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Accreditation Update: Navigating the Standards in an Era of Change

THIRD IN A SERIES

Fran White, president of the College of Marin, and Ed Valeau, senior partner with Education Leadership Search and president emeritus of Hartnell Community College, contributed greatly to the development of this accreditation series of articles. ACCCA Reports wants to extend their gratitude to Drs. White and Valeau for lending their time and expertise to this project.

This fall, *ACCCA Reports* has taken a special focus on accreditation issues.

We are talking to accreditation officials at the regional and national levels to provide insight into how accreditation standards and methods are changing, why it's happening, and how our institutions can respond. Ultimately, our goal is for our members to understand the issues around accreditation, and help guide their colleges through the arduous accreditation process successfully.

In October, we featured an interview with Barbara Beno, president of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Colleges, about the issues facing California colleges as they go through the accreditation process.

In last month's article, we took a look at accreditation issues from a more national perspective. We talked to Dr. Belle Wheelan, president of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, and learned how community colleges in other parts of the country are dealing with the changing accreditation landscape.

This month, we talk to Judith Eaton, who is serving her 11th year as president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. A national advocate and institu-



tional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. Dr. Eaton talked to *ACCCA Reports* about accreditation at the national level, and how legislation and national initiatives are changing the landscape.

Q: In carrying out your duties, what are some of the major challenges CHEA faces?

A: At CHEA, we have just started a new a multi-year effort – the CHEA Initiative – to influence public confidence and recalibrate government involvement in accreditation. Developed in response to issues and concerns raised by the academic and accreditation communities as well as public officials, the Initiative has two goals: (1) to further strengthen accreditation, thereby enhancing public confidence and trust in self-regulation and (2) to refocus federal oversight of accreditation more directly on issues related to institutional viability and the use of federal funds, rather than the academic policy issues that are primarily the province of colleges and universities. (For more information on the CHEA Initiative, go to <http://www.chea.org/About/CI/index.asp>.)

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Accreditation” is a periodic, standards-based, peer-based scrutiny of the academic quality of institutions and programs established and maintained by the nation’s higher education enterprise. The accrediting organizations themselves are periodically scrutinized for their effectiveness and reliability, a process known as “recognition.” At present there are two sources of recognition in the United States: CHEA, a nongovernmental, non-profit, institutional membership body, and the federal government through U.S. Department of Education (USDE). Accreditors play a “gatekeeping” role; for example, to be eligible for federal funds, institutions must be accredited by an accrediting organization recognized by USDE.

It is appropriate for the federal government to hold academic institutions and accreditors accountable in a number of areas. But when it comes to core academic quality issues – like curriculum and academic standards and choice of faculty – those decisions need to be made first and foremost by institutions, not the federal government.

We are talking about a relationship where, since accreditors are gatekeepers for federal funds, they are accountable for overall review of institutions and soundness of institutions. At the same time, there is a long history of institutional leadership and responsibility in the academic arena and we would like to see that remain.

How would changes be made? It requires sitting down within our community first, then with the federal government and looking at existing law and regulations. We need to ask: Does this preserve the balance? Is this how we want the relationship to go forward or not?

The CHEA Initiative is about being reflective and taking a good look at these issues within the academic and accreditation communities, then more broadly with the public and in the federal policy arena.

The CHEA Initiative is a three- to five-year effort. We are spending the first year reaching out and bringing in all interested parties for discussion. We held our first in a series of national accreditation forums in September. A second forum is planned in January at our annual conference here in Washington.

We are also having discussions with institutional leaders, with associations, with accreditors, with officials in the Department of Education and with members of Congress.

Q: What major issues will community colleges face with the accreditation process in the next three years?

A: Whether it’s community colleges or four-year colleges, in New Mexico or New York or California – all colleges and universities are challenged in the financial area. The financial issues facing all of us are very, very important.

Other major issues facing colleges and universities include the extent to which the public (including legislators) is convinced that we are adequately accountable for student achievement. The public needs to believe that we are providing adequate information about what our colleges and universities do.

