

COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

CHEA INITIATIVE SIXTH NATIONAL ACCREDITATION FORUM ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

NOVEMBER 19, 2010

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) held its sixth National Accreditation Forum on November 19, 2010 in Washington DC. This event was part of a multi-year project on the future of accreditation, the *CHEA Initiative*, launched in 2008. The *Initiative* has two goals: to enhance the accountability of accreditation and to sustain a balance in the federal government – accreditation relationship such that the longstanding leadership role of the academy in setting standards for academic quality is preserved, even as appropriate accountability to the federal government is maintained.

The forum focused on the eight issues about the future of accreditation that emerged during the first two years of the *Initiative* (2008-2010):

1. **Advocacy for accreditation:** Accreditation is highly valued in the academic community. There is a need for even greater advocacy to sustain its respect and credibility, especially with government and the public.
2. **Accreditation's relationship with the federal government:** There is growing worry that the federal government is taking on academic issues and using accrediting organizations for this purpose, in contrast to turning to institutions to provide this leadership.

3. **Accreditation and accountability:** There is agreement that accreditors, institutions and programs have done a great deal – but, at the same time, more needs to be done. There is little consensus about what counts as successful accountability for all of higher education.
4. **Accreditation's relationship with state governments:** There is a perceived need to sort out the relationship between states and accrediting organizations and to achieve parity among types of accreditors as this relates to transfer of credit, licensure of schools and licensure of students.
5. **The relationship between institutions and accrediting organizations:** Accreditation is viewed as both valuable and burdensome, with the student achievement issue looming large. There is a need to enhance shared understanding about the evolving role of accreditation.
6. **The relationships among accreditors:** There are calls for more trust and sharing, more attention to effective practices and more working together.
7. **International activity:** Many colleges and universities have expanded their international offerings, accompanied by additional scrutiny from accrediting organizations. Accreditors spoke to the desirability of sharing ideas and effective practices for accrediting internationally. There are calls for a single set of international standards for some fields.
8. **The growth of the for-profit sector:** As for-profit higher education continues to expand, there is a need to understand similarities and differences between this sector and nonprofit higher education. Considerable tension between the two sectors remains, indicating a need to examine this relationship.

The purpose of the sixth forum was to establish a framework for action: What are essential next steps in the eight areas that had been identified? Additional *CHEA Initiative* gatherings will work within this framework, making choices to establish an action agenda for the future of accreditation, culminating in a consensus-driven commitment to policy positions and anticipating the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Forum participants included institutional executives, accreditors and the public. They divided into four groups, each examining one or more of the eight issues. Each group emerged with a number of recommendations for action steps that will be shared with attendees at the 2011 CHEA Annual Conference in January and will be taken up again at another *CHEA Initiative* Forum to be held in spring 2011.

In general, the forum produced a framework that includes four major areas of action. Higher education and accreditation are called upon to: (1) establish a fresh dialogue with federal and state government about the role of accreditation, (2) reassert the leadership role of accreditation as a judge of academic quality, (3) continue to enhance the strength of accreditation as challenges emerge, e.g., expanded international activity, the continued growth of the for-profit sector and the various directions that accountability may take and (4) launch a major strategic advocacy and communication program to build confidence in accreditation and enhance public understanding.

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION PLANS

Group 1: Accreditation and Government

This group focused on the three issues above that relate to accreditation and (1) the federal government, (2) state government and (3) accountability.

The framework for action proposed by this group is to establish a stronger role for accreditation in working with government and to take steps to further enhance information to government and the public, additionally working with institutions and expanding attention to student learning outcomes.

- *Federal Government*
 - Reach out to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) to come to agreement with regard to fair and practical criteria for recognition, outside the current negotiated rulemaking system.
 - Create a task force to develop a series “leave behinds” for House and Senate staff and undertake this action periodically.
- *State Government*
 - Work with institutions to achieve greater acceptance of accreditation at the state level.
 - Work with other higher education associations on model state policies for interstate reciprocity.
- *Accountability*
 - Review effective practices related to disclosure of outcomes.
 - Work more closely with institutions.
 - Model the best outcomes assessment plans (e.g., the CHEA Award winners).
 - Reassert the pre-eminence of accreditation as the “last word” on academic quality.
 - Take assertive control of the national conversation about accreditation.
 - Form a task force to develop common definitions for outcomes.
 - Create a corps of articulate ambassadors to speak out for accreditation.

