
Status Report:

The CHEA Reauthorization Agenda and Progress on Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

September, 2004

Identification of Key Reauthorization Issues. In April 2003, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Board of Directors adopted an agenda for the pending reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). Of the six goals contained in the *CHEA Agenda*, four focus on the key areas in Congress' work on reauthorization to date: student learning outcomes, distance learning, transfer of credit and information to the public. The major HEA bill in the House of Representatives, HR 4283, addresses all four issues. While HR 4283 adopts major parts of CHEA positions, it also goes well beyond these provisions to erode the self-regulatory authority of colleges and universities with regard to academic quality.

CHEA Activities. In the House, CHEA has advised the bill sponsors of the provisions it supports and has suggested changes to other areas. CHEA is in ongoing consultation with House members and staff, urging improvements and modifications to specific parts of HR 4283. CHEA also consults regularly with the Washington-based associations and accrediting organizations. In the Senate, CHEA stays in contact with members and staff, monitoring discussions about its proposals for a Senate reauthorization bill.

Timing of Reauthorization. Representative Howard "Buck" McKeon (R-CA), chair of the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, indicated in late June 2004 that his subcommittee would not vote on HR 4283 this year. This leaves the formal steps of the legislative process to resume in the new Congress in 2005. Informally, congressional staff members can continue to consider alternatives and negotiate further in preparation for next year. The bill could move quickly next

January, but several months or even the whole year is a more likely schedule for completion. The Senate has not developed a timetable.

Progress on the Issues. The material below summarizes the CHEA positions on the four key issues, compares them to the positions in HR 4283 and indicates CHEA's recommended changes.

The Issues: The CHEA Agenda and HR 4283

Student Learning Outcomes. The *CHEA Agenda* proposes that colleges and universities expand attention to student learning outcomes and institution and program performance, with two important caveats. First, institutions and programs must retain the authority to choose their outcomes and performance goals and evidence consistent with their respective missions. Second, both qualitative and quantitative evidence should be used as desired by the institutions or programs.

HR 4283 expands accreditor requirements for addressing learning outcomes in ways that largely leave educational decisions in the hands of institutions and accreditors. CHEA supports this approach. However, the bill also directs institutions to publish learning objectives for each program and further directs accrediting organizations to review student achievement based on the stated objectives.

CHEA is working to modify the bill to delete the rigid requirement of a stated learning objective for every program. In addition, CHEA has developed a range of materials to aid accrediting organizations, institutions and programs in this difficult undertaking. See *Is Accreditation Accountable? The Continuing Conversation between Accreditation and*

the Federal Government (CHEA, 2003). See also *Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs*, a CHEA Advisory Statement released in September 2003. Both are available on the CHEA Website (www.chea.org) under “Research and Publications.”

Distance Learning. The CHEA *Agenda* supports continuation of accreditation review of distance learning for existing providers and offerings and expansion of quality review for providers that are newly-eligible for Title IV, provided that a single set of standards can be used for distance delivery and on-site delivery methods.

HR 4283 is ambiguous with regard to quality review of distance learning. The bill directs accreditors to assess the capacity of programs to deliver distance learning, consistent with the CHEA position. But the bill also says that accreditors must determine that distance programs are “comparable” to site-based programs, which could lead to additional standards. The bill also contains several additional tasks for accreditors, such as monitoring the growth of distance education programs, directing the accreditor training of site visitors for distance learning review and assuring the “integrity” of students enrolled in distance learning programs.

CHEA is working to assure that accreditors are free to undertake a single review using the same standards for distance and site-based learning. CHEA also proposes modification or elimination of some of the additional tasks for accrediting organizations and institutions.

Transfer of Credit. The CHEA *Agenda* urges that institutions follow the “CHEA Principle” of reviewing proposed transfer of credit on its merits and not refusing to consider requests for transfer based solely on the source of accreditation of the institution where the credits were earned.

HR 4283 adopts the “CHEA Principle,” but goes much further in mandating how an institution must judge transfer credits. It imposes elaborate policy disclosure and data publishing requirements, such as “objective criteria” for transfer, a call for examination of “student proficiency” when making transfer decisions and providing the government with data on “transfer rates.”

CHEA is working to roll back these additional transfer-related provisions.

Information to the Public. The CHEA *Agenda* proposes that institutions, programs and accrediting organizations work together to provide more information to the public on the findings or results of accreditation reviews.

HR 4283 has several provisions on making accreditation findings public but does not provide for institutional participation in the decisions about if and how these findings will be shared with the public. [The professional staff in Congress has advised us that deletion of institutional participation was an inadvertent error and will be corrected.] The bill also requires a series of other disclosures by accreditors, e.g., directing them to require that institutions regularly produce a 10-part “College Consumer Profile.”

CHEA is working to modify some of these provisions and create language that speaks to holding accrediting organizations, institutions and programs mutually accountable for providing additional and useful information about findings. CHEA urges that institutions and accreditors work together to decide the best ways to provide information. CHEA has developed several templates that can be used for this purpose. See “Balancing Competing Goods: Accreditation and Information to the Public About Quality,” a CHEA *Letter from the President* (March 2004). This is also on the CHEA Website (www.chea.org).