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Accreditors Feel the Heat, but Are Torn Over Calls for Change

By Eric Kelderman JANUARY 29, 2016 The Chronicle

In recent years, Judith S. Eaton has worked behind the scenes, mostly, to persuade the nation's major regional accreditors to accept rising calls to hold colleges more accountable for their academic outcomes. This week, however, Ms. Eaton, who is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, delivered a very public message to those groups: Embrace change or be swept away by its tide.

Accreditors 'have to at least attempt to engage' with changes outside their comfort zone in order to be 'effective in serving students and society in the future.'

At the opening session of the council's annual meeting, bluntly titled "The Future Is Now: Where Is Accreditation?," Ms. Eaton told attendees that they must consider demands from the public and policy makers to hold low-performing institutions more accountable, using concrete measures of student achievement such as graduation rates, and considering issues of price and student debt.

"We know we are talking about change that is outside of our comfort zone — things that we've not done before or are in contrast to what we are used to doing," she said on Tuesday morning. But people in accreditation "have to at least attempt to engage such change," she said, in order to be "effective in serving students and society in the future." But it's not clear that accreditors, in particular those that approve a majority of two- and four-year public and private nonprofit institutions, are ready for those changes. When asked by a panel of journalists on Wednesday if accreditation needed to be improved, few in the audience signaled they agreed that change was coming or necessary.

"In the national buzz and the press, accreditation has gotten a bad name. But it got a bad name by being put in a neighborhood where it never asked to be," said Dorothy Leland, chancellor of the University of California at Merced, during another panel discussion about whether and how accreditation should respond to negative perceptions.

Calls for a Shake-Up

Calls for change in accreditation have, in fact, become routine in Washington, where the White House, the Education Department, and [Congress](#) have routinely [blasted accreditors](#) for their inaction against colleges with low graduation rates or institutions accused of fraud or financial mismanagement. The pressure has mounted in recent months with the [collapse of the giant for-profit educator Corinthian Colleges Inc.](#) and news articles such as The Wall Street Journal's examination of [how few low-performing colleges are penalized](#).

President Obama has issued a set of executive actions meant to [increase scrutiny on accreditors](#). And there are efforts by the Education Department to [create new accreditation models](#) for individual course providers, such as StraighterLine, which contracts with colleges to offer mostly remedial classes for students [at a very low cost](#).

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has even created a [draft proposal](#) that calls for giving employers more say in accreditation to ensure that college graduates are properly prepared for the work force. While the measure is unlikely to be adopted, it is another sign of discontent with the current accreditation system.

Ms. Eaton is not the only voice in the accreditation community calling for change. Susan D. Phillips, chairwoman of the [federal advisory panel](#) that makes recommendations to the secretary of education on accreditation, said her group was interested in digging deeper into how accreditors assess student performance in their reviews of their member colleges. Such actions could include asking about completion and graduation rates, especially for low-income and minority students, as well as levels of student debt and defaults on student loans, said Ms. Phillips, a former provost of the State University of New York at Albany.

And there were those at the conference who said the Education Department should even set the minimum academic-performance standards for colleges — though such a policy is now specifically barred by federal law.

Jamienne S. Studley, a former deputy under secretary of education, said the data used to measure graduation rates, for example, are not nuanced or complete enough for the department to do a good job of setting those standards. But giving the department the authority to begin a discussion about the standards "would be a positive step," Ms. Studley said.

Calls for Caution

Many others at the conference, however, urged caution in making more changes in the accreditation process, which has expanded with a growing number of federal regulatory requirements.

Many of the changes now being demanded go far beyond the role and purpose of accreditation, said some of the attendees, and could bring unintended consequences.

Using graduation rates, for example, is a poor way of grading a college's success, said John Bassett, president of Heritage University, in Washington State. The percentage of students who graduate, Mr. Bassett said, has much more to do with the selectivity of the institution than it does with the quality of instruction. At an elite college "a graduation rate of less than 95 percent would be unacceptable," he said, while at an open-access college a graduation rate of 25 percent or higher "would be remarkable."

There are also serious questions about measuring an accreditor's effectiveness based on the number of colleges it has stripped of accreditation — an action that typically forces those colleges to close, since accreditation is required for a college's students to receive federal financial aid.

"We often get criticized because we don't close down enough institutions," Mr. Bassett said. But "of how many could we say the community would be better off if this college didn't exist?"

'We can't take the position of, No, not us. ... Accreditation has to do a better job of explaining how it's relevant.'

Many accreditors acknowledged they need change, but are still struggling with how to explain to the public and elected officials that they are looking out for students.

In one session, titled "Protecting Students and the Role of Accreditation," Michale S. McComis, executive director of the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, said accreditors already do much more than consumer protection under their current processes.

