

April 30, 2015

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander:

One of the enduring challenges in federal higher education policy is drawing an **appropriate balance between the government's need to ensure accountability for federal expenditures and the need of colleges and universities to retain responsibility and control over their academic missions.** With respect to federal student aid programs, this balance has largely been achieved by requiring institutions to be approved by an accrediting agency **that is "recognized" by the Secretary of Education.**

Accrediting agencies were created to set standards for quality and to stimulate institutional improvement by raising standards over time. Institutions voluntarily joined the various regional accrediting associations, but membership was predicated on continuous adherence to **each agency's standards.**

Over time, public policy has assigned another role to accreditors – ensuring that institutions have an appropriate level of academic quality to permit student aid funds to flow to students at the school. We believe that accrediting agencies have been effective in creating standards to perform this function.

Unfortunately, in recent years the Department of Education has transferred some enforcement functions to accreditors, and this has created problems. We believe that accrediting agencies should focus on educational quality and student learning. But they should not be given responsibilities that properly belong to the Department of Education.

Accreditation is not fixed and immutable. As postsecondary education continues to evolve with the development of new learning modalities, accreditors must develop new ways to review and assess student learning and academic quality. Accreditors have and will continue to do this in the years ahead.

As Congress considers the role and place of accreditation in federal higher education policy, it is critical to emphasize the central features of accreditation and to maintain these characteristics.

First, regional accreditation is rigorous.¹ An accreditation review is a complex, demanding process that requires a large number of actors from inside and outside the institution to comprehensively examine all aspects of the school before accreditation is awarded. No institution makes a decision to pursue accreditation unless it is deeply committed to participating in a challenging, extensive activity. Even so, roughly half of all schools that seek regional accreditation do not receive it.

Second, regional accreditation is an effective, peer review process. By using members of **the academic community to examine each other's practices based on professional norms** and values, accreditation relies on extensive and detailed expertise to examine critically all aspects of an institution. Peer review is flexible and can be adjusted to specific local circumstances and facilitates the dissemination and exchange of best practices. According to the Council of Higher Education Accreditation, in 2009 almost 20,000 peer reviewers participated in accreditation reviews as part of their professional responsibilities.

Third, regional accreditation preserves institutional diversity. U.S. colleges and universities are easily the most diverse in the world—public and private (non-profit and for-profit), large and small, two-year and four-year, specialized and general, faith-based and secular, and research-intensive and teaching-focused. Accreditation, unlike the other two legs—the states or tribes and the federal government—**of the “triad” that oversees** colleges and universities, is totally focused on how successfully each institution fulfills its own mission. Because of that, accreditation enhances the diversity of American higher education while, at the same time, providing valuable information to the public about institutional quality.

Finally, regional accreditation is nongovernmental. Accreditation is not operated or owned by any level of government, nor should it be. The absence of governmental control allows institutions to evaluate fairly all types of postsecondary education institutions regardless of whether they are public or private, non-profit or for-profit, secular or religious.

Despite these important strengths, the higher education ecosystem is changing in important ways. Greater demands for accountability, new forms of instructional delivery, new providers, and new students and patterns of attendance are all creating challenges for accreditation. We believe that the impending reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) will allow for a careful rethinking of ways to preserve the important and proven strengths of accreditation while also ensuring that it adjusts to the rapidly changing world of postsecondary education.

¹ There are three types of accrediting organizations: regional, national and specialized. The vast majority of traditional colleges and universities have regional accreditation and the focus of the Senate HELP **Committee's paper raises a number of questions** that appear to focus on those agencies. National and specialized accreditors are and will remain a vitally important part of the postsecondary education ecosystem but our response, which is submitted on behalf of the regional accrediting agencies and higher education organizations is primarily focused on regional accreditation.