Group 2: International Accreditation Activity

This group focused on the growing international activity of U.S. accreditors, whether scrutinizing the international work of U.S. institutions and programs or responding to calls for accreditation of non-U.S. operations.

The framework for action proposed here addresses differences between U.S. accreditation and higher education vis-à-vis other countries, appropriate standards for international accreditation and a role that CHEA might play with regard to sharing information.

- Hold a forum to explore international issues related to accreditation, e.g., the three-year degree, the Bologna Process, joint degrees, portability of credit and online education.

- Develop ideas and guidance about U.S. accreditation requirements for which there are no counterparts outside the United States such as a requirement for institutional accreditation in order to obtain programmatic accreditation, Title IV requirements that would not apply in an international setting and professional licensure requirements that would not apply.
- Provide guidance on awareness of differences in culture and higher education practices that can affect application of the core elements of U.S. accreditation in another country, e.g., U.S. accreditation is mission-based and other cultures do not use this approach, the role of academic freedom and views on institutional autonomy.
- Explore the desirability and feasibility of separate standards for accrediting outside the United States.
- Consider a clearing house role for, e.g., CHEA, in sharing effective practices, exploring functional equivalencies to address differences between U.S. accreditation standards and practices in other countries and identifying areas where establishing functional equivalencies is not desirable.
- Explore the development of “international services” for U.S. institutions.

Group 3: Accreditation and Its Relationships

This group focused on (1) how accreditors relate to the institutions and programs they review, (2) how accreditors relate to each other and (3) accreditation’s role in how different types of institutions relate to each other, specifically nonprofit and for-profit operations.

The framework for action proposed here includes establishing means to strengthen the relationship of institutions and programs to their accreditors, especially attending to the strains that are created when third parties create requirements for accreditors that produce difficulties for colleges and universities. The framework also includes developing means to strengthen the working relationships among accreditors, especially across the different types of accreditation.

- *Institution-accreditor relationship*
 - Assure that institutions and programs are informed when accreditors are given new responsibility by an outside party, e.g., federal government. The more demands (e.g., regulation, accountability) third parties make on accreditation, the more strain in the institution-accreditation relationship.
 - Collect and share evidence of successful transfer of credit that crosses different types of institutions and accreditation.
 - Emphasize to institutions and the public how accreditation standards make an institution better.
 - Go the distance to provide information to the public, e.g., on the results of an accreditation review. “Not providing information is now a non-starter.”
 - Examine how accreditors can provide even greater assistance to institutions. If, e.g., 85 percent of institutions are asked to do more on assessment, does this raise questions about the expectations of accreditors?

- Address the transparency – confidentiality tension: The more transparency, the less an institution is likely to share.
- *Accreditor-accreditor relationship*
 - When an accreditor implements a new, perhaps risky, undertaking, e.g., regional accreditation initially moving into the for-profit area, share this with the community in order that others learn from the experience.
 - Continue to address transfer of credit. This remains a major source of differences among accreditors, both with regard to regional and national accreditors and institutional and programmatic accreditors.
 - Emphasize trust, communication and sharing among accreditors, acknowledging that this is a challenge given the decentralized structure of accreditation.
- *Nonprofit/For-profit relationship*
 - Pay attention to when there are similarities between nonprofit and for-profit higher education. Both types of institutions may share some faculty and approaches to curriculum and content. Some nonprofit and for-profit institutions are subject to the same accreditation standards.
 - Be aware that many of the issues around for-profit higher education are not accreditation-related.

Group 4: Advocacy for Accreditation

This group focused on building significant additional advocacy for accreditation as this relates to the public, government officials and students.

The framework for action proposed here creates an accreditation advocacy plan that emphasizes (1) accreditation's leadership role in judging academic quality, (2) creating a common advocacy language and (3) expanding the visibility of accreditation among all constituents

- Identify core common elements and language shared by most accreditors as central to strengthening advocacy.
- Become more assertive with regard to the national conversation about the value of accreditation.
- Expand conversations with key constituents, e.g., institutions and associations.
- Develop templates for institutions to use in communication, including additional attention to improvement and outcomes.
- Expand the use of media, e.g., social networks.
- Develop consumer-friendly publications, e.g., case studies, success stories, effective practices.

The work at the Sixth National Accreditation Forum resulted in significant progress in establishing a framework for action to achieve the goals of the *CHEA Initiative*. The framework

provides the foundation for the essential choices that will need to be made at upcoming fora and other meetings during 2010-2011.

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