



OP-ED



THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: THE 20TH YEAR OPINION SERIES

Issue 9 • July 2017

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

John Bassett

(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.