In particular, Congress should clarify the responsibilities of accreditors vis-à-vis the Department of Education. Over time, the Department has increasingly come to see accreditors as a regulatory extension of the federal agency and has significantly increased their responsibilities as a condition of approving them. The Department has the ultimate authority and responsibility to make and enforce institutional eligibility requirements under the HEA and those responsibilities include Title IV compliance. Outsourcing functions for which the Department has primary responsibility is an inappropriate use of the knowledge and skill set of accrediting agencies and diverts accreditors from their primary mission. In short, accreditors ought to focus on student learning and educational quality and the Department of Education should focus on enforcing the Title IV eligibility requirements.

1) Are accrediting agencies adequately focused on student learning and education quality? Can and should accreditors give more attention to these issues?

Regional accrediting bodies are focused on issues related to student learning and educational achievement, and this emphasis has increased considerably in recent years.² The view that accreditors do not pay attention to learning and educational quality is the product of a different and earlier era when accrediting standards were much more focused on inputs than results. We believe that inputs are still important,³ but it is at least as important for accreditors to focus on educational results and outcomes.

All institutions, working with their accreditors, must be able to document evidence of student success. The demonstration of learning and academic quality is a fundamental

² One example of a regional accreditor's **standard on student learning is: "Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and resource allocation and to inform the public about the institution."** The key words: "**verifiable information,**" "**what the students have gained as a result of their education,**" "**Success of its recent graduates**" ... "used to inform the public about the institution."

Another accreditor has even more elaborate standards related to student learning and educational **outcomes: "The institution achieves its purposes and attains its educational objectives at the institutional and program level through the core functions of teaching and learning [and]...demonstrates that these core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning and by supporting the success of every student..... The institution's student learning outcomes and standards of performance are clearly stated at the course, program, and, as appropriate, institutional level. These outcomes and standards are reflected in academic programs, policies and curricula and are aligned with advisement, library, and information technology resources and the wider learning environment.....The institution demonstrates that its graduates consistently achieve its stated learning outcomes and established standards of performance. The institution ensures that its expectations for student learning are embedded in the standards that the faculty use to evaluate student work."**

³ For example, one accreditor's **standard on financial inputs reads "The institution's financial resources are sufficient to sustain the quality of its educational program and to support institutional improvement now and in the foreseeable future. The institution demonstrates, through verifiable internal and external evidence, its financial capacity to graduate its entering class. The institution administers its financial resources with integrity."**

responsibility, but the measures of quality and the methods used to measure it will differ depending on the mission of the institution and its academic program. A free-standing medical school will be evaluated differently than a Christian college. A research university and a community college have very different student bodies and missions and therefore measure educational success in different ways. Accreditors must be sensitive to these fundamental distinctions and their ability to do so is the hallmark of regional accreditation.

Efforts to document student learning and education quality are complicated because there are no standardized tools for measuring student learning and educational quality that work equally well for all students in all academic disciplines. As much as some might wish, measuring learning and educational outcomes does not lend itself to a one-size-fits-all approach. In particular, it is difficult to measure the intangible benefits of higher education (such as civic engagement, leadership, ethical behavior, commitment to lifelong learning, open-mindedness, religious values and practice, and community service), and these are often the very outcomes that some institutions emphasize.

We recognize the need for broad-based principles that might be used to summarize the general categories where all institutions should be expected to demonstrate evidence of success. In 2013, several higher education organizations and regional accreditors **developed “Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement,” a consensus statement** that called on all institutions to find ways to document success in three areas:

- 1) Evidence of the student learning experience (the kind of experiences students have inside and outside the classroom)
- 2) Evaluation of student academic performance using measures determined by the institution
- 3) Post-graduation outcomes (such as completion, job placement, post-graduate study, civic participation, personal satisfaction)

Importantly, the responsibility for specifically defining and measuring success must rest with the institution.⁴

Measuring student learning and educational quality are the central consideration for all accreditors. Can accreditors do more? Yes, and all regional accreditors are engaged in a continual search to ensure that institutions measure and document, in the words of the **statute, “success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution’s mission.” These efforts will continue even as the nature of postsecondary education and the ways in which it is delivered evolve.**