Accreditors get criticized for considering only "inputs," such as the size of a college's library, the number of its faculty members, and the adequacy of its finances to meet its mission and goals. All of those things are important in enhancing the student experience and the quality of education, Mr. McComis said, but are rarely acknowledged by elected officials [who criticize accreditation](#).

After the session, Mr. McComis said that doesn't mean accreditors don't need to change: "We can't take the position of, No, not us."

But the accrediting agencies could also improve their message, he said. "Accreditation has to do a better job of explaining how it's relevant."

Employers as Accreditors

Businesses should have a stronger voice in accreditation, while also developing their own alternative to the process, say the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation and USA Funds.

January 28, 2016 By [Paul Fain](#) Inside Higher Ed

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation and USA Funds want employers to have more say in the accreditation process, and even to create an alternative, complementary form of quality assurance that would be employer driven.

That was the central finding of a [draft report](#) the two groups released Wednesday. They said the goal of their work on accreditation is to help close the so-called skills gap -- millions of jobs that remain unfilled because workers lack proper training and skills.

"We argue that there is a need for a different approach that would establish a voluntary, employer-driven talent supplier recognition and certification system," the report said, "one that can complement the existing accreditation system and be used to improve government-supported quality assurance systems over time."

The foundation is a nonprofit affiliate of the chamber, which is a prominent business-oriented advocacy group. USA Funds is a nonprofit student loan guarantor, which recently has focused on college completion.

The new report from the two groups gives some specifics about how the still-nascent ideas might work. First, it proposes stronger employer involvement in the governance of accrediting agencies, as well as input on the institutional and programmatic reviews that accreditors conduct.

The report also suggests making accredited institutions declare whether workforce readiness or career preparation are part of their mission, and prove how they evaluate success in those areas. And the two groups said accredited colleges and programs should measure and report on performance metrics that are most relevant to employers -- requiring minimum performance levels to remain accredited.

However, the odds of that happening are slim, the report said.

"Employers operate along the periphery of this system and do not play a meaningful role in terms of its governance or operations," the groups wrote, so "they are seen as one of many stakeholders."

That's why plan B is worth pursuing, the report said. Such an employer-led "quality assurance and supplier certification system" would be based on lessons employers have learned in supply chain management, according to the two groups.

The use of business supply chains as a model, and the general corporatespeak of the report, are unlikely to win many allies within traditional higher education. But that doesn't appear to be the groups' goal. The new quality-assurance review should be layered, the report said. First would come basic requirements -- such as "employability" skills like communication or teamwork. Successive layers for defining quality in worker training would address the needs of particular industries or employers and would look at technical skills and specialized competency and credentialing requirements.

The report said the scope of this work would "include the full range of education and workforce partners that could become suppliers of talent throughout the world, including accredited higher education providers."

A first place to start, however, could be STEM industries, the report said, such as manufacturing, energy, information technology and health care.

With or Without You

The two groups hosted an event here on Wednesday to discuss the report. The event featured several experts on accreditation, including Peter Ewell, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a research and consulting group, and Ralph Wolff, former president of the WASC Senior College and University Commission.

Ewell welcomed the report but also encouraged the two groups to start small. "Abandoning the established mechanism is probably a mistake."

Both Ewell and Wolff pointed to the rise of competency-based education as a promising area where employers already are collaborating deeply with colleges.

"Competency-based education is a good vehicle because employers are being drawn in to help design the curriculum," said Wolff.

Accreditors are facing plenty of criticism these days. Widespread public angst about tuition prices, student debt and the quality of college credentials have led policy makers and the news media to [increasingly question](#) the oversight role of accreditors.

The report will add some fuel to that fire, as it signals frustration by employers with the accreditation process.

Even so, the event Wednesday included some self-criticism about the skills gap from business groups. For example, Dane Linn, vice president for the Business Roundtable, said employers often haven't adequately fleshed out what they want in new hires.

"Our members aren't particularly clear, oftentimes, about what they need," said Linn. Job descriptions often date to the 1980s, panelists said. And they said corporate executives' big ideas about different ways to find skilled hires often don't translate to action in human resources departments.

Paul Lingenfelter, former president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, participated in meetings that led up to the report's creation. He applauded the effort and said there is room for progress in accreditation.

“It’s a good thing for employers to be explicit about what their needs are,” said Lingenfelter. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation held its annual meeting here this week. Judith Eaton, the group’s president, said employers already work with accreditors, particularly at the programmatic level. But more involvement would be welcome, she said.

