Beginning in 2016-2017, CHEA initiated an Op-Ed Series, with articles from leading thinkers in accreditation and higher education. The Op-Eds address the future of accreditation: what we do, how we serve students and our role in society. These Op-Eds are published on the CHEA Website.

Issue 9 and Issue 10 • July 2017

**Higher Education and Accreditation: A Dialogue with the U.S. Secretary of Education**
(Part 1)
(Part 2)

by John Bassett, president of Heritage University

Issue 8 • June 2017

**The Future of Specialized and Professional Accreditation**
by Joseph Vibert, executive director of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA)

Issue 7 • May 2017

**On the Need for Leadership in the World of Accreditation**
by John Bassett, president of Heritage University

Issue 6 • May 2017

**Four Questions for Re-Authorization**
by Barbara Brittingham, president of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Issue 5 • May 2017

Accreditation: Transactional or Value-Added?
by Richard Legon, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB)

Issue 4 • May 2017

Students First: Reimagining Accreditation
by Rini Sampath, policy director at the National Campus Leadership Council, a non-profit organization launched in 2012 to better empower student body leaders at colleges around the country to develop the tools, networks, and skills necessary to confront exigent issues facing students today

Issue 3 • April 2017

Involving Students in Accreditation
by Simon Boehme, director of student engagement at The Quality Assurance Commons for Higher and Postsecondary Education

Issue 2 • March 2017

Burdensome Accreditation System Needs Overhaul
by Richard Ekman, president of Council of Independent Colleges

Issue 1 • March 2017

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? ("Who will guard the guards themselves?")
by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president emeritus and university professor at the George Washington University, a leading author and expert on the challenges facing higher education

The views and opinions expressed in these Op-Eds are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.
Higher Education and Accreditation: A Dialogue with the U.S. Secretary of Education

John Bassett

(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 spurious 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.

John Bassett is retiring this month after seven years as president of Heritage University. Before coming to Heritage, he served as president of Clark University in Massachusetts for 10 years and previously was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of English at Case Western Reserve University.
On the Need for Leadership in the World of Accreditation

John Bassett

Few Americans outside of higher education, unless journalists or members of Congress, pay much attention to “accreditation” except to be aware that a college possessing it has passed muster on certain qualitative scorecards. For a professional program, it signifies a “good housekeeping seal of approval” from an accreditor probably recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) with both the program and the accreditor performing at a certain standard. Having accreditation from your professional association has clear meaning with regard to the standards of the profession and in relation to the availability of federal funds for students studying in these fields.

If you plan to attend, or your child plans to attend, an undergraduate college, however, accreditation means validation by one of seven regional accreditors, or a national accreditor usually for Bible colleges or certain business schools. These accreditors also go through a process of “recognition” perhaps by both the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and CHEA. The federal government’s role derives from the growth of billions of dollars in Pell Grants and other financial aid and the corresponding need for taxpayer accountability. They bring somewhat different expectations to the recognition process; an accreditor wants to lose neither the tie to financial-aid-eligibility for its process nor peer-review approval of quality.

While attention is often paid to the tension between these two forms of recognition, less has been paid to the kind of leadership peer-review higher education accreditation will need in the next generation to maintain credibility and influence as the gatekeeper for quality standards. Addressing that challenge is also the key; however CHEA and DOE work out their “partnership” to maintaining strong support within higher education itself for peer review as the coin of the realm to measure not simply “quality,” a rather general term begging the question “quality of what and for what,” but also integrity, fulfillment of mission, and sustainability. Peer-review accreditation also holds dear the importance of continuous improvement based on what is learned from an institution’s own self-assessments.

Accreditation of programs for the professions depends on standards for and proven success in preparing new professionals to be strong practitioners in such professions as engineering, physical therapy, nursing or business. There are leadership issues at stake—openness to new modes of education, awareness of changes in the profession and in the political and economic contexts for the profession and wisdom in managing quality oversight amid those changes. The issues in institutional accreditation, however, are more complex and may require a different kind of leadership.

For the regionals, it is intriguing that the same kind of credential (accreditation) is granted to every successful institution whether Eastern Illinois University, Yale, Whitman College, Charter Oak, or Cuyahoga Community College. The fundamental standards of all regionals are similar even if phrased differently, and within a region the standards are always the same. And yet everyone knows the analyses must differ. Evaluating quality of teaching at
a large public research university, using hundreds of Teaching Assistants with varied English skills, and at a liberal arts college like Grinnell or Millsaps or Washington and Jefferson can scarcely be the same process.

Second, peer-review defines its role not in terms of identical compliance but in terms of a college's articulated mission. While the education mission is always most important, colleges may also have a certain religious mission or military mission or public-service mission. Evaluation must account for how fulfilling a dual mission may justifiably be part of the accreditation process.