Congress could underscore the importance of student learning and educational quality by streamlining the federal accreditation standards mandated in federal law under Section 496(a)(5) of the HEA. Eliminating less important standards in the law would increase the

⁴ **“Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement,” a July 19, 2013 statement** of national higher education associations and regional accrediting commissions.
<http://www.aau.edu/workarea/downloadasset.aspx?id=14532>

focus and emphasis given to student learning. But we underscore that simple mechanistic approaches (such as a standardized examination or test score) will never work well for all institutions and that an accreditation process driven by the mission of the institution must remain the most basic feature of accrediting agencies.

In addition, as noted earlier, the continued expansion of regulatory oversight and enforcement responsibilities imposed on accrediting agencies by the Department of Education diverts accreditors from their core focus on student learning, educational **quality, and innovation. We strongly urge Congress to review and streamline “regulatory creep”**—the continuous incremental expansion of requirements imposed on accreditors by the Department—as part of the HEA reauthorization.

2) Should federal accreditation standards not related to education quality be eliminated as a focus of federal policy?

Under federal law, all accreditors are required to have standards in 10 different areas (many with subparts) to evaluate institutions. In turn, these standards are reviewed by the **Department of Education’s National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI)**. In fact, the issues of greatest importance to students, families, and taxpayers—student learning, education quality, and financial stability—represent just a modest part of the standards that the Department must review and approve.

If federal policy makers seek greater emphasis on certain standards, we recommend that some of the standards that are less significant for federal policy purposes be deleted. For **example, “facilities, equipment and supplies” are of less importance for federal policy makers than “student achievement.”** **Focusing and narrowing the standards that the** Department must approve sends a strong signal about the most critical federal priorities. In the same vein, reducing the number of standards that are evaluated and approved by federal policy makers would streamline the recognition process—a matter of great benefit to accreditors and campuses.

A reduction of federally mandated requirements does not necessarily mean that accreditors would abandon their own standards in these areas. Accreditors did not establish their standards simply because the federal government mandated them in the Higher Education Amendments of 1992. Indeed, almost all of the regional accreditors had standards in each of the areas laid out in the law well before federal policy specified them. Accreditors, for example, will certainly maintain standards for faculty and governance, even if these are deleted as federal required standards. But narrowing the list of federal specified requirements will have the very beneficial effect of focusing more attention on them.

3) Are accreditors a barrier to innovation?

An oft-repeated accusation about accreditation is that it is a barrier to innovation. This is an inaccurate charge, and there is no shortage of examples of very innovative postsecondary degree programs that have quickly won approval from their accreditors. **For example, Southern New Hampshire University’s proposal for competency-based “direct assessment” was quickly accepted** by its accreditor (New England Association of

Schools and Colleges) because it was a clear, well-developed plan that demonstrated it would serve students well and the institution had the experience and capacity to implement their innovative idea successfully. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission approved a plan that allows the **Keck Graduate Institute and the Minerva Project to offer an innovative bachelor's degree** program that brings students from many countries together for residential study in China, India, North America, South America, Europe, and Africa in a program that combines the benefits of traditional classroom study with online seminars. The Higher Learning Commission quickly supported the **University of Wisconsin's "Flexible Option" plan that** offers undergraduate degrees online through a self-paced, competency-based format that relies on direct assessment. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has accredited a graduate degree program in computer science at Georgia Tech designed around courses provided by Coursera and that leads to a guaranteed employment opportunity for graduates.

Even innovative international degree programs win approval. Hult International Business School is a nonprofit institution based in Massachusetts that is owned by EF, a Swedish for-profit corporation that has campuses in Dubai, San Francisco, London, New York, and **Shanghai. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges rapidly approved Hult's** degree program, which encourages students to study at two or more campuses while enrolled and has coordinated its academic standards with the higher education quality control agencies in both Dubai and the United Kingdom.

In short, as even a cursory review of their actions reveals, all regional accreditors regularly approve highly innovative and experimental academic programs.

