



OP-ED



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Higher Education and Accreditation: A Dialogue with the U.S. Secretary of Education

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(First of a Two-Part Series)

Now is the best time for higher education and its accreditors to invite a dialogue with Secretary Betsy DeVos about accreditation and quality oversight of higher education. While her appointment generated controversy because of her views on K-12 schooling, her position on colleges and universities is just emerging and perhaps not yet fully formed. She seems supportive of the for-profit sector; and for that very reason she can be especially helpful in encouraging the best performers in that sector to press for quality oversight of its good and bad performers with the same yardsticks used to measure other colleges.

During the Obama administration, despite large increases in Pell Grant funding, the values of peer-review accreditation were threatened by a Department of Education bent on turning justifiable accountability to taxpayers into federal policies on higher education. Those policies were full of regulations that increasingly seemed to replace accreditation for continuous improvement of colleges, based on their individual missions, into a strategy of compliance and uniformity. It seemed only a matter of months before American colleges and universities would be overseen by a true Ministry of Higher Education, like those in Europe, and would lose that special value of having great diversity in the very kinds of our institutions. In many ways, the United States has the best system of higher education because it does not have a system of higher education. That specialness seemed threatened.

Secretary DeVos, like the President, is dedicated to reducing regulations on industry, and there is no reason that policy might not include higher education, especially since much of the work to plan reductions has been done by a bipartisan task force commissioned by Senators Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray. More importantly, she may be amenable to changes that reaffirm the value of peer review within a context that encourages innovation in education, reduces some of the burdens of the accreditation process, and recognizes the varied kinds of excellence, traditional and entrepreneurial, throughout both the public and private sectors.

The Secretary will find that many current accreditation practices work very well and inspire little criticism. She will find in higher education partners who can share values but also affirm the value of higher education itself being the best overseer of quality standards. She will find partners open to changes and improvements in the process and certainly open to innovation. Rarely do we see accreditors not open to approval of new modes of delivery or new kinds of institutions; but we have seen the Department of Education putting burdens on innovation in the form, for example of outdated seat-time requirements or state-authorization requirements that – in the understandable interest of providing accountability – deny expanded opportunities in an electronic age.



The Secretary may want to work with higher education to make sure that quality standards recognize and accommodate the profound changes taking place in higher education – technology in so many ways, new delivery systems, new kinds of credentials, a much-expanded global dimension and global interactions of institutions, changing demographics of students, changing faculty roles, new business models, the rise of the for-profit sector, and much more. Decades ago, one would not have imagined fully accredited universities like Excelsior or Charter Oak. They offer very few courses, but package credits students gather at multiple institutions into legitimate credentials.

Then there are the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the most visible of the operations that evaluate prior experience as possible higher education credits for colleges to consider, and the American Council on Education (ACE), reviewing and “validating” hundreds of courses offered by the military and corporations, an approval that many colleges acknowledge as the basis for transfer credit. There are companies like StraighterLine and Capella offering online college courses that are often of good quality. Current federal guidelines have not made students who take courses offered by such companies eligible for federal financial aid because the companies have no accrediting mechanism.

Should not such eligibility be added if, indeed, a sound assessment mechanism can verify that the companies’ operation satisfies quality considerations and that their courses help a student progress toward his or her Bachelor’s degree? There are also countless badges and certificates being offered, credentials that many employers will value; but even though they can replace college degrees for some employers, they and much else lie outside the accreditation system. Perhaps they should stay there so that accreditation can focus responsibly on whole institutions and on discrete professional programs. But that decision can only be made while being fully aware of how new credentialing and new modes of delivery are changing the industry we are preserving and maintaining.

[In Part II, we will look at both some potential changes in accreditation processes and the positive aspects of the processes that should be retained.]

Read the second part of John Bassett’s two-part series on inviting a dialogue about accreditation and higher education and the rest of the CHEA Op-Ed series [here](#).

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