

THE CHEA INITIATIVE

THE FIRST THREE YEARS (2008-2011)

BACKGROUND

In Fall 2008, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) launched the *CHEA Initiative*, a multi-year national conversation on the future of accreditation. The *Initiative* seeks to (1) enhance accountability in accreditation and (2) sustain a balance and distinction between accountability to the federal government and the academic work of accreditation – its focus on institutional mission and independence, peer/professional review and quality improvement. Through the *Initiative*, CHEA is working to build consensus for action on the issues of greatest importance to the accreditation and higher education communities, as well as prepare for the anticipated reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2013 or thereafter.

THE FIRST TWO YEARS (2008-2010)

CHEA devoted the first two years of the *Initiative* to reaching out to member institutions, accrediting organizations, government, higher education associations and the public, conducting an unprecedented national conversation on accreditation. Staff and board members met with 21 accrediting commissions, hosted five CEO/CAO Roundtables with member institutions, held five national accreditation fora and conducted a student focus group on accreditation, for a total of 32 meetings involving some 1,500 colleagues.

This national conversation surfaced six major issues about the future of accreditation: advocacy for accreditation, its relationship with government, accreditation and accountability, its relationship with state governments, the relationship between institutions and accreditation and relationships among accrediting organizations. During the second year (2009-2010), two additional issues emerged: the international activity of institutions and programs and accreditation and the growth of for-profit education and its impact on accreditation.

HEARING FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

As the *CHEA Initiative* discussions began, participants spoke to the benefits and value of accreditation. At the same time, they expressed interest in some changes to accreditation policy and practices. For the most part, the interest was in incremental alterations over time. Many participants pointed to the importance of accreditation in responding effectively to the current societal emphasis on access and accountability for student success, on expanding the role of faculty 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, rethinking the current structure of regional accreditation or realigning programmatic accreditation in some way.

The conversation about accreditation changed during the *Initiative's* second year. Higher education and accreditation began to feel the impact of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA). The revised law produced a heightened sense of urgency from government, especially with regard to accountability from accreditation. Changes in federal law as a result of passage of the HEOA were accompanied by additional rules developed during the two negotiated rulemakings that took place in 2009 and early 2010. This legislative and regulatory activity intensified the pressure on accreditation and, consequently, the institutions and programs that are accredited by recognized accrediting organizations. As a result, participants in the *Initiative's* conversation on accreditation raised more and more serious concerns about the expectations of the federal government and the role of accrediting organizations in carrying out these demands.

Key points made by participants about the eight issues.

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.

Regarding the two additional issues that have emerged during the *CHEA Initiative's* discussions:

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.

Additional information about the conversations on the eight issues may be found at www.chea.org/About/CI/index.asp.

LOOKING AHEAD: 2010-2011

In the third year of the *CHEA Initiative*, the focus shifts to action. CHEA will host several national accreditation fora during which participants will review the national conversation to date and begin to frame action plans focused initially on steps that institutions and accrediting organizations can take in the eight areas that have been identified. This will also assist with preparation for the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. As in the past, participants will include institutional leaders, accreditors, students, government, the public and the press.

The action plan development will begin with a CHEA Fall Forum, followed by additional deliberation at the 2011 CHEA Annual Conference, a likely Spring Forum and completion of the action plans at the 2011 CHEA Summer Workshop. Information about these events will be forthcoming.

Become part of the CHEA Initiative conversation. Please email CHEA at CHEAInitiative@chea.org to offer your ideas and suggestions about the future of accreditation.