Third, many other factors have been suggested as legitimate parts of evaluation. Should the average debt burden of graduates be a factor, or is that unrelated to quality? Should safety factors and responsiveness to student concerns be a factor? Should a record of political partisanship be a negative factor? Should the level of community involvement be considered? How important should diversity and low-income access be? How do you consider graduation rates when those are affected by many factors but especially the economic level of entrants?

Fourth, many universities have significant research agendas that affect everything else, including undergraduate teaching; and that research is likely part of the institutional mission and the institution’s role in the state, regional or national economy. Yet normal accreditation processes do not attend much to the research dimension and perhaps they should not, though it is hard to do a comprehensive analysis without accounting for that elephant in the room.

So given the complexity of accreditation today, what kind of leadership is needed going forward? One goal must be deep buy-in from the most highly regarded universities and colleges, so the management and commissioners of accreditors are able to enlist regular involvement and support from those institutions. This involvement was very present when CHEA was founded, and it continues to be essential to commanding respect from not only higher education, but also business and government leaders. Accreditation leadership must be able to help lead higher education through this age of great changes—technology in many ways, globalization, new delivery modes and kinds of providers both for-profit and not-for-profit, demographics, an increasing role of government, and more. It must help to make good decisions about what is and is not part of the formal accreditation process and how the industry accommodates quality evaluation of what is not. Leadership must continue to insist upon the special value of the diversity of the very kinds of colleges and universities in America, but also recognize that much post-secondary education will take place outside of colleges in the future.

Leadership will provide a vehicle for recognizing that colleges must attend to safety, debt load, community involvement, intellectual openness, and diversity of several kinds, but that the bottom lines for accreditation will be the demonstrated quality of the student learning experience and student outcomes however measured, the sustainability of the institution, and the integrity of its operation. To articulate these values in an academic world of constant change, anathema for many colleges, will require accreditation leaders able to manage change, to articulate effectively the value of peer-review to diverse audiences, and to develop partnerships with government. It will also require the courage to say NO, whether to a college failing to serve its students and community or to a government that might insist on a model for accreditation that violates the fundamental values of peer review and continuous improvement.

John Bassett has been president of Heritage University since July 2010. Before coming to Heritage, he served as president of Clark University in Massachusetts for 10 years and previously was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of English at Case Western University.
Accreditation: Transactional or Value-Added?

Richard Legon

In recognizing the 20th anniversary of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) it is timely to consider the role, status and future of accreditation in ensuring the quality of our colleges and universities.

In its most essential role, accreditation is the pillar of self-regulation of our colleges and universities. Over 50 years ago, this central role was merged with the responsibility to serve as the federal government’s proxy in determining access to federal funding, which is critically important to the millions of students seeking access to higher education, and to institutions as well. However, the pairing of these two responsibilities – the original expectation of accreditation as a peer process for quality assurance and the latter as a logical and efficient means by which to ensure that federal education dollars are being spent wisely – has proven to be increasingly problematic. As institutions look to more creative and innovative ways to deliver educational programs, accreditors are pressed to become more demanding (a difficult task for peers). It’s a tough mix of responsibilities and under the strain of external demands for greater educational and financial accountability, accreditation as we know it may well be undermining its own best opportunity to add value to the sector.

America’s higher education system stands upon the inherent value of college and university autonomy from direct government control, or that of other founding organizations. It is this commitment to autonomy that has in many ways defined the nation’s higher education system: Institutions set their own respective missions, shape their academic programs that enable those missions to be met and explore creative and new models of education that meet the expectations of a changing student body and a demanding public. And it is institution autonomy, more than any other condition, that enables the diversity and quality of our colleges and universities. Ultimately it falls to the men and women who serve on the governing boards of our institutions and university systems to protect that autonomy while exerting their own independence as a policymaking body. It is higher education’s governing boards that are accountable for the success of their institutions; and it is their independence as fiduciaries that is essential for effectively assuring institutional mission fulfillment.

The breadth and quality of academic programs across some 4,000 accredited colleges and universities in the country is compelling. It’s that level of quality that has been reinforced and furthered by accreditation processes. But it is the nexus of academic quality and diversity where accreditation now runs the risk of embodying more of a regulatory burden than a value-added resource.
So, it's fair to ask: Are regional and program accreditors unintentionally limiting the strategic direction of the institutions they review? Could regional and program accreditors be more proactive in encouraging and supporting distinction over conformity, and by advocating on behalf of the essential value of institution autonomy?

Accreditors play an important role in assessing and assuring academic program quality and fiscal sustainability. And, current and prospective students and their families depend on the assurance that the process provides regarding the quality and overall strength of the college or university they are considering or currently attending (as well as the access to federal financial assistance ensured by accreditation’s regulatory regime). However, accreditation can often seem merely a transactional process in which minimalist regulatory oversight is the final (and primary) outcome.