“Maybe we need to bring them into the quality conversation in a way we haven’t before,” said Eaton. It’s not clear, though, whether the chamber’s foundation and USA Funds will accept such an invitation. “It’s certainly very hard to reform accreditation, to change it,” said Mark Pelesh, executive vice president at USA Funds. “It might be wiser to start something new.”

The Rise of Competency-Based Education

January 26, 2016

Inside Higher Ed is pleased to release today “The Rise of Competency-Based Education,” our latest print-on-demand compilation of articles. This compilation is free and [you may download a copy here](#). And you may [sign up here](#) for a free webinar on Tuesday, Feb. 23, at 2 p.m. Eastern about the themes of the booklet.

ASPA Releases Outcomes Report

January 26, 2016

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors released a report [Outcomes – Getting to the Core of Programmatic Education and Accreditation](#) which describes the current state of outcomes assessment by specialized and professional accreditors in higher education. The report was presented at the CHEA conference in Washington, DC on January 26, 2016. ([See Press Release here](#))

The Faculty Role Online, Scrutinized

The Education Department's inspector general is auditing Western Governors U over the faculty role in its competency-based programs. The high-stakes audit is relevant to other colleges and forms of online learning.

January 15, 2016 By [Paul Fain](#) Inside Higher Ed

In recent years the Office of Inspector General at the U.S. Department of Education has asked tough questions about the faculty role in competency-based education. Now the inspector general has turned its scrutiny to Western Governors University, the largest and most-established competency-based provider, which has long been a darling of the Obama administration and top department officials. The fast-growing online university, with a total enrollment of 64,000 students last month, has been providing information to the inspector general in response to the inquiry, which began almost three years ago, said Joan Mitchell, a spokeswoman for Western Governors.

In its [annual work plan](#), the inspector general said it would “continue our work to determine whether Western Governors University complied with the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, and selected regulations governing institutional eligibility, program eligibility, disbursements and return of Title IV aid.” (*Politico* [reported](#) on the probe last month.)

A spokeswoman for the inspector general said Wednesday that the watchdog agency is auditing the university, and that the audit is ongoing. It's not clear how much risk the inquiry poses to Western Governors, but university officials and advocates for digital forms of education are taking it seriously. The inspector general's interest in competency-based education so far has centered on federal definitions of what constitutes "distance education" versus correspondence courses.

Rules for [federal aid eligibility](#) require "regular and substantive interaction" between students and instructors in distance education programs. That requirement does not apply to correspondence courses. Students typically initiate contact with their instructors in those courses, which often are self-paced.

Previous [audits](#) from the inspector general have questioned whether some competency-based programs should be classified as correspondence courses. That question appears to be at the center of the office's inquiry into Western Governors, which is a nonprofit. If the inspector general decides the university is a correspondence-course provider, its report could recommend a fine based on previously received federal aid payments, in part because of the different rules for correspondence courses.

Both the university and the department are waiting on findings from the inspector general. It's uncertain if the department would need to follow through on any recommendations in a report on the matter, sources said, given that the Office of Inspector General is an independent entity that answers to both the secretary of education and the U.S. Congress.

Even so, the prospect of unflattering results from the inspector general is nerve-racking to supporters of both the university and competency-based education more broadly, which include politicians from both sides of the aisle.

A possible fine of even pennies on the dollar for federal aid that should not have been received could get large, given that Western Governors has 55,000 graduates.

The university's brand would suffer if the inspector general dubbed it a correspondence-course provider. And such a recommendation could come with financial costs beyond a fine, if enacted by the department, because colleges cannot be eligible for financial aid if more than half the courses they offer are of the correspondence variety.

A critical report from the inspector general also might threaten other forms of higher education that rely on some form of automated and nontraditional forms of instruction, experts said, including [massive open online courses](#), degree programs that use [adaptive learning](#) technology, and emporium-style [math labs](#). The White House has [praised high-profile forms](#) of all three offerings as being promising innovations.

The department has formed a working group to discuss the "regular and substantive" issue, several sources said. And supporters of competency-based education, among others, are working with sympathetic members of Congress to seek a policy fix. So far those efforts have failed, but proposed legislation may be coming soon.

The dust-up is a classic example of the tension within the department about how to balance its desire to encourage innovation while also fulfilling the role of protecting students and taxpayers from low-quality or fraudulent providers.

Van L. Davis, associate vice president of higher education research and policy at Blackboard, said part of the problem is that federal policy hasn't kept pace with developments in higher education, such as the use of sophisticated learning software in online courses.

"We're dealing with old definitions and new technology," Davis said. "And folks aren't using the same language."

Defining Faculty Roles

Accreditors and the department are in charge of determining whether a distance education program meets federal requirements for faculty interaction. The inspector general recently has issued rebukes to both the feds and a regional accreditor for their review of competency-based programs related to this question.

