



The *CHEA Initiative* 2011-2012: The Fourth Year

From Discussion to Action

August 2011

The primary goal of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Initiative for 2011-2012 is to develop recommendations for each of the eight issues identified during the past three years of work. CHEA will:

- **Develop alternatives for action for each issue,**
- **Review the alternatives with the academic and accreditation communities and**
- **Finalize recommendations for each issue by June 30, 2012.**

The recommendations will be used by CHEA, working with institutions, programs and accreditors, to bring about desired change in accreditation and to develop a foundation for future policy positions.

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* sought 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 seeks to build a 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.

During the first three years of work, CHEA hosted five CEO/CAO Roundtables with member institutions, met with 22 accrediting commissions, held seven National Accreditation Fora and conducted one student focus group for a total of 35 meetings – an unprecedented national dialogue on accreditation with some 2,000 colleagues around the country. The roundtables and commission

meetings took CHEA to 11 states during this time, including multiple visits to a number of states, in addition to its work in the District of Columbia where CHEA is headquartered. The student focus group was held in Washington, DC. CHEA also published 12 white papers and meeting summaries.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION: THE EIGHT ISSUES

The three years of dialogue surfaced eight issues. These topics emerged repeatedly during discussions with participants. Many of the suggestions related to the topics were offered a number of times and in a variety of settings. Some of the suggestions were offered for more than one topic.

Advocacy for Accreditation

Summary of Issue: *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.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “We need an ‘affirmative defense of accreditation.’”
- “We need to make the case for self-regulation and the role of mission.”
- “Prove accreditation works to keep government away.”
- “Accreditation must speak with a ‘clear unequivocal voice.’”
- “Accreditation is the highest; it’s the gold star for an institution...it implies an outside source of judgment.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Establish a program of strong advocacy for accreditation within the academic community, stressing that accreditation is highly valued, especially because it is key to quality improvement and because it provides access to highly beneficial peer review that assists institutions and programs as they seek to enhance their services to students.
2. Undertake more robust advocacy for the value and importance of accreditation to constituents outside higher education – states, government officials, business, prospective students and the public. The focus needs to be on the thoroughness and depth of accreditation scrutiny, the worth of accreditation and garnering greater respect.
3. Create the above accreditation advocacy programs with emphasis on (1) accreditation’s leadership role in judging academic quality, (2) a common advocacy language and (3) the visibility of accreditation among all constituents:
 - Identify core common elements and language shared by most accreditors as central to strengthening advocacy.
 - Work with institutions and programs to become more assertive with regard to the national conversation about the value of accreditation.
 - Expand conversations and develop a stronger voice 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.

Accreditation–Federal Government Relationship

Summary of Issue: *There is growing worry that the federal government is too involved in directing accreditation and making decisions on academic issues, in contrast to holding institutions and accreditors accountable for determining and judging academic quality.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “Every time we get additional rules, we become less effective as accreditors.”
- “We need to come to a decision about what the accreditors’ relationship with government is.”
- “Peer review keeps us on track, instead of the government during this.”
- “The most significant element in the federal relationship is broken trust.” “Accreditation seems to have ‘given up...and given in to focus of [federal] power.’”
- “Accreditation isn’t about ‘the federal government made me do it.’”
- “Don’t ever say to faculty: ‘You have to do this because of accreditation.’”
- “Don’t invite government oversight. It’s about us.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Be affirmative about the responsibility for academic quality that is to be reserved to the academy and accreditation, including steps to assure that the community is to decide core academic standards and expectations in the context of mission, not government.
2. Take steps to protect distinctive institutional mission, institutional autonomy and academic freedom even as accreditation continues to participate in the gatekeeping relationship with government,
3. Develop strategies that encourage government to expect and not prescribe accountability, reducing attention to such issues such as credit hour.
4. Explore means to work with the federal government to focus its expectations on accreditation’s quality improvement role, with the federal government itself developing a stronger presence in overseeing student financial aid and screening for baseline institutional performance.

5. Reach out to the U.S. Department of Education to come to agreement with regard to fair and practical criteria for recognition, outside the current negotiated rulemaking system.
6. Create a task force to develop a series of “leave behinds” for House and Senate staff to keep them informed of developments in accreditation and undertake this action periodically.

Accreditation and Accountability

Summary of Issue: *There is agreement that accreditors, institutions and programs have done a great deal about accountability but, at the same time, more needs to be done. There is considerable debate about the desirability of greater accountability and about what counts as success with accountability.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “It’s vital that we keep accreditation voluntary.”
- “What is going on at the bottom?”
- “We are tough on each other.”
- “We need accreditation to be about helping students. What is essential/critical to assist them?”
- “What are we giving up to do accreditation?”
- “We need more nuance in accreditation.”
- “Accountability is becoming an industry.”
- “Accreditation can affect the value of your degree.”
- “Accreditation helps deans help students.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Explore means to come to community agreement about public accountability, addressing how, e.g.,
 - Accreditation can raise the bar of threshold standards as part of gaining additional credibility.
 - Mission-based analyses of institutional quality can be externally benchmarked.
 - Accreditors and institutions can expand the information they provide the public about what accredited status means.
 - Accreditors and institutions can enlarge the attention to student learning outcomes as key to judgment about what counts as quality.
 - Accreditation can address concerns about alleged conflict of interest with regard to peer review and the financing of accreditation.

2. Take steps to further enhance information to government and the public, additionally working with institutions and expanding attention to student learning outcomes:
 - Review effective practices related to disclosure of outcomes.
 - Work more closely with institutions.
 - Explore establishing common expectations of what a degree means.
 - Form a task force to develop common definitions for outcomes.
 - 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.
 - Create a corps of articulate ambassadors to speak out for accreditation.