When higher education leaders discuss accreditation, disdain and annoyance seem more often the norm than a sense of the process serving a meaningful and strategic value. In a demanding period where “change” and “disruption” seem to define the foreseeable future, institution leaders are concerned that accreditation is too often a barrier to risk-taking and innovation. Accreditors face a quandary: Strict standards provide needed confidence and access to federal support; but such standards may be limiting creativity, making accreditors complicit in inhibiting progress that a more demanding public expects from our colleges and universities. Strict standards and openness to innovation should not be in conflict. Institution innovation should be encouraged rather than over-regulated.

And yet as a result of this false choice between rigorous review and healthy innovation, we run the risk of a diminution of that most central principle of institutional autonomy, which more than any other condition, enables institutional risk-taking and innovation. Protecting that autonomy is fundamental to our governing boards’ responsibilities, in part, to ensure the overall strategic direction of the institutions they serve. Boards and institution leadership, however, are increasingly distracted by the need to develop counterweights against government (and even accreditor) oversight that comes dangerously close to infringing on their basic responsibilities.

Addressing the value of accreditation across higher education is particularly timely as we celebrate CHEA’s substantial impact on and defense of effective accreditation. In a changing and increasingly uncertain higher education environment we need a vibrant accreditation structure and process that focuses on the right areas in the right way. However, at a time when higher education is figuring out how best to change, adapt and innovate while regaining the broader public trust, it is essential that accreditors be supportive, flexible partners and that they help ensure institutions’ autonomy through effective quality assurance. It’s not an either-or proposition, and it can’t be long debated.

Richard Legon is President of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB).
Burdensome Accreditation System Needs Overhaul

Richard Ekman

Voluntary, nongovernmental regulation has long been a hallmark of the American approach to quality assurance in higher education. Our system relies on agreement by colleges and universities to pay for the apparatus that maintains the review process, on the premise that the process assures the public that the college has met a standard of satisfactory performance. The review also gives the college advice from well-informed peers about improvements that it may wish to consider. Unfortunately, while the concept remains valid, the U.S. accreditation system’s actual operations have become overly burdensome. It’s time for an overhaul.

In recent years, several detrimental changes to this model have occurred. The paperwork and the expense of the review process are increasing, as accreditors require more information in each review and ask for more frequent reviews. For smaller institutions, the expense of compliance is disproportionate. This creeping burden derives from federal pressure on both accreditors and institutions to do more, with more required interaction between the federal government and the accreditors. The cumulative effects of these changes are chipping away at the voluntary, nongovernmental character of the American approach. What’s more, the pressures from the federal government have led to a more uniform, nationwide set of standards and judgment criteria. This significantly diminishes any recognition of differences in institutional mission and educational philosophy, as well as regional variations. It disregards one of the distinctive strengths of the American higher education system—its diversity.

Will these trends be reversed or continue in the future? Without significant and sustained pressure to change the current system, it is unlikely that the time or expense of compliance will be made any smaller. We would do well to remember that many people expected the true conservatism of the George W. Bush administration to lead to a reduction of government regulation of higher education, but it didn’t. Most educators expected the Obama administration to be more favorable toward higher education—as Democratic administrations have usually been in comparison with Republican administrations. But it wasn’t. There is no reason to believe now that the Trump administration, despite its calls for reducing government regulation, will do so in the case of colleges and universities. Public skepticism of higher education remains too potent a political factor to be ignored by elected and appointed public officials. We can expect more exploitation by officials of the shortcomings of colleges and universities in order to win public favor.
If accreditors continue to require colleges to do more work as part of the accreditation process, the accreditors must take steps to streamline the process. Failure to do so could lead to a devastating collapse of the entire accreditation system. The strongest, most affluent, and most selective institutions are already more outspoken about not needing regional accreditation at all; their willingness to be good citizens in cooperating in a process from which they derive little value is near the breaking point. Meanwhile, the cost pressures are such that the weakest, smallest and least affluent institutions will have even more difficulty in carrying the burden of increased costs and large commitments of staff time. These institutions truly need the third-party affirmation of quality that accreditation provides. In a democracy it is desirable that no institution be exempted, but the need for vigilance to prevent a “one size fits all” set of standards and criteria will become crucial. Although accreditors will be hard-pressed to simplify the process, they must if it is to survive.

There are plenty of distractions. If the trend toward disaggregation of a college degree continues, for example, accreditors will need to remain focused on whole institutions.Accrediting of a single course, certificate program, or badge is not meaningful, requires too much work and is not cost-effective for either the institution or the accredits. Moreover, if we truly believe that in undergraduate education the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, we must keep the focus on entire institutions, recognizing the transformative effects of education that go beyond a single course. Accreditors should have a comprehensive perspective on the ways that all components—the major, general education, extracurricular activities and institutional values—contribute to successful performance.

Although the route will not be easy to follow, resisting pressures to change in undesirable ways while enacting needed changes will be of paramount importance in the days ahead.

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