Appendix 1.2

Accreditation at a Crossroads

***Much is at stake as the newly formed Council for Higher Education Accreditation begins its work.***

by Robert Glidden

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In American higher education, accreditation - our procedure for "quality control" - is often misunderstood and sometimes maligned. It relies on voluntary peer review and it functions in lieu of a federal government monitoring agency. In nearly every other country in the world, the monitoring of postsecondary education is conducted by a federal ministry of education. Americans, however, have always felt it inappropriate for the federal government either to determine curricula or to decide who may study what. Accreditation in the United States arose because institutions of higher education themselves recognized the need to establish minimum standards for admission and to assure transferability of academic credits. Other accreditation initiatives followed, in which specific disciplines and professions began to police their own programs in an effort to guard against fraudulent and unethical practices.

After World War II and the advent of the GI Bill, accrediting associations were called upon to determine the eligibility of institutions for federal funding. That made what had been a voluntary procedure more mandatory than voluntary for most institutions. And, when some professions were successful in tying licensure for professional practice to graduation from accredited programs, much of the voluntary nature of accreditation was lost. Thus, it is not too surprising that there exists a certain tension (not all of it unhealthy) between institutions and accreditors (especially specialized accreditors), and occasionally among accrediting groups themselves.

Despite the confusion and occasional tension that surrounds the subject, most would agree that accreditation has meant higher standards and greater progress for American higher education. Accreditation's peer review process has allowed American higher education to change with the times and to be responsive to the needs of society.

But accreditation is at a crossroads. The immediate concern is that reauthorization of the 1965 Higher Education Act in the U.S. Congress is at hand. Accreditation "took it on the chin" during the 1992 reauthorization process. Rightly or wrongly, Congress exhibited little confidence in accreditation's ability to handle fraud or deal with institutions demonstrating excessive student loan default rates. There was general confusion in the Congress about what accreditation does, how it works, and whether it is effective.

The result in 1992 was that Congress authorized the establishment of State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs) in each state to review postsecondary education institutions with high default rates. Most institutions and accreditors viewed the SPREs as a dangerous precedent, even though these agencies were intended to deal initially with only the most egregious situations of loan default. The succeeding Congress did not fund the SPREs, but the threat is still ominous. The government has told higher education: "Either you do it right and assure us that you're measuring quality and preventing fraud, or we'll do it ourselves."

After the 1992 reauthorization fiasco, the higher education community reacted by assigning blame in two directions: on the organization that had recognized and coordinated accrediting activities for nearly 20 years, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), and on non-degree-granting vocational and technical schools, in which much of the default had occurred. Educators perceived that COPA was ineffective in telling the story of accreditation on Capitol Hill, and the organization was dissolved in 1993. Also, college and university leaders were convinced that the reputation of accreditation as a method of quality assurance was so tarnished by the high default rate in some non-degree-granting schools that they resolved to disassociate themselves from such institutions, partly through the dissolution of COPA.

The higher education community has worked since then to come up with a replacement for COPA. First, the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) was established to continue the recognition of accrediting groups on an interim basis. The National Policy Board, an alliance among the regional accrediting associations and major higher education associations, met for more than a year but could not reach consensus about a permanent solution for the governance of accreditation. At a conference in 1995, a group of college and university presidents and trustees affirmed the value of accreditation and recommended that institutional chief executives assume responsibility for drafting a plan to create a national organization to coordinate accreditation. The resulting Presidents Work Group developed the concept for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) during 1995­96 and submitted its proposal, along with nominations for the first CHEA Board of Directors, to all degree-granting institutions in the United States for a ratification vote in the spring of 1996. Fifty-four percent of the institutions voted, and 94 percent of those voted for the establishment of CHEA.

CHEA assumes the recognition function from CORPA this fall. It comes on the scene just in time for the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1997. Will accreditation fare any better this time? Federal government officials and the public still ask, usually with regard to regional accreditation, "Are accreditors tough enough? Do they ever deny accreditation or disaccredit institutions? Do they discover fraud and set appropriate penalties?" Meanwhile, institutions ask, usually with regard to specialized accreditation, "Are accreditors objective and fair in their judgments, or are they simply trade associations determined to secure more resources for their own interests? Is this level of quality assurance worth the cost?"

Several points seem evident:

* The public does not understand how accreditation works. With six different regional associations that accredit institutions, another group of national institutional accreditors in such specific fields as theology, and another 50 or more specialized groups that deal with specific disciplines and professions, it is complex! Many people in the higher education community itself do not understand who serves whom. A much more thorough and compelling program of education and advocacy is needed, or, at the very least, a clearinghouse for accurate and up-to-date information about accreditation - who does what, how they do it, and how effective they are.
* For accreditation to work properly and achieve its objectives, it must be a cooperative enterprise among institutions and accreditors. Cooperation is not likely, perhaps not possible, without good coordination and communication.
* For accreditation itself to improve, accreditors need a common forum in which they can share ideas. They need feedback from those they serve, and they would benefit from the impetus to improve that comes from accountability and a certain amount of peer pressure.
* In an endeavor such as accreditation, which cannot avoid some degree of tension and conflict, a mechanism for resolving disputes about principles and processes is essential.

Before facing the questions that will be asked during the reauthorization process, accreditation needs a "rallying point" - some coordinated effort to describe, defend, and advocate for accreditation. CHEA will represent the interests of the entire accrediting enterprise and will attempt to enhance the credibility of accreditation by:

* recognizing ("certifying") accrediting agencies that are objective, fair, and rigorous but even-handed; that adhere to an ethical code of good practice; and that demonstrate that they contribute to quality assurance and quality improvement through their standards and the way in which they implement them;
* serving as an accreditation information clearinghouse for the public, decision makers, institutions, and accreditors themselves;
* being an advocate - providing a consistent and persuasive national voice - for accreditation as an essential component in American higher education;
* fostering studies and discussion aimed at improving accrediting practices, including finding ways to make them both more efficient and more effective; and
* providing a balance among the interests of the institutions, the professions, and the public by mediating accreditation disputes.

CHEA will take the leadership in formulating policy positions in advance of reauthorization discussions - by being proactive rather than reactive - and it will try to develop consensus among the entire community so that higher education can speak with one voice on accreditation during the reauthorization process next year.

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