However, there should be no doubt that any credible review by an independent and external body can delay and, when appropriate, block the introduction of new and untested programs for very good reasons. That some proposed initiatives are rejected rather than automatically approved is a legitimate and important feature of the accreditation process, not a flaw.

Evaluating new programs, practices or delivery methods; approving those that hold promise and rejecting those that pose risks to the academic integrity of institutions or to students is the very purpose of an independent third-party review. One agency recently declined to approve a new program because it would not allow students to withdraw and transfer credit. Another blocked a new degree program because the school that planned to offer it had neither the facilities nor the experience to offer a high quality program. Finally, one accreditor recently rejected a new program because it would have effectively transferred academic and fiscal control from the private, non-profit institution that sought the change to a for-profit entity. Given their Title IV gatekeeping responsibilities, accreditors must balance the benefits of innovations against the risks that they carry. In general, accreditors achieve this balance very effectively.

Federal accreditation requirements—rather than the practice of accreditors themselves—can also block innovative programs because they were developed for traditional higher education institutions and may be inappropriate or inapplicable for non-traditional

providers. For example, 34 CFR 602.16 (a)(1)(viii) requires that **accreditors' standards** address the quality of programs with regard to program length. Other Department of Education practices and requirements beyond accreditation can also be a significant barrier to innovation. While the Department publicly encourages the creation of new programs that are relevant to consumer and market needs, applications to launch these programs can languish for months within the Department even after they have been approved by accrediting agencies. Even more problematic, the Department does not allow institutions to submit more than one new program request at a time, so even a single new pending program application creates a complete bottleneck.⁵

In short, there is no single barrier to the development and implementation of new programs that are eligible for federal student aid. As part of reauthorization, we encourage the committee to develop a comprehensive list of barriers, identify the most serious, and find ways to alleviate them. Assuming that a single actor or policy is responsible for limiting innovations means that proposed solutions will only fall short.

We strongly believe that innovative and experimental education and training programs are important and desirable. We support efforts to encourage more experimentation in postsecondary education and to allow students and families to use federal student aid funding for these programs once sufficient evidence of success is at hand for such initiatives. However, we underscore that encouraging innovation and permitting federal funds for this purpose will inevitably mean that some boundary-breaking programs will fail. A degree of risk is the handmaiden of even the most carefully designed innovation, and federal policy needs to recognize that things can and will go awry. Agencies that approve innovative initiatives after careful analysis and study should not be unfairly second-guessed in the event that the programs do not work as hoped.

4) Non-traditional providers and accreditors

As currently configured, student financial assistance programs authorized under the Higher Education Act are restricted to eligible students attending eligible institutions of higher education, with the latter term itself defined in the HEA. The eligibility requirement, and by no means accreditation alone, is the reason that non-collegiate companies and organizations have difficulty establishing eligibility to participate in federal student aid programs. Congress can certainly revisit and revise the complex and vexing considerations involved in extending federal financial aid to non-institutional providers, but it should do so with an awareness of the costs and risks associated with relaxing the legal barriers to Title IV eligibility.

Under the current eligibility system, accreditors are assigned the task of accrediting institutions and schools are granted wide discretion in incorporating non-traditional programs, pedagogical practices, delivery methods, or learning experiences and incorporating them into their academic policies and practices. Accreditors regularly

⁵ For a more extensive analysis of this issue, see Report of the Senate Task Force on Federal Regulation of Higher Education, *Recalibrating Regulation of Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2015).

approve non-traditional programs with little controversy, as can easily be verified by the rapid growth of such new arrangements. This does not mean that further improvements and refinements are not possible, just that this dimension of dealing with non-traditional postsecondary education is more straightforward for accrediting agencies.

