited institutions (Johnson, Johnson, Farenga and Ness, 2005). Accreditation is not a guarantee of quality; however, accreditation is regularly reduced to being used as a proxy for quality or a stamp of approval.

2) There are concerns that accreditation becomes a gatekeeper used to determine eligibility for funding. This creates a "haves and have nots" dynamic where some programs are excluded and have even less access to resources. This is particularly problematic in a field where virtually all programs are competing for the same limited sources of funding.

3) While not intended as a rating system, programs do get compared. The tendency to turn an accreditation system into a rating system to distinguish a higher quality program from a lower quality one raises the issue of how to balance the use of a standardized process with a more contextualized assessment.

4) There are worries that using a standard accreditation process might threaten the rich variety of the field. Some suggest that accreditation leads to commoditization and supports a type of status quo (Dillard and Tinker, 1996). Some worry accreditation may not be malleable enough to fit the range of youth programs, and that it may limit innovation and reduce diversity.

5) There are apprehensions about the practicality of accreditation around the amount of time, money and organizational capacity it takes to participate in an accreditation process. There are related concerns that accreditation can divert funds and resources from point of service to administration.

6) There are concerns that accreditation is neither a neutral nor an apolitical process. Environmental factors including local resources, politics, and buy-in to a specific framework or methodology can come into play (Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010).

Over the years people have worried about and documented the ways that program accreditation can be misused and lead to unintended consequences. Accreditation systems have a track record of being twisted to achieve different ends than originally envisioned. Voluntary becomes mandatory; encouragement becomes enforcement; rewards become requirements. Harvey (2004) cautions that it would not be wise to rush precipitously into accreditation based on naïve assumptions of what accreditation is and what it can achieve. "Political expediency has too frequently impeded or diverted the development of accreditation" (Young, 1983, p. 379).

Accreditation Stakeholders

Perspective on these benefits and limitations vary across stakeholders; the beneficiaries, users and interest groups involved. As Table 1 illustrates, where one stakeholder sees values, another may see risks. It is essential to build consensus among stakeholders around the shared criteria or standards that undergird the accreditation process. Further, it is critical to align stakeholder, surface conflicts of interest, and consider these perspectives:

1) *Young people* should be at the core. Accreditation should be about higher quality program and better outcomes for young people. How can accreditation be grounded in what we most value for young people, and what they value for themselves? How can young people be meaningfully engaged in the process?

2) *Parents and families* make many participation decisions for younger children, and their support is essential to encourage participation by older youth. Most Minnesota parents (85%) want programs that teach the value of hard work and help youth explore their interests (Lochner, Allen and Blyth, 2009). How can they feel confident that programs meet their expectations?

3) *Youth workers and volunteers* have primary responsibility for direct service delivery which takes the bulk of their energy, time and commitment. How can accreditation validate and support their work without pulling them away from their core purpose?

4) *Organizations* would want to ensure that the process aligns with their mission, provides them with relevant information and enhances enrollment for their programs. Accreditation can be constructive, or it can be onerous, time-consuming and costly. Can accreditation be simplified without limiting its effectiveness?

5) *Funders* seek ways to justify that resources are allocated to programs most likely to make a difference. How can they ensure a program is worthy of their investment of money and other resources?

6) *The public and policy makers* generally want to know that the program makes a contribution to the greater public good. How can accreditation help establish legitimacy of and support for youth programs in the eyes of the public?

7) *Accreditors* often have a vested interest in accreditation as a process for setting standards and providing brand recognition. How can accrediting bodies keep continuous improvement at the core and add value to the field without being cast as merely dealers of seal of approval?

Again, different stakeholders bring different—sometimes conflicting—values and goals to the accreditation conversation. Building a deep commitment to the goal of continuous improvement for the good of all is an essential step in generating broad support for accreditation. Without consensus and trust around this common commitment, fears about having "the system used against you" can sabotage the effort.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

There were several guiding principles that forum participants held up as essential if considering some version of youth program accreditation in Minnesota. In addition, there remain a number of lingering questions around development and implementation to be considered if pursuit of youth program accreditation took hold in Minnesota.

Guiding Principles

1) *Youth voice.* Forum participants stressed the importance of authentically engaging youth in the development and implementation of any accreditation system. Engaging young people as assessors is just one strategy.

2) *Inclusive.* The development of an accreditation system must reflect and be informed and vetted by stakeholders from across Minnesota's diverse communities. Economic, cultural and geographic differences should be taken into consideration when developing and utilizing an accreditation system to reduce the risk of marginalized communities becoming further marginalized.

3) *Continuous quality improvement.* Accreditation should align with program quality improvement efforts that have gained prominence and acceptance in Minnesota. There needs to be alignment between quality improvement and quality assurance; it should be a *process* for continuous quality improvement, not a stamp of approval or a pass-fail assessment system.

4) *Voluntary.* Accreditation needs to be voluntarily undertaken by a program rather than imposed from outside or attached to funding. Established well-funded, well-recognized national youth organizations may be more immune to the pressure to participate (or better positioned to achieve accreditation) than smaller, local programs.

5) *Non-punitive.* Accreditation should be generative; a carrot not a stick. Incentives and supports should encourage programs to pursue accreditation, rather than penalize programs for not pursuing it.

