

The Witnesses

U. S. Senate Hearing on Accreditation, February 26, 2004

Senators Have Questions, but Dismiss “Delinkage”

CHEA SUMMARY AND COMMENTARY

FOUR U.S. SENATORS HAD LOTS OF QUESTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS IN THEIR HEARING AND TOUCHED ON ALL THE major accreditation issues. But they showed no support for “delinking” accreditation from access to federal program. Senators across a wide ideological spectrum emphasized their support for institutional autonomy and their distaste for direct federal measurement of institutional quality.

On February 26, 2004, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) held a hearing on “Higher Education Accreditation: How Can the System Better Ensure Quality and Accountability?” HELP Chair Judd Gregg (R-NH) was joined by Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) in hearing from four witnesses. The senators then made observations and questioned the witnesses for more than an hour, an unusually long and lively dialogue for this type of Senate hearing.

The overall impression was a strong interest in improving some aspects of the federal-accreditation linkage, but no support for ending it. In effect, these Senators signaled their intentions to build on the present system, to make it more competitive, to focus on outcomes measures, to enhance intellectual diversity and to sustain the autonomy of institutions. These participating Senators are a small share of 21 members of the HELP Committee. Questions at a hearing do not indicate the full range of issues, views and proposals that the committee might touch as they amend and renew the Higher Education Act (HEA). But the hearing was a touchstone of how the committee plans to approach accreditation in the reauthorization of HEA.

Four witnesses each made five-minute summaries of their formal written statements. The summaries and biographic background are available on the Senate HELP Committee Website at http://health.senate.gov/bills/edu_33_bill.html. The longer formal statements are submitted for the printed hearing record, which is available later.

The witnesses were:

- **Dr. Steven D. Crow**, Executive Director of the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools,
- **Dr. Jeffrey D. Wallin**, President of the American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE),
- **Dr. Jerry L. Martin**, Chairman of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), and
- **Dr. Robert L. Potts**, President of the University of North Alabama, (also representing the American Association of State Colleges and Universities - AASCU)

Opening Testimony

Dr. Crow emphasized the unique quasi-public role of accreditation and the very American effort to create an effective and trustworthy partnership through which privately held, voluntary self-regulation supports the broad public policy agenda for higher education as defined by the federal government. The current system serves the public interest and has demonstrated responsiveness to new demands upon it. Since the major changes in federal law on accreditation in 1992, we have come to understand, appreciate, and support the federal relationship. But we understand that new concerns mark this reauthorization and he outlined four of them: institutional quality and student learning, transparency of the accreditation process, credit transfer and distance education. He noted and summarized specific proposals have been offered to address each issue in the HEA reauthorization. He emphasized several caveats, stressing that the unique missions of institutions need to be understood and that discretion of the institutions was key to successful improvements.

Dr. Wallin said that American higher education is becoming ubiquitous. But, in the last two decades, serious questions have been raised about whether the quality of higher education has kept up with its growth in access and in expense. Academic standards are falling. He invoked Winston Churchill, saying, "Education is at once universal and superficial." He said that regional accreditation does a good job of assuring the reliability of the processes and resources of educational institutions, and weeding out diploma mills. But we should also build another system focused on quality assessment and high standards, which accreditors are not well equipped to do. He offered several suggestions. Regarding credit transfer, he urged reforms but said that it must remain the individual institution's prerogative to accept or reject transfers.

Dr. Martin said that accreditors have great power, but that they do NOT assure quality. Academic standards are falling and accreditation standards have little to do with learning. Grade inflation is a major problem. Accreditors performance is a persistent failure. Therefore, Congress should break the linkage between federal eligibility and accreditation. It should be replaced with a combination of federal officials weeding out inadequate institutions and states framing performance measures and enforcing them. Trustees should also act to strengthen academic standards at their own institutions. He criticized accreditors as cartels and unhealthy monopolies and called for competition among them.

Dr. Potts cited his "on the ground" experience with accreditation and his service on the National Advisory Committee that advises the Secretary of Education. He said the prior descriptions do not conform with his first-hand observations. The present system has worked well overall, and wholesale changes or "delinking" would be harmful to institutions and the public interest. It would be impossible to improve the situation by replacing the volunteer experts in accreditation with government inspectors. He stressed that the complex quality assurance system COULD be improved, and associated himself with a number of proposals from the higher education community (including AASCU) to do so. He urged the Congress to make small and targeted improvements - tweak the system - and not massive changes.

Senator's Reactions

Chair Gregg opened the questions by noting the differences of views. He observed that the central issue before the committee was whether to change the system a little or a lot. Martin said that no one had refuted his statements on grade inflation and deterioration of quality. Crow replied that the ACTA evidence is not convincing and the whole premise of massive decline is essentially bogus. Wallin said that American higher education is clearly the best in

the world, but it has major flaws like graduates who lack basic competence in writing ability. Potts added that U.S. institutions are very competitive, leading to constant improvement and reflection of market interests. HEA reauthorization cannot be the place to fix all the ills of our society.

