

## Is the Era of Self-Regulation Over?

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Dear Colleague:

All the best for a healthy, happy new year.

The brief holiday respite offered the luxury of taking a step back from the daily press of activities, issues and details associated with the current reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). It was an opportunity to take stock of the past year, to reflect thoughtfully on accreditation and federal policy and to ask: *What are the vital issues and values at stake for accreditation and higher education in this reauthorization?*

*The vital issue in this reauthorization is self regulation itself.* Will higher education, through accreditation – its primary form of self regulation – continue to carry out its responsibility for academic quality or will the federal government be successful in shifting more of the responsibility for academic quality to the federal level? As this reauthorization has moved forward, it has become increasingly clear that efforts to make major alterations in the fundamentals of accreditation and to diminish the central role of institutions in matters of academic quality have become a principal focus of various legislative proposals.

Current legislative proposals, if enacted, would significantly alter accreditation, sometimes in dramatic fashion. Through these proposals, Congress could begin to take over judgments for academic quality that have, for centuries, been the responsibility of our colleges and universities. For example, Congress, working with the United States Department of Education (USDE), could be in a position to determine conditions for transfer of credit, to decide what counts as quality in distance learning or to prescribe acceptable student learning outcomes. This is in contrast to prior reauthorizations that proceeded on the tacit agreement among all parties that self regulation of higher education through accreditation by and large "worked." Yes, some adjustments were needed, e.g., in the case of distance learning in relation to eligibility for student aid funds in 1998. But, accreditation as self regulation, although not without its critics, was viewed as generally effective and reliable.

To challenge self regulation in this manner is to challenge some of higher education's most cherished core academic values: our institutional autonomy, academic freedom and the centrality of institutional mission. A U.S. higher education enterprise that seriously compromises or loses its autonomy, academic freedom and mission base will have lost its capacity to make essential judgments about academic quality. Our academic core will become a federal- and state-directed enterprise that, while still functioning, will likely experience a diminishing of some of our most positive attributes.

- *Institutional autonomy* is vital to academic quality. The principle that institutions – faculty, students, administrators and governing boards working together – are responsible for decisions related to academic quality is essential to the richness, diversity and effectiveness of all higher education.
- *Academic freedom* is vital to academic quality. U.S. higher education has sustained a vibrancy of intellectual development precisely because of a spirit of openness, thoughtfulness and innovation that can exist only in an environment of free inquiry and a sense of security about expressing a rich array of views.
- *The centrality of mission* is vital to academic quality. Students have flourished in the diverse array of U.S. higher education institutions that provide extraordinary opportunity through our community colleges, faith-based colleges, liberal arts colleges, state colleges and universities, technical colleges and research universities.

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These values are clearly outlined in the *CHEA Reauthorization Agenda* as approved by the CHEA Board of Directors in April 2003 ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)).

As we are all aware, advocacy for self regulation was a difficult task in 2003 and we expect it to be equally difficult in 2004. Our society is experiencing a broad challenge to self regulation, whether this applies to accounting (e.g., Arthur Anderson), corporations (e.g., Enron), charities (e.g., United Way), mutual funds (e.g., Janus), or government agencies (e.g., the Securities and Exchange Commission). Nonetheless, we in accreditation and higher education must effectively demonstrate that accreditation is one form of self regulation that *does* work: *Accreditation is a successful form of self regulation, with an impressive history of integrity, robustness and vigor.*

CHEA's approach to reauthorization is grounded in a fundamental commitment to sustain and enhance self regulation of higher education and to preserve core academic values that are, in turn, dependent on the continued independence of higher education. We routinely ask: "How will self regulation of academic quality and the central role of institutions be affected?" when we propose legislative language. This is the basis on which we decide to support or not support legislative proposals, whether these emerge from the House, the Senate, USDE, Washington-based associations or accrediting organizations. This commitment animates all of our advocacy for accreditation in this reauthorization. It is grounded in an unwavering commitment to the independence of degree-granting colleges and universities.

CHEA does not support proposals to increase federal authority over institutions or accreditation when these proposals would weaken self regulation. We believe that the goals of some members of Congress (e.g., greater accountability) can be achieved through enhanced reliance on self regulation rather than replacing this with federal control that would be burdensome to institutions. While we may need to face some compromises in the future, CHEA maintains that it is essential that we start from a position of principled advocacy.

This reauthorization challenges all of us in accreditation and higher education to remember what is most important to us: the essential role of self regulation in maintaining our core academic values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and the centrality of mission. Please join with CHEA in addressing these vital issues. You may contact us by email, telephone, fax or mail. We can assist in bringing your views to the attention of national policymakers.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



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In addition to the CHEA Reauthorization Agenda, other important information about accreditation and reauthorization issues may be found on the CHEA Website at [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org) under "Government Relations." Periodic updates on reauthorization activity as well as letters, testimony and links to other key sites are available here.