In 2014 the office issued an [audit](#) that criticized the department for granting federal aid eligibility to a handful of new direct-assessment degree programs. This emerging form of higher education is completely untethered from the credit-hour standard, and allows students to complete assessments whenever they're ready.

The audit found that the department had not adequately determined whether students in direct-assessment programs might be receiving federal aid for "life experience." It also said those degree tracks actually might be correspondence programs, particularly if colleges are not requiring regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors, some of whom might better be classified as tutors, coaches or mentors.

The audit's release set off some confusion among accreditors and colleges that were mulling new competency-based degrees. Some predicted a chilling effect on the spread of this form of higher education, which, ironically, still has the strong support of both the White House and top department officials.

Then, last year, the inspector general [criticized](#) the Higher Learning Commission, the largest regional accreditor, for its review of colleges' proposals for new competency-based credentials. That [audit](#) also focused on the regular-and-substantive issue. It led to the HLC temporarily freezing its approval of new programs.

The logjam eased last summer, when a group representing the seven regional accreditors and the department [both issued letters](#) that attempted to clarify the rules on competency-based education. The letters described requirements for the faculty role.

Officials at colleges that have taken the lead on competency-based education said at the time that federal regulators and accreditors appeared close to being on the same page about issues including the regular-and-substantive requirement. Meanwhile, interest in competency-based education continues to explode, with [more than 600 colleges](#) at least planning to create a competency-based degree.

Yet the inspector general remains a wild card. Even people close to the Western Governors inquiry said they didn't know what the office would recommend. And whether the department would be obliged to follow through on the inspector general's recommendations remains murky as well.

Leah Matthews, executive director of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, said the inspector general tends to be uncomfortable with forms of higher education that don't adhere to a strict definition of the credit-hour standard. She said scrutiny of WGU could scare off other colleges from trying competency-based education, and worried that "we don't have experts in teaching and learning making these judgments."

The university said the principal role of its faculty members is being a mentor to students. But full-time faculty members work with students one on one or in groups. Students are assigned a faculty member (called a student mentor) the day they begin at the university, working with their mentors regularly until they graduate, the university said. Faculty mentors have at least a master's degree in their field and are well versed in students' program requirements.

In addition, Western Governors employs a faculty "course mentor" for each course. These faculty members are Ph.D. holders and subject-matter experts, who also interact with students. (Click [here](#) for more from the university on its faculty members' role.)

Russell Poulin, director of policy and analysis for the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), said the rules for faculty interaction in distance education are outdated.

"Regular and substantive has to go," said Poulin, who has [written on the topic](#). "It's focused completely on process and not on outcomes."

Poulin also criticized the inspector general's take in recent years, calling it a "narrow, prescriptive view of that regulation."

To some observers, it's surprising that the federal regulator would focus on Western Governors, a nonprofit institution that the Obama administration, Senate Democrats and others have held out as a quality alternative to for-profit colleges for students who are working adults. (The average age of a WGU student is 37.)

For example, *Washington Monthly* five years ago [lauded](#) WGU as "The College For-profits Should Fear." That hype has faded a bit, in part because of the rise of MOOCs, other competency-based competitors and boot camps.

Yet Western Governors' model is doing well. The university has seen annual enrollment growth of 20 percent in recent years.

WGU also is politically popular. The idea was hatched in 1995 by 18 governors (of Western states). The university, while private, has strong support in many states, even qualifying for state-based financial aid in a couple.

Furthermore, Congress [wrote the language](#) that opened the door to direct-assessment degrees with Western Governors in mind. The university chose not to pursue that authority, however. "It's not like they were hiding from anyone," Poulin said of Western Governors. "It had been vetted."

The university pointed to the strong backing it has received from policy makers. "We feel like we have really good support from the department, from the administration and from Congress," said Mitchell.

But despite the widespread desire in Washington for Western Governors to emerge unscathed, and for competency-based education to continue to spread, several experts said the risk of the inspector general recommending sanctions is serious.

As a result, leaders from Western Governors and other institutions that offer competency-based education encouraged Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican representing Utah, where WGU is based, to try to introduce a rider to the budget bill last year that would have sought to change federal aid rules for distance education. That attempt failed, but other proposed legislation that might take on the faculty contact issue in competency-based education is being discussed on Capitol Hill.

The regular-and-substantive rule was introduced for good reason, said Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at New America, a Washington think tank. Laitinen, an expert on and supporter of competency-based education, said the feds created the regulations to crack down on a rash of federal-aid fraud in the '80s and '90s. But she said clarity is needed, particularly given the big advances in online education during the last two decades. "Congress needs to make this fix and get with the times," she said.

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