Senator Alexander had a large number of observations and questions based on his experience as U.S. Secretary of Education and both Governor and university president in Tennessee. He felt that it was important to encourage more choices and less monopoly in accreditation. He was most wary of any proposal to restrict the autonomy of institutions because that is a key to their success. The marketplace of our higher education system works very well. He cited grade inflation as a problem to be solved by campus presidents, not accreditors. He stressed that federal law directs accreditation to determine “sufficient quality,” a correctly minimal standard, to receive federal support. He rejected states as a useful determinant of eligibility because “no state would unaccredit itself.”

Senator Sessions also noted his direct experience with accreditation as a trustee of Huntington College, as Attorney General of Alabama, and, more recently, observing Auburn University. These experiences raised a number of concerns about difficulties in the system. He was troubled that accreditors went beyond their proper scope. He cited the many well-known accomplishments of Auburn and found it odd that such a great institution could find itself on probation with its accreditor. The ensuing discussion noted that regional accreditors hold an effective monopoly, that review of institutional administration is part of the statutory requirements for accreditation, that progress on issues at Auburn was clearly evident and that all the facts were not available at this hearing.

Senator Clinton noted that Senator Kennedy wanted to attend the hearing, but was on the Senate floor dealing with gun legislation. She agreed with Senator Alexander that institutional autonomy and independence were precious. She opposed government standards on political correctness and direct government assessments of quality. She said that extreme cases should not cause us to overlook the enormous accomplishments of our higher education institutions which are a source of great pride to our country. Citing a recent home state meeting with all types of colleges and universities, she conveyed their great alarm at the proposal for federal rules over the transfer of credits and said she opposes such new rules. The pipeline of opportunity to attend college still needs a lot of work, but higher education does a great job and Congress should not interfere with such an extraordinary product.

In a **second round of questions**, Chair Gregg asked about distance learning, and was told by Dr. Crow that accreditors can assess its quality on the same standards as other delivery means and additional standards are problematical. Dr. Wallin added that you cannot hold e-learning to a higher standard than other means of delivery. Dr. Potts noted that accreditation agencies are prepared to address quality assurance in expanded distance learning, and that sound outcome measures are available to do so.

Finally, **Senator Alexander** asked a series of questions about expanding choices in accreditation and giving more power under law to the U.S. Secretary of Education. He asked if problem cases in accreditation might be referred to a special board or other body for review or resolution. Dr. Crow replied that it was quite difficult to establish a new accreditation agency. Various groups have discussed it often, but little work has gone forward, except AALE. He said that the 1992 federal actions (by then Secretary Alexander) had made

accreditors far less prescriptive. Crow also noted that accreditors were, unfortunately, not well equipped to assist schools that were clearly failing. Accreditors do not have the funds to do this task, and have no potential source to get them.

Wallin repeated his support for competition, but said it was unrealistic to expect many new accreditation agencies because the resources were too scarce and there is too much work to build a new one. He noted that competition DID exist in teaching (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and Teacher Education Accreditation Council), but the latter emerged with the support of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), an existing association. He said that it was very difficult to set sound criteria for giving more power to the Secretary and likewise for referring any cases to a special board. The problem was who would decide when to invoke these tools. Martin said that the U.S. Education Department could play a role like the U.S. Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) to measure financial stability, with periodic financial spot-checks as done by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Potts noted that most of the competition being sought could be done under current federal law, and cited nursing, teaching and the liberal arts as three areas where competition among accreditors already exists.

CHEA Commentary

At the conclusion, Senator Alexander encouraged the witnesses to also respond further with any other options for accreditation and for better ways to assure quality while preserving the autonomy of institutions.

On the positive side, the hearing demonstrated a strong wariness of federal action to directly intervene in academic affairs and little interest in radical changes in the current system of federal quality assurance depending on voluntary accreditation. On the negative side, one witness attacked the current system, saying accreditors do not do their job, and many anecdotes of alleged failures and mis-steps by accreditors were placed on the public record. Overall, it was a thorough airing of the successes and challenges to voluntary quality assurance that points the Senate in the direction of modest reforms.

CHEA has been invited to submit a subsequent written statement for the official hearing record, and plans to do so. This document, and other materials from the hearing, will be posted when available on the CHEA Website www.chea.org under "Government Relations."

This document was completed and posted on the CHEA Website on March 3, 2004. Please see the Website for other materials on the Higher Education Act (HEA) Reauthorization, including periodic "CHEA Updates" on HEA developments. CHEA Update # 7, posted on Monday, March 1, 2004, is a brief version on the same Senate hearing discussed in this document.

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