



What Does the “Federalization” of Accreditation Mean for Boards and Institutions?

The 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act and the rules that accompanied it in 2009 and 2010 have given significantly more authority to the federal government in academic decision making. Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), tells boards why they should be concerned.

What does “federalizing” accreditation mean?

It’s about the growth of federal requirements that accrediting organizations must meet as a condition of being scrutinized or “recognized” by the government, especially in the academic arena. Academic institutions must be accredited by a federally recognized accreditor in order to be eligible for federal funds like student grants and loans. By “federalizing” accreditation, the government takes on some of the academic decision making that has traditionally been carried out by faculty and academic administrators.

For example, the federal government, since 2008, has had at least some legal or regulatory authority over or how a credit hour is defined, transfer of credit, distance learning, and how enrollment growth is managed, among other areas. U.S. Department of Education (USDE) guidelines for accreditors extend to student-learning outcomes, general education, and curriculum—all arguably the province of faculty.

What is behind this new push to intervene in accreditation?

Money, international competition, and for-profit higher education. The annual federal investment in higher education continues to grow, up to an unprecedented \$150 billion. Congress and USDE increasingly view the primary work of accreditation as enforcing federal law and regulations related to assuring quality education, with taxpayer dollars resulting in degree acquisition and an educated workforce.

This concern with money is often framed in the language of international competitiveness: that the United States now lags behind other countries in degree acquisition and its future economic and social vitality depends on higher education. Accreditation is viewed as one part of assuring this competitiveness. Consider President Obama’s 2020 goal of having the world’s largest share of college graduates.

For-profit higher education has been much in the

news lately because of Congressional attention to recruitment and marketing practices, attrition and retention of students, and student debt. Lawmakers are questioning accreditation’s effectiveness in the face of problems at a small number of for-profit institutions, accredited by either regional or national career-related accreditors. While these issues have touched nonprofit higher education as well, the focus has been on the multibillion-dollar, multi-state, for-profit corporations enrolling hundreds of thousands of students.

How would new rules concerning state authorization affect institutions and academic decision making?

That is not yet clear. Based on what we understand right now, the rules require that a state government follow federal guidelines in authorizing public or private institutions if those that operate within its borders are to be eligible for federal funds. The new state oversight would affect institutions with distance-learning offerings and private institutions, except for certain religious institutions and tribal colleges. Each state must now have a complaint procedure for all institutions, independent of accreditation. Some speculate that this is an effort to rein in for-profit distance-learning providers or to strengthen state oversight, even at the price of reliance on accreditation.

How can boards be prepared to respond to growing calls from the public for more information about student learning outcomes?

By providing more information. The climate in which we operate is no longer satisfied with descriptions of institutional resources and practices, e.g., the number and credentials of faculty and “assessment” processes. The future credibility of higher education rests squarely on providing information about results: what students learn and how the institution performs. Boards and presidents would serve their institutions well by developing key indicators of institutional performance—such as student success with educational goals, graduation, transfer, entry to graduate school, or job placement—providing evidence that these indicators are met, and making this information not only public but readily accessible.

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