Accreditation and State Government

Summary of Issue: *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*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “States act as if accreditation doesn’t exist.”
- “Students are penalized if they move from one state to another.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Establish parity at the state level for institutions and programs accredited by different types of accreditors, e.g., regional, national career-related and national faith-related accrediting organizations and their recognition.
2. Work with states and accreditors to diminish redundancy, prescriptiveness and confusion that can result when accreditation standards, state law and regulation may be in conflict.
3. Focus additional effort on state authorization issues related to distance learning to diminish the need for federal involvement in this area.

4. Work with other higher education associations on model state policies for interstate reciprocity.
5. Take steps to assist students having difficulty with variation in certification requirements for employment as well as licensure, forcing them to take additional coursework.
6. Work with institutions to achieve greater acceptance of accreditation at the state level.
5. Take steps to diminish the growing emphasis on accreditation as prescriptive rather than collegial.
6. Consider differentiating levels or creating a tiered system of accreditation instead of the same characterization “accredited” for all successful institutions and programs.
7. Assure that institutions and programs are informed when accreditors are given new responsibilities by an outside party, e.g., federal government. The more demands (e.g., regulation, accountability) third parties make on accreditation, the more strain on the institution-accreditation relationship.

Relationship Between Institutions and Accreditors

Summary of Issue: *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.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “Peer review is vital, even if we have problems with it – and we do.”
- “Accreditation is both a burden and insightful.”
- “Accreditation is our best friend – in spite of what is happening with outcomes.”
- “Can we have a small college version of regional accreditation?”
- “Accreditation is validating that we are doing what we are supposed to do.”
- “‘We’re protecting you from the federal government’ is the approach.”
- “Accreditation is an umbrella standard to live up to set by peers.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Establish more faculty engagement in accreditation.
2. Review any need for greater uniformity of practice within accrediting organizations as students, faculty and administrators are more and more mobile.
3. Examine ways to establish greater economies of scale for institutions undergoing accreditation review to minimize time and other resources taken away from the vital task of serving students.
4. Look for means to reduce the cost of accreditation.
8. Collect and share evidence of successful transfer of credit that crosses different types of institutions and accreditation.
9. Improve transfer of credit and address the perception on the part of some that accreditation is a barrier and inhibits student mobility, especially student efforts to move from schools accredited by national career-related accreditors to regionally accredited schools.
10. Emphasize to institutions and the public how accreditation standards make an institution better.
11. Expand the provision of information to the public, e.g., about the results of an accreditation review and other aspects of accreditation.
12. Address the transparency-confidentiality tension: The more transparency, the less an institution is likely to share.
13. 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?

The Relationship Among Accreditors

Summary of Issue: *There are calls from institutions and accreditors for more trust and sharing among accrediting organizations, more attention to effective practices and more working together.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “Can our regional accreditation and our programmatic accreditors work together? We provide the same information many times and in many different ways.”
- “Can we have at least some alignment among the regionals? It doesn’t seem fair.”
- “We need to clarify the landscape of accreditation.”
- “Accrediting organizations need to be more courageous.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Develop greater cooperation and commonality among various accrediting organizations in order to, e.g., assist institutions and programs in data collection and reporting.
2. Reduce the perceived burden of multiple accreditations to a single institution, including any inconsistent demands on institutions from various accreditors that may emerge.
3. Eliminate distinctions related to types of accreditation that can have deleterious consequences for students, especially between regional and other types of institutional accreditation and between nonprofit and for-profit institutions and accreditors.
4. Address significant accreditation-related issues such as institutional accreditation’s role in oversight of graduate education, whether regional accreditors need “secondary standards” for specific programs for which there are no accreditors, e.g., adult education.
5. When an accreditor implements a new 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.
6. Continue to address transfer of credit, a major source of differences among accreditors, both with regard to regional and national accreditors and institutional and programmatic accreditors.
7. Emphasize trust, communication and sharing among accreditors, acknowledging that this is a challenge given the decentralized structure of accreditation.

International Activity

Summary of Issue: As colleges and universities have expanded their international offerings, this has been accompanied by additional scrutiny from accrediting organizations. It has resulted in calls for sharing effective practices for accrediting internationally and, in some instances, a single set of international standards for some fields

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “How do we think through accrediting internationally?”
- “What is common internationally?”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Examine the expansion of international offerings by many colleges and universities that require scrutiny by accreditation, whether building campuses or offering programs internationally or entering into business relationships with non-U.S. colleges and universities.
2. Build additional capacity within accrediting organizations seeking to support schools engaged in international work. Explore the development of specific services and capacity-building to assist U.S. institutions operating internationally.
3. 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 may not use this approach, the role of academic freedom and view on institutional autonomy.
4. Establish additional strategies to address degree mills and accreditation mills as requiring international attention.
5. Explore current international issues of significance and their potential impact on accreditation, e.g., the three-year degree, the Bologna Process, national and international rankings and qualifications frameworks, joint degrees, portability of credit and online education.
6. Explore the desirability and feasibility of separate standards for accrediting outside the United States.

7. Consider a clearinghouse role for, e.g., CHEA or another organization, 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.
8. 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 or professional licensure requirements that would not apply.

For-Profit Sector

Summary of Issue: *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.*

As described by CHEA Initiative participants:

- “We need to work to eliminate the divide between for-profit and nonprofit higher education.”
- “Be aware that many of the issues around for-profit higher education are not accreditation-related.”

Suggestions for Action from the Participants

1. Work to understand the similarities and differences between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors with regard to business models, governance, approaches to curriculum, approaches to faculty, marketing and recruitment. 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.
2. Take steps to encourage greater transfer of credit between for-profits and nonprofits.

Additional information about the CHEA Initiative may be found at www.chea.org/About/CI/index.asp

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.

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