We are calling for more accountability around student achievement, and transparency, but we want the colleges and universities to decide the standards to which they will hold themselves, and the way in which they will inform the public.

Q: Throughout the nation, many community colleges are finding themselves on probation or threatened with loss of their status. Can you cite three common causes for this condition?

A: In general, if we look back especially over the last 10 years or so, there have been enormous changes in higher education – changes such as distance learning, the significant growth of the for-profit sector, finances, globalization and internationalization. Confronting change takes time, and it doesn’t always go smoothly.

Q: Do you have advice for colleges regarding how to avoid being sanctioned?

When an institution is going through a review and there are issues about whether or not an institution has met all the standards of the accreditation, it’s usually a question of that institution not providing adequate evidence that they meet the standards.

Accreditors are looking for this evidence. If it is not compelling, accreditors are required to raise questions.



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Accreditors are explicit about what an institution needs to do to meet a standard. Institutions benefit when they work with the accreditors to find a way to make sure that the standard is met.

Q: Have you noticed what leadership strategies among CEOs help them to steer their colleges away from possible probation or sanctions? What are they?

We talk a lot to college and university presidents and chief academic officers about accreditation and the role it plays in an institution. What we find over and over again is that the leader of an institution sets the tone of the accreditation self-study and peer review visit.

These leaders should emphasize that the accreditation process can help an institution examine itself and help strengthen what it does. It is the opportunity for peer review that is so valuable. When CEOs and CAOs approach the process that way, the institution benefits.

Q: Leading up to the accreditation process, what are some common pitfalls colleges fall into that hamper their progress or chances for success?

A: Often an institution reports accreditation as being a burden when that institution hasn't kept up with its data collection about the work it's doing, such as student achievement or finances. When the accreditors come, the institution realizes they've got to provide this data, and that's when they start saying "How are we going to get this done?"

Institutions need to have quantitative and qualitative data about what they are doing.

Accreditors are always there ahead of time to help you avoid pitfalls. Look at the standards and have some advanced discussions.

Stay current with what's going on at the federal level. Come to meetings. Those accreditors that are federally recognized have to be responsive to what

is happening in Washington and in the federal policy arena. Stay informed – accountability is a really important issue, governance is emerging as an important issue. Staying informed gives institutions perspective about why accreditors are asking for what they are asking.

The extent to which colleges and university leaders become involved with accreditation is an asset. Become part of peer review teams. Engage in accreditation. Come to conferences.

Q: How does a sanction affect the college and the community?

A: When an institution receives a sanction, it immediately look at how the sanction is going to impact a number of things, including enrollment, the ability to recruit faculty, and the confidence of the governing board, city or county or state that funds it.

If I were the President or CAO of an institution that has received a sanction, I would want to put any problem I have into a constructive light. I would have a plan to address the problem and publicize that plan, in order to retain confidence. Keep in mind that addressing a sanction provides an opportunity for improvement, which can be conveyed to the accreditor and to the public. Ultimately, resolving any issues raised by an accreditor can lead to a stronger institution. ■

CHEA Annual Conference to Feature Leaders From U.S. and International Education Institutions and Accrediting Organizations

Leaders from U.S. and international higher education institutions and accrediting organizations will converge on Washington, D.C. to attend the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) 2009 Annual Conference. The conference will be held January 26-29 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel.

The conference offers sessions covering a wide variety of issues, including:

- Expectations of a new administration.
- Federal policy, accountability and accreditation.
- Governing boards and accreditation.
- Student learning outcomes.

Other highlights will include the Second National Accreditation Forum, which will continue the dialogue on accreditation and government launched at the first Forum in September 2008, and presentation of the 2009 CHEA Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. The conference will be followed by the CHEA International Seminar, with a separate registration fee, covering issues ranging from emerging international developments to international quality assurance practices.

A full Preliminary Program for the 2009 Annual Conference, including a registration form and hotel registration information, is available on CHEA's Website at http://www.chea.org/pdf/2009_CHEA_Preliminary_Program.pdf.