One popular suggestion for expanding student aid eligibility is to permit individuals to use federal student aid funds if they take postsecondary education courses from non-traditional postsecondary education providers such as Coursera or Straighter Line. Some organizations offer a service that enables providers to have their courses evaluated to determine whether they merit consideration for academic credit. Students who earn the credits may be able to have that credit applied to an academic degree program at another institution, although the decision whether to grant credit rests with the degree-granting institution that the student attends. Similarly, some private companies have had their courses evaluated and military service members may, through the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, be awarded college credit for their military training. This model may provide a basis for reviewing the academic side of such enterprises for student aid eligibility but it would not, at least as currently practiced, deal with other important requirements of federal student aid programs—such as financial responsibility, state authorization, the maintenance of academic records, and consumer protection.

As with all significant new departures in federal policy, there is no certainty about how or whether an expansion of eligibility will work in practice. Once again, such an undertaking carries a degree of risk because some promising initiatives will fail. For this reason, it might be best in these cases to start with a carefully designed demonstration project that limits initial eligibility to a very small number of entities and that requires careful and extensive evaluation to measure success.

5) Department of Education recognition of accrediting agencies

Under federal law, accrediting agencies must be recognized by the Secretary of Education and NACIQI is charged with advising the Secretary about applications to be federally recognized accreditors. Since the last reauthorization of the HEA, the Department of Education has used NACIQI to micromanage accreditors and to impose far more extensive and detailed requirements on them than envisioned under the statute. For example, the Department requires accreditors to terminate the accreditation of an institution that does **not comply with the agency's standards within a two-year period**. Recently, the Department delayed a decision on renewing one regional accreditor until the agency demonstrated it had such a policy by terminating an institution. In another recent case, **the Department delayed action on an agency because it disagreed with the accreditor's determination of "academic" job titles**. We believe that such micromanagement is designed to use accreditors to pursue federal goals and objectives rather than simply determining whether the agencies are reliable authorities as to the educational quality of postsecondary institutions.

It goes without saying that the federal government must carefully review any agency that seeks to become or remain a recognized accreditor. But the process has become excessively time-consuming, extensive and burdensome. Requirements can change even

when the process is underway and accreditors can be asked to provide very different information depending upon which staff reviewer they are assigned. It often takes more than two years to acquire NACIQI approval, even for accreditors with a long and successful track record. We strongly urge Congress to mandate the Department develop a more streamlined, straightforward approach for agencies that focuses on broad issues, rather than a process based on micromanagement and excessively detailed requirements.

6) State governments and accreditation

Under federal law, with one exception, only private, non-profit organizations are permitted to become accreditors. The exception is the state of New York, which has had an exception that allowed it to remain an accreditor under the Higher Education Act because it was an accrediting agency before the law was enacted in 1965.

Some observers have suggested that other state governments ought to be allowed to become accreditors for the purpose of determining federal student aid eligibility. It goes without saying that any state government can now establish itself as an accreditor—though it would not control access to federal student aid—but none have chosen to do so.

Therefore, it seems clear that states have very little interest in performing this role unless they also can control federal student aid eligibility.

We strongly oppose giving states the authority to determine institutional eligibility for federal student aid, for several reasons. First, it is not clear what problem this would solve. The reason for giving state governments this authority is unclear and proponents of the idea have not made a compelling case that state governments need such authority to do things they cannot do already under state law.⁶

Second, states already have responsibility under the HEA to ensure that institutions in their state are authorized to operate. Despite this clear authority, many states devote little **attention to this responsibility. Indeed, the Department of Education’s “state authorization” regulations were fundamentally an effort to force states to play a stronger** role in this area. Given this history, it is unclear why states want to act as accreditors. With the authority they already have, states that wish to pay more attention to their postsecondary institutions are free to do so.

Third, not only are many states failing to comply with their responsibilities under the HEA, the vast majority have flunked their most basic higher education role by slashing funding for public higher education over the last twenty years. We do not believe states that have consistently chosen to reduce financial support for their institutions should be given the chance to oversee those institutions for the purposes of federal student aid.

⁶ Further, if states are given accrediting authority for purposes of determining federal financial aid eligibility, Congress must address the issue of federally recognized American Indian tribal governments and the institutions of higher education that they charter, as state regulations would not apply to these institutions.

