

May 23, 2003

The Honorable Judd Gregg, Chairman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Edward Kennedy, Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Gregg and Kennedy:

This letter transmits the views of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), per your invitation for comment in your letter of April 15, 2003. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our views and hope that the Committee will look upon CHEA as a resource for information and ideas on quality assurance in higher education programs.

Your letter identified six areas of interest. The CHEA mission deals primarily with your third area: assuring accountability. The CHEA Board of Directors has just adopted a CHEA Agenda for the HEA Reauthorization which focuses on accountability reform in accreditation.

We believe that revision to HEA should build on the current strengths of private, voluntary accreditation for quality assurance in educational offerings supported by Title IV programs. This system has served the government and our country well for half a century reaching back to the GI Bill. Reform should focus on educators making educational decisions within their institutions and assisted by external peers through accreditation. Reform should clarify that federal officials can rely upon institutions and accreditation organizations in academic issues and focus federal attention on administrative and financial measures of accountability, an area of documented government capacity. The HEA reforms in the 1992 and 1998 amendments have had great success in reducing fraud, abuse and waste in Title IV programs, most notably in lower default rates. While additional improvements may be warranted, this success is significant and a guide to what functions are well suited to direct federal activity.

Mindful that public expectations are changing regarding accountability of institutions of higher education, the CHEA Board of Directors has outlined six goals for the HEA deliberations in the 108th Congress. Many of these goals address the activities of institutions and accreditors and do not belong in the statutory or regulatory domains. Nonetheless, they are reforms vital to sustaining public confidence in the quality of education provided by accredited institutions as well as advancing the public trust in Title IV funds as a sound investment of taxpayers' resources.

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These goals are detailed in our attached statement and I summarize them here. Our Goal One deals with the expanded development and use of student learning outcomes. Our Goal Two calls for expanded information about the findings of accreditation reviews. Our Goal Three says that any expansion of Title IV programs in distance learning needs to sustain a proper means of quality assurance. Our Goal Four deals with transfer of credit, while maintaining the appropriate autonomy of institutions in academic decisions. Our Goal Five stresses that reform of accountability must sustain the basic principles of accreditation and the current federal role, which relies upon these principles. Finally, we are trying to develop some ideas to place these concepts into a statutory form. While this is still under development, we are beginning discussions with your respective staffs on this possibility.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on HEA issues. We would be happy to discuss further these ideas, or assist the Committee as it addresses its important responsibilities in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. You may reach us at 202-955-6126 or at eaton@chea.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judith S. Eaton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Judith S. Eaton
President

JSE/hlg

Attachment: CHEA Reauthorization Agenda