Foreseeing the Future of Accreditation

This spring, in the wake of nearly two years of conflict in which the U.S. Education Department was widely perceived as trying to transform higher education accreditors into enforcers in its campaign to prod colleges to produce better student learning outcomes, an alarmist view of the future of accreditation seemed entirely in order.

In an essay published in March on Inside Higher Ed, Judith S. Eaton, who as president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation was a key combatant in that conflict, envisioned a scenario in which the traditional system in which nongovernmental regional agencies oversee a system of peer review of institutional quality and self-improvement had, by 2014, been replaced by “federal control of thousands of U.S. colleges and universities.”

Several months later, with Congress having largely squelched the department’s attempt to transform accreditation through changes in federal laws and rules, many of the key players in the drama (yes, that may be the first time accreditation and drama have ever appeared in the same sentence) gathered Friday to assess whether Eaton’s sketch of a possible future was realistic, ridiculous or somewhere in between.

In a panel discussion Friday at the accreditation council’s summer workshop, Eaton, an Education Department official, a key Congressional aide, and two accrediting agency leaders debated Eaton’s vision and, more fundamentally, the current state of the tension-filled system by which the federal government, accrediting agencies, states and colleges and universities seek to ensure the quality of education provided to students.

In many ways, the participants seemed to agree more than they clashed, concurring that (1) American colleges have a long way to go in showing that they are effectively educating students and (2) that higher education leaders — accreditors and college officials together — have a several-year window (before the next renewal of the Higher Education Act, assuming this year’s actually concludes) in which to make that case to Congress and the next presidential administration.

But despite that surface agreement, the discussion also revealed a fundamental disconnect that has underscored years of debate about accreditation’s role in ensuring student learning and is likely to remain a roadblock to an ultimate consensus: Those pushing hardest for clearcut measures and minimum requirements for student learning outcomes want a degree of commonality (at least for groups of institutions with similar missions and student bodies) in what colleges report and the standards they should be required to meet that most institutional officials and accreditors of non-vocational institutions believe is inappropriate. Bridging that divide may be difficult.

Apocalyptic or Sagacious?

Eaton’s Inside Higher Ed essay painted a picture that even its introduction admitted was designed to show a bleak picture of how the federal government’s system of using accrediting agencies to help assure higher education
quality could evolve if federal accountability demands are “not properly countered.” Her essay followed an 18-month period in which the Education Department, inspired by the work of Margaret Spellings’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, used various mechanisms at its disposal — seeking to change federal rules that govern accreditation and urging a tougher stance by the advisory panel that helps it decide which agencies deserve federal recognition — to prod accrediting agencies to hold colleges more accountable for measuring and meeting minimal levels of student academic performance.

Following those pressures out to their logical extremes, as Eaton envisioned it in her Alice in Wonderland-style vision, she foresaw (by 2014) the government allocating its billions of dollars in federal financial aid and other support for colleges and universities based in large part on whether institutions had “government-defined ‘acceptable’ .... graduation rates and transfer rates.... These institutions also had to document government-acceptable rates of entry to graduate school and job placement”; without them, they were ineligible for government support.

The extent to which participants in Friday’s discussion saw Eaton’s scenario as alarmist depended largely on the perspectives from which they had viewed the last two years of activity. As president and executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges’ Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, Ralph A. Wolff was a member of the body that negotiated possible new federal rules for accreditation, and he watched as the Education Department’s advisory committee sought to prod his agency (among others) to set “bright line” minimum standards on student learning for the institutions it accredits. As he has watched the department seek to “dramatically” change the role of accrediting agencies in ways that he characterized as “inappropriate,” Wolff said, Eaton’s portrayal did not seem terribly farfetched.

David Cleary, an aide to U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), who has been most responsible for stopping the Education Department’s efforts to alter accreditation in their tracks, said that “Judith’s vision is not likely” to come to pass — not least, he said, because his boss would “still be making sure we don’t go quite that far.”

Vickie L. Schray, who has been the Education Department’s point person on accreditation for several years and in recent weeks was promoted to to help fill the gap left by the departure of Diane Auer Jones, the department’s assistant secretary of postsecondary education, joked that Eaton’s depiction was “right up there with the apocalypse.” She suggested, as she and other department officials have previously argued, that Eaton and others have exaggerated the department’s desire to compel accreditors and colleges to measure student success in narrow and overly restrictive ways.

“Institutions should be able to define for themselves what participation in postsecondary education provides to an individual going forward, to defining [their own definition of] quality,” Schray said. “The federal government is not interested in that business, plus we have Congress watching us closely to make sure we never get into that business.”

But as they listened to the discussion, and particularly to Schray’s assessment of the situation, many in the audience Friday may have had ringing in their ears a counterpoint offered Thursday evening by Jones, Schray’s former colleague. In a speech to the CHEA gathering Thursday, points she reiterated in an interview with Inside Higher Ed Sunday, Jones acknowledged that she had been motivated to leave the department last month after less than a year in her job largely because of the department’s singleminded push on accreditation.

Jones said that she had been frustrated in her attempts to persuade Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to abandon the department’s push (which she described as motivated by business and industry interests) to “lose sight of all the things higher ed does and focus exclusively on a narrow band of outcomes,” she said. “I was pushing pretty hard with this counterpoint on liberal arts education,” but others in the department, including Schray and her boss, Under Secretary Sara Martinez Tucker, seemed to hold sway over the secretary.

Nothing proved that more, Jones said, than the department’s actions against the American Academy for Liberal Education, which the federal agency slammed because the accreditor refused to embrace students’ results on licensure exams and other simplistic, inappropriate measures as proof of institutions’ quality.
To the extent they disagreed about what has happened in the past, participants in Friday’s discussion (and Jones, as well) shared a more consistent view about what might happen going forward. Even those, like Jones, Eaton and Cleary, who believe that the Education Department has defined student outcomes too narrowly and inappropriately sought to expand the government’s role in defining those outcomes, tend to agree that higher education institutions should, where appropriate, do a better job explaining how they measure their own students’ success.

And accrediting agencies should work together with colleges, Jones said, to come up with mechanisms for institutions “to be honest with the world in saying, ‘This is our mission, these are the outcomes that the educational opportunities we provide should generate, and this is how we’re measuring to make sure we provide what we say we provide.’”

Ideally, said Cleary, that process should come from within higher education itself, rather than from the federal government. But just because Congress has stepped in and prevented aggressive government action now, Cleary warned, does not mean that college leaders should assume that such steps won’t be forthcoming — and appropriate — down the road.

“I think we’re talking about a five-year time frame,” he said, in which officials in higher education and accreditation control their own fate. “The challenge for schools is to convince Congress ... and the administration that the conversation is ongoing and that there are results from that conversation,” Clearly said.

It will be “in the absence of answers” from higher education leaders, he added, that worst-case scenarios like Eaton’s become possible.

— Doug Lederman

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at [http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/06/30/accredit](http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/06/30/accredit).*

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