6) *Accessible.* Accreditation needs to be relevant for, accessible to and reflective of the diversity of Minnesota's youth programs, not a one-size-fits-all application of standards applied to all programs with only one access point. For example, the Council on Accreditation (COA) has several levels for After School Program Registration, Certification and Accreditation.

7) *Reflective.* Accreditation needs to be responsive and adaptive over time. The shared criteria, for example, should not be static; it needs to reflect community changes. Related, the effort needs to be evaluated to verify whether it is effective and to fine-tune and update the process.

As one forum participant summarized, "It should be something that really strengthens the field and quality of programming, helps us meet our intended outcomes, does not hinder access and participation, and truly validates youth work."

Important Questions

This paper was developed in response to a funder's seemingly simple question about accreditation, yet there are no easy answers. The question of accreditation has many objectives, perspectives and implications. This paper, therefore, does not conclude with an answer, but rather with more questions that surfaced during the process. These lingering questions are organized around purpose, process and possibilities.

Questions of Purpose

1) What is our driver for considering youth program accreditation *here and now* in Minnesota?

2) How could accreditation take us further than existing quality improvement efforts alone?

3) How will accreditation significantly improve or ensure positive outcomes for youth across Minnesota? How will we know if we're successful?

4) Would programs or organizations be accredited? Would it be about point-of-service program quality or organizational capacity?

Questions of Process

1) What would Minnesota's "shared criteria" be? How and by whom would that shared criteria get determined?

2) Among the complex universe of youth programs, to what would accreditation apply?

3) What entity would lead, finance and staff a regional or statewide accreditation system dedicated to promoting and assuring quality and monitoring progress across the state?

4) In a declining funding environment, does it make sense to invest limited resources towards system support versus program operations?

Questions of Possibilities

1) How could existing accreditation systems be utilized to apply to the rich variety and diversity of Minnesota's youth programs?

2) What are some alternatives to accreditation for promoting and assuring youth program quality?

3) Given the lack of evidence for or against accreditation, is there an opportunity for Minnesota to lead the way in testing out and studying youth program accreditation?

REFERENCES

Dillard, J.F., & Tinker, T. (1996). Commodifying business and accounting education: The implications of accreditation. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting, 7*(1), 215-225.

Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.Harvey, L. (2004). The power of accreditation: Views of academics. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 26*(2), 207-23.

Johnson, D., Johnson, B., Farenga, S., & Ness, D. (2005). Trivializing teacher education. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Lochner, A., Allen, G., & Blyth, D. (2009). Exploring the supply and demand for community learning opportunities Minnesota. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

Lubinescu, E.S., Ratcliff, J.L., & Gaffney, M.A. (2001). Two continuums collide: Accreditation and assessment. *New Direction for Higher Education, 113*, 5-21.

Madzey-Akale, J. (2011). Literature review summary: Out-of-school time & youth development program accreditation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

Starr, B., Yohalem N., & Gannett, E. (2009). Youth work core competencies: A review of existing frameworks and purposes. Washington DC: Next Generation Youth Work Coalition.

Walker, J., Gran, C., & Moore, D. (2009). Once we know it, we can grow it: A framework for quality nonformal learning opportunities and youth work practice. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

Walker, R.H., & Johnson, L.W. (2009). Signaling intrinsic service quality and value via accreditation and certification. *Managing Service Quality, 19*(1), 85-105

Urgel, J. (2007). EQUIS accreditation: Values and benefits for international business schools. *Journal of Management Development, 26*(1), 73-83.

Yohalem, N., & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. (2010). Inside the black box: Assessing and improving quality in youth programs. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 350-357.

Yohalem, N. & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. with Fischer, S. & Shinn, M. (2009). Measuring youth program quality: A guide to assessment tools (2nd Ed). Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment.

Young, K.E. (1983). Epilogue: The future of accreditation. In K.E. Young, C.M. Chambers, H.R. Kells & Associates. (Eds.), *Understanding Accreditation: Contemporary Perspectives on Issues and Practices in Evaluating Educational Quality* (pp.379-406). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Young, K.E., & Chambers, C.M. (1980). Accrediting agency approaches to academic program evaluation. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *27*, 89-103.

MINNESOTA YOUTH PROGRAM ACCREDITATION FORUMS

Greater Twin Cities United Way, the Minnesota Department of Education, and the Extension Center for Youth Development convened a series of three forums in 2011-2012:

- *Youth Program Accountability—Is Accreditation the Answer?* was designed to debate the role that accreditation-like systems of accountability could play in the development of our field, and whether program accreditation could lead to higher quality programs and better outcomes for youth.
- *What Could "Youth Program Accreditation the Minnesota Way" Look Like?* explored the benefits and limitations of accreditation as an accountability system to ensure high quality programs. Participants brainstormed innovative approaches, models, and applications of a statewide accreditation system.
- The purpose of the third forum was to review and discuss a draft of this issue brief. As peer reviewers, participants helped ensure that the paper surfaced the complexity of the issue in a balanced way, and captured the wisdom, advice and spirit of the forums.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Suggested citation: Walker, K. (2012). The question of youth program accreditation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.