

# THE CHEA INITIATIVE

## *BUILDING THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE SECOND YEAR 2009–2010*

### **BACKGROUND**

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation *CHEA Initiative* is a multi-year effort to influence public confidence and government involvement in accreditation. Developed in 2008–2009 in response to issues and concerns raised by the academic and accreditation communities as well as public officials, the *Initiative* has two goals: (1) to further strengthen accreditation, thereby enhancing public confidence and trust in peer/professional review and self-regulation and (2) to focus federal oversight of accreditation more directly on issues related to institutional viability and the use of federal funds, rather than the academic policy issues that are primarily the province of colleges and universities.

The *CHEA Initiative* is intended to provide a foundation for the next generation of accreditation. It is part of building the future of accreditation and enhancing the value and credibility of peer/professional review. It will enrich accreditation's service to the public interest.

The first *Initiative* goal, strengthening accreditation to enhance public confidence, is about students and society additionally investing in accredited status as a clear and unequivocal signal that an institution or program is reliable, legitimate and meets threshold expectations of quality performance. Enhancing public confidence is also about public awareness of the powerful commitment to ongoing quality improvement that is part of periodic accreditation review.

The second goal, focusing the federal role, is about partnership and balance, calibrating (1) appropriate accountability expectations of the federal government when overseeing accrediting organizations that provide access to federal funds and (2) appropriate independence for institutions and programs as well as accrediting organizations themselves. Partnership and balance are essential to sustaining peer/professional review, responsible institutional independence, responsible exercise of academic freedom and the diversity of the U.S. higher education enterprise.

As promised at the start of the *Initiative*, what follows is a summary of the first-year discussions and an indication of activities for the second year.

### **THE FIRST YEAR: A SUMMARY OF COMMENTS ON THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION DURING 2008–2009**

CHEA held an unprecedented 15 conversations and consultations on the future of accreditation during 2008–2009: national accreditation fora open to professionals and the public, meetings with accrediting commissions, CEO/CAO Roundtables and constituent meetings with, e.g., institutions, accreditors and associations. Those involved in the discussions often spoke to the benefits and value of accreditation in assuring academic quality. At the same time, the discussions reflected interest in some change to accreditation policy and practice. For the most part, the interest was in incremental alterations over time. Many discussants pointed to the importance of accreditation responding effectively to the current societal emphasis on access and accountability for success, expanding the role of faculty, addressing new technology and assuring that peer/professional review remains effective and efficient. There was little interest in any dramatic departure from current practice, e.g., eliminating federal review or the gatekeeping connection with government, establishing a charter status for private recognition, rethinking the current structure of regional accreditation or realigning programmatic accreditation in some way.

The 2008–2009 *Initiative* conversation was productive, yielding six broad issues as most prominent for ongoing consideration of the future of accreditation; these are briefly described here.

1. **Advocacy for accreditation.** Perhaps more than any other single issue, the *Initiative* conversations reflected strong interest in accreditation sustaining a vibrant public voice for academic quality in higher education. Many discussants spoke to a need for the public to become better informed and aware of the value of accreditation, especially the benefit of accreditation's quality improvement role.

2. ***Accreditation's relationship with the federal government.*** Most *Initiative* conversations reflected agreement that keeping the accreditation gatekeeping function is desirable and that both public (USDE/NACIQI) and private (CHEA) recognition are needed. At the same time, some apprehension was expressed about the expanding government oversight of institutions and accrediting organizations. Questions were raised about what role institutions (as they meet the obligations associated with maintaining eligibility for federal funds) and accreditors (as they seek and maintain federal recognition) need to play in the face of this expansion.
3. ***Accreditation and accountability.*** Many of the discussions reflected agreement that the accreditation-accountability connection needs to be stronger in order to build additional public confidence and investment in the quality of higher education. Discussants spoke to the need for greater transparency in providing information about institutional performance and that providing this information would enhance the credibility of accreditation for the future. Discussion of student achievement was reflected in the overall concern about academic quality, with a call from some that accreditation raise the bar for threshold standards.
4. ***Accreditation's relationship with state governments.*** The *Initiative* conversations surfaced several topics with regard to this relationship. First, a number of states treat different types of accreditation [regional, national (career-related and faith-related) and programmatic] differently and concern was expressed that this differential treatment created barriers for accreditors and institutions alike. Second, concern was expressed that students may be harmed by this differentiation. Third, a number of discussants talked about the relationship of accreditation and state licensure and the impact on accreditation standards.
5. ***The relationship between institutions and accrediting organizations.*** Most conversations included reference to the importance of accreditors continuing to support institutional leadership in setting student achievement standards as well as institutions and accreditors working together to enhance this leadership even as the gatekeeping role is sustained. Discussants also indicated an interest in further involving faculty and governing boards in accreditation and exploring the advantages and disadvantages of developing common expectations for degrees, especially as this relates to transfer of credit.
6. ***The relationships among accreditors.*** The major topics identified here were related to effective accreditation practice. This included the ongoing issue of transfer of credit across types of accreditation, the need to address building additional trust throughout the accreditation enterprise and the importance of addressing practice as this relates to such diverse areas as international accreditation activity, for-profit higher education and degree mills.

## 2009–2010 ACTIVITIES

The six issues identified in 2008–2009 will form the basis of discussion in 2009–2010. CHEA is planning the following conversations with key constituents:

- National Accreditation Fora – open to the public and all interested parties.
- Meetings with accrediting organizations' commissions and boards, as invited.
- CEO/CAO Roundtables with CHEA member institutions.
- Constituent meetings: students, institutions, accrediting organizations, governing boards and higher education associations.

*Accreditation is a decentralized and diverse enterprise of 80 active institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. Although private bodies, the federal government has relied on these organizations as legitimate authorities on higher education quality since 1952. Accreditors play a "gatekeeping" role: Award of accredited status is required for institutions and programs to be eligible for federal funds. This role has carried with it considerable and growing federal oversight in the form of "recognition" or periodic scrutiny of accrediting organizations. The academic and accreditation communities have, since 1975, also maintained their own oversight of accreditation or "recognition," a process that has been carried out by CHEA since 1996.*

**Become part of the *CHEA Initiative* conversation. Please email CHEA at [cheainitiative@chea.org](mailto:cheainitiative@chea.org) to offer your ideas and suggestions about the future of accreditation.**