Finally, we oppose letting states determine eligibility for federal student aid because states may use that authority to disadvantage some institutions. For example, private colleges and universities within the state might find that their applications for new programs or locations are much delayed or subjected to more extensive evaluation while out-of-state schools might find it difficult to get approval for their educational program. Even public colleges that seek to make academic decisions may find themselves overruled by state bureaucrats acting in their capacity as an accreditor.

In short, states already have adequate opportunity to oversee their own public colleges and universities and have a central role to play in the triad. We do not believe that it is necessary or desirable to give them more responsibilities. However, if Congress does elect to give states such authority, it is critical that agencies that wish to undertake such responsibilities be subjected to the same level of federal scrutiny as all other accreditors currently receive, including NACIQI review and Secretarial approval.

7) Reducing the Cost and Burden of Accreditation on Institutions

The workload that accreditation imposes on individual institutions is a function of several factors. First, it depends on the total number of accreditors that the institution must deal with and the requirements that each impose. All traditional colleges and universities use a single regional or national accreditor. Many, but certainly not all, institutions work with specialized accreditors because they want to take advantage of the benefits associated with receiving such approval. Indeed, a large university can easily have 25 separate specialized accreditors, each with its own standards and requirements. An institution that does not use specialized accreditation will certainly feel less of a burden than a regionally accredited school with multiple specialized accreditors.

The burden imposed by accreditation also depends on the ability of the institution to demonstrate clearly and convincingly that its policies and practices are in full compliance with accreditation standards. An institution that is under investigation or that is asked to respond to a potential action by its accreditor will face a far greater set of obligations than a school that is not addressing such challenges.

For most institutions, the most significant costs and burdens are associated with a renewal of its accreditation rather than with specific or intermittent actions. Most regional accreditors require a renewal review once every ten years for academically strong, financially stable institutions.⁷ This process is designed to be a significant undertaking because it asks institutions to carefully rethink their mission and to identify improvements and changes that they need to make in all areas of their operations. Much of the workload **is associated with the “self-study” that institutions must complete. Importantly, all** regional accreditors give institutions considerable latitude in deciding what topics they wish to pursue in their self-study.

⁷ In addition, all accreditors also require a “mid-cycle review” for each institution they accredit. This activity is typically far less extensive than a full “renewal” review.

But there are clearly ways to reduce the accreditation burden on institutions. For example, under current Department of Education rules, accreditors are tasked with reviewing activities and issues completely unrelated to educational quality and student learning. For instance, the Department suggests that accreditors review institutional compliance with local fire safety codes, despite the fact that all local governments routinely do this and that accreditors have no expertise in this area. The Department also demands that accreditors review institutional compliance with Title IV regulations, even though the Department clearly has greater expertise and better mechanisms (such as regional offices and their Program Review process) for this purpose. Recent regulations mandate that accreditors ensure that institutional credit hour determinations are consistent with both a newly created federal definition and with commonly accepted practices. In recent years, the Department has begun to instruct accreditors to review institutions if the agency learns of **an “issue” at the institution that the agency wants to know more about**—such as something that it might learn from a newspaper story. Again, the Department has other and more appropriate tools at its disposal for such investigations.

Similarly, for institutions that have multiple branch campuses or locations, the **Department now requires accreditors to visit a “representative sample” of new locations** at the midpoint of the review cycle, regardless of how successfully the institution is managing its operations. Another step to reduce the federally imposed costs of accreditation is for the **Department to defer to the accreditor’s experience and judgment to determine whether** and how many campuses or locations should be visited at the midpoint review. This step would reduce workload on accreditors and the costs imposed on institutions.

None of these responsibilities (or others we could identify) is mandated under the Higher Education Act. They are imposed by the Department. Demanding that accreditors do such things unquestionably increases the accreditation burden on institutions, even if the reason for the imposition has nothing to do with the standards or practices of the agency.

