

MEMORANDUM

To: U.S. Senate HELP Committee Staff

From: Gregory Fusco
Vice President for Government and Public Affairs

Subject: HEA Reauthorization and April 15 meeting

Date: April 14, 2005

Let me commend you for inviting interested parties to your HEA “Stakeholders” meeting on April 15. As we discussed in our prior meetings, CHEA wishes to be a resource to the Committee as it develops its HEA legislation.

The federal laws on accreditation, largely in Part H of HEA Title IV, need minor adjustments to address new conditions. CHEA prepared in May 2003 an *Agenda for HEA* that presents our overall view and remains the basis of our position. I shared this document with you previously and attach another copy. It urges improvements in accreditation to address the developments in higher education as well as the changes in public expectations for institutions and for the quality assurance work of accreditation. CHEA has not developed any specific HEA legislative language of its own, but we could work with the committee as might be helpful.

The fundamental HEA approach to accreditation should be a reaffirmation of the successful federal policy of reliance upon private, voluntary accreditation for quality assurance in higher education programs that receive federal assistance. This is far preferable to direct federal quality control in higher education. This policy has served well the public, the government and the institutions since 1954 for veterans programs and since 1965 for HEA. The HEA Amendments of 1992 regarding accreditation have strengthened the federal-accreditation relationship. The major improvements in the administration of the federal grant and loan programs from the 1992 changes speak for themselves. Accreditation is one major element of these improvements.

In the last two years, consideration of HEA changes in accreditation has focused attention on several major accreditation-related issues: distance, achievement, transfer and information. Each issue is presented briefly below, along with two other issues.

Distance Education

CHEA supports the expanded attention of accreditors to programs of distance education. As “distance” is a means of delivery, it is not a separate system of education. So the quality standards should be the same for every means of delivery. Accreditors can and do use different methods to review distance programs, but the quality standards should be the same and no additional standards should be placed in federal law. Accreditors should also take special care when distance programs expand rapidly, and should review institutional processes that assure the distance student is the one actually completing the program. Well-drawn provisions to address these questions could strengthen the HEA.

Student Achievement

CHEA supports accretor and institutional attention to student achievement. This work needs to be based on the mission of each institution and the goals of its students. The means of measurement should be determined by the institution or program and may be designated by the accretor. Simple or solely quantitative measures of student achievement are often misleading and should not be mandated.

Transfer of Credit

CHEA has been a leader in the advocacy of institutional and accretor improvements of their credit transfer activities, through CHEA policy, its public meetings, its analytical papers, and the new HETA alliance. The “CHEA transfer principle” states that institutions should consider transfer application on their merits and not discriminate solely on the basis of accreditation of the sending institution. Institutions should determine their academic programs, and no federal law should direct what credits should or should not be transferred. While CHEA does not favor new federal law in this area, CHEA suggests that any new federal rule embody the CHEA principle of non-discrimination. It might also be helpful for institutions to make their transfer policies public.

Public Information

CHEA has advocated more public information on the results of accreditation reviews. This could be done with the collaboration of accreditors and their institutions or programs under review. Work is ongoing to produce a broadly acceptable approach, but no consensus has yet been developed in the higher education community. Care should be taken to assure that additional information does not inappropriately damage institutions or programs, and that the information to the public can be understood. Accreditation is a complicated activity conducted among experts in a confidential and peer-based process. A balanced approach is needed, so that the desire for public information should not trample the confidentiality needed to make the accreditation process work. The costs of liability and litigation also need to be addressed if new law is written in this area.

Other issues

Two other issues have received attention in the HEA discussions: governance and states as accreditors. CHEA does not favor the addition of either of these proposals to the HEA.