



OP-ED



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

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(This is the second of a two-part series exploring the desirability of dialogue between the Secretary of Education and the higher education and accrediting communities. [Click here](#) to read Part I.)

In addition to assuring that innovation is encouraged and that changes in higher education are accommodated within quality-based oversight, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and higher education can work to make the accreditation system a bit less burdensome. Electronics have simplified data collection but, for most accreditation reviews, the amount of data now required can still be reduced. Colleges with scarce resources often cannot afford the staff time required by the process and large universities may have a huge burden to support not only their regional accreditation but also two or three dozen professional accreditations required by their many specialized programs.

Moreover, why not expedite the process somewhat for colleges and universities that have been reaccredited each time with flying colors? To some people, yes, it seems inequitable not to demand the same work of all colleges every time. A differentiated process every ten years for schools and programs continually demonstrating health and strength and fulfillment of mission, however, would reduce the burden on accreditors, institutions, volunteers, and in the public sector taxpayers. It makes sense to deploy resources where most needed: for proven entities a ten-year checkup with a self-study, site visit, and red-flag awareness; for those with some success but more marginal metrics the current comprehensive review; for those still unproven or in trouble additional assessments to ascertain sustainable quality.

Some people suggest throwing out the regionals and having, perhaps, segmentation by type of institution – research universities, regional publics, community colleges, small four-year colleges, and so forth. It is, however, not clear that the current regionals are not fully aware of the difference between reviewing Ohio State and Central Michigan and Pacific Lutheran and Monroe Community College. Nor is it clear that the enormous difficulty and expense of dismantling the current units and establishing totally new ones would ever end up being worth the effort and expense. On the other hand, should competition among the regionals be allowed, so that a college might go to any one of them and not be limited to the one in its region? That is a complex question.

The Secretary will probably know or want to know that a great deal about accreditation goes well and is rarely controversial. First of all, at least half the time universities spend is not for the more visible “regional” accreditation of whole institutions, but for professional programs in nursing, business, engineering, physical therapy, and just about every other profession whose members are educated at an institution of higher education. These processes can be time-consuming and their burdens can be streamlined; but the system works well. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recognizes some sixty of the accreditors, sometimes more than one in a field given the differing missions of programs in, let us say, nursing or business. CHEA holds them to a rigorous standard, and in many cases the accreditor does not seek federal recognition because undergraduate financial aid is not at stake.



Second, the self-study process needed for accreditation is found to be valuable by most programs and colleges, even if its burden can and should be reduced. By the end of a serious self-study, most colleges and programs know almost as much about their strengths and challenges as they will by the end of the whole accreditation process. If they act on what they learn, and improve, they are fulfilling a most important purpose of accreditation.

Third, most professionals in higher education see “peer review” as the key to all of accreditation and continuous improvement by all institutions as a major goal. Experienced faculty and administrators, receiving no pay and acting in the interest of education, do site visits to institutions being reviewed and serve on commissions making the judgments afterwards. Like professionals in medicine and law, those in higher education have for years taken seriously oversight of the quality of the programs in their own industry. The specious criticism that the process is simply insider trading, where we pat each other’s back, is not evidenced by any review in which I have been a part or of which I know. The peer reviewers are, by and large, tough minded and astute in their questions and judgments. Handing such a responsibility over to state or federal officials would reduce the focus on academic quality and doubtless also create a huge new tax burden.

Accreditation’s value is complicated, however, by the growing investment in federal student aid, as valuable as those dollars are, because eligibility for such aid has been coupled to the accreditation process. The Secretary and higher education will want to review whether this coupling is good for all. The federal government, to provide accountability for taxpayers, now insists on a range of compliance measures that make up a different kind of scorecard from the qualitative measures normally part of accreditation, measures tied to a goal of “continuous improvement” by all institutions that take advantage of the accreditation process. Nonetheless, the value of accountability that led the Department of Education (USDE) to establish the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) must be accounted for in deliberations with the Secretary.

The other goal of peer review, of course, is maintaining baseline values for continuing the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” that accreditation represents. Politicians often ask why more colleges do not lose their accreditation and suggest standards are lax. Many seeking accreditation, of course, do not get it; some do lose it; but one always must ask “how many of these colleges are so bad that their communities would be better off if they had to close their doors?” It is a sobering question since many colleges who struggle the hardest still may serve an important purpose to members of their communities and with good leadership can be better.

But CHEA and USDE, along with other representatives of government – such as Senators Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray – and higher education can surely now begin to work out procedures and policies for higher education that protect quality-and-improvement-oriented peer review of programs and institutions, that preserve accountability to taxpayers – whether coupled with accreditation or not, that establish quality-oversight of newer developments in higher education delivery without impeding innovation, and that account for the tremendous and wonderful diversity of kinds of colleges and universities in America that is one of the keys to America’s standing in the eyes of educators worldwide. Let us seek that dialogue as soon as possible.

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