In addition, we believe accreditors should have clear authority to undertake differentiated **reviews that reflect the institution’s history of meeting accreditation standards. At present,** it is not clear if accreditors can do this, even though it has the promise of reducing the cost and burden imposed on institutions. Under such a plan, accreditors could decide that a school with a consistent record of high performance and low risk of not meeting accreditation standards, based on its history and audited data of key metrics, would be eligible for a review that reflected this strength. The initial screening might focus on a short list of key indicators as defined by the regional accreditor and its member institutions, such as clear and compelling evidence of student learning and performance, financial condition, graduation and retention rates. Schools that pass this initial screening might be asked to develop a self-study that delves more deeply into areas that the school and accreditor agree have good potential for institutional improvement. Colleges that do not have a sustained record of high-quality performance would undergo the traditional full review. Obviously, such an approach would require accreditors to develop processes that would result in a reliable judgment of institutional quality and performance.

Some accreditors have begun to experiment with ways to reduce institutional burden. For example, the Western Association Commission on Colleges and Universities sets the next

comprehensive review at 6, 8, or 10 years and the Higher Learning Commission has developed the “Open Pathways” program. Unfortunately, it is not clear that accreditors have sufficient flexibility under the HEA and Department of Education regulations to implement a broader system of flexibility. While we have asked the Department for clarification on this matter and do not believe that the HEA prohibits it, no accreditor is willing to risk the wrath of the Department unless such an action is clearly permissible.

We strongly believe accreditors should have this authority. Given the uncertainty that surrounds this issue, it may be necessary for Congress to clarify the matter as part of reauthorization.

8) Break the link between Title IV and accreditation

We strongly oppose efforts to break the link between Title IV eligibility and accreditation. Our opposition is based on the assumption that some organization or entity will need to evaluate the educational quality of all Title IV eligible institutions and, if accreditors do not play that role, it is unclear who will replace them.

The only obvious alternatives to accreditors are state agencies or the Department of Education. Such organizations lack the experience and organizational skill to manage individual, institution-specific reviews of the roughly 7,000 institutions of postsecondary education in the United States. Given the size of the undertaking, they would inevitably emphasize a small number of easily measurable and quantifiable factors. Such reviews will be a serious challenge for colleges and universities that serve a special purpose or mission, such as religiously affiliated schools, art schools, conservatories, and free-standing graduate and professional schools.

The extensive effort made by accrediting agencies and the thousands of volunteers who participate in the detailed review of individual institutions are engaged, for lack of a better term, in handcraft. Government agencies who must work with broad guidelines and standards and who will lack access to the trained reviewers used by accreditors would be engaged in mass production, much to the detriment of the institutional diversity that is a hallmark of American higher education.

Given the highly diverse nature of higher education in the United States, there is simply no reasonable, sensible alternative to independent, nongovernmental accrediting agencies. If the authority to ensure educational quality is given to the federal government, it will result in the creation, even if unintentionally, of a Ministry of Education that approves the academic programs of every college or university. If state governments become the arbiters of academic quality that would disadvantage some institutions—such as private colleges and institutions located out-of-state—and could easily result in some schools (such as those with extensive online programs) being forced to gain approval from multiple states.

This is not to argue that accreditors are perfect or that changes are not in order as Congress reauthorizes the Higher Education Act. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that,

Comments on Accreditation White Paper
April 30, 2015

to paraphrase what as Churchill famously said of democracy, it is far better than any other option that has ever been tried.

Sincerely,



Molly Corbett Broad
President

On behalf of:

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges Western Association of
Schools and Colleges
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
American Dental Education Association
American Indian Higher Education Consortium
APPA, Leadership in Educational Facilities
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of American Universities
Association of Community College Trustees
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
Association of Research Libraries
Council for Christian Colleges and Universities
Council for Higher Education Accreditation
EDUCAUSE
Higher Learning Commission
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Middle States Commission on Higher Education
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher
Education
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
UNCF
WASC Senior College and University Commission