

November 22, 2011

Ms. Melissa Lewis
Executive Director
NACIQI
U.S. Department of Education, Room 8060
1990 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Ms. Lewis:

On behalf of the higher education associations listed below, I write to share our views on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (“Committee”) Discussion Draft (“Draft”) issued Oct. 18, 2011. We commend the Committee members for the serious way in which they have approached the Secretary’s request, which is on top of their already extensive statutory responsibilities, and for their work in producing this document of options and considerations. In addition, several of our associations were given the opportunity to share our views on specific accreditation topics with Committee members and we hope these discussions helped inform the Committee in its deliberations.

The primary purpose for which accrediting agencies were created is to encourage and promote continuous institutional self-improvement based on extensive peer review. Over time, public policy assigned another role to accreditors: one that requires them to certify minimum thresholds of quality necessary to qualify an institution to participate in federal student aid programs. Within higher education, there is general consensus that accreditation continues to fulfill both of these roles effectively. However, as the public responsibilities of accreditors have been enlarged, there is a growing need to evaluate the continuing ability of our accreditation system to serve these dual roles.

In examining this system, it should be remembered that accrediting agencies are not static. In fact, they have repeatedly demonstrated the ability to adapt and respond to the changing higher education landscape and current policy concerns. In recent years, accreditors have reviewed and modified policies as part of their efforts to provide greater quality assurance, transparency and public accountability. This self-correcting ability of accreditors obviates the need for heavy-handed federal interventions. Indeed, the standardization that is necessarily a feature of government policies or regulations could easily undermine the ability of accrediting agencies to develop and implement needed reforms.

As the Committee's Draft reaffirms, there is an inherent tension between institutional improvement and Title IV gatekeeping functions. This tension serves a critical purpose in our accreditation system, helping to preserve the strength, diversity and innovation that characterize the U.S system of higher education, while at the same time, assuring the prudent use of federal resources. If the balance is tipped too far in favor of the gatekeeping role, with its accompanying greater government involvement, the result is likely to be an excessively rigid and standardized system with diminished academic input and discretion. If the balance is tipped too far away from gatekeeping responsibilities, there is a risk that federal resources will be squandered on institutions that fail to meet minimal threshold of academic quality. Any changes to federal policy regarding accreditation need to address carefully the balance between institutional self-improvement and quality assurance.

We believe that the overarching issues for this Committee are:

- (1) To preserve the balance between institutional self-improvement and quality assurance; and
- (2) To define more precisely the federal gatekeeping functions that are reasonable and appropriate for accreditors to perform and distinguish what gatekeeping functions are best addressed by other members of the triad.

As the Committee considers changes to this document, we offer four observations based on the draft report. We would oppose any final recommendations that fail to reflect these factors.

- Accreditation's principal role in the triad is quality assurance, and this reflects a complex and nuanced process for evaluating an institution or program. These evaluations have always been based on the specific mission of an institution, which enable accreditors to make detailed, institutionally specific recommendations for improvement. Given the enormous diversity of American higher education, we believe that the mission-based focus must remain the central element of accreditation.
- Ferreting out fraud and abuse in federal student aid programs is not the primary mission of accreditors, and they should not be deputized as surrogate enforcement agencies. Accreditation works well for the vast number of institutions that are providing a quality education, and should not be recast to focus on the few to the detriment of the many. Within the framework of the triad, the role of enforcement should continue to rest with the Department since it alone has the resources and legal authority to execute this role.
- The assessment of student learning outcomes does not require the intervention of the federal government. In the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress specifically prohibited the Department from regulating student learning outcomes. More specifically, we believe the Department should not

mandate or set any standards that deal with academic quality, institutional improvement, or teaching methods. We believe this is the role of accrediting agencies working in conjunction with institutions.

- It is inappropriate for NACIQI to address or recommend changes in the geographic boundaries of accrediting bodies. Accreditation clearly has a public role but it is essential to bear in mind that accrediting agencies are private organizations. If a change is to be made in these boundaries, it should be the result of careful deliberations among institutions of higher education and accrediting bodies.

In addition to these observations, we note several specific options discussed in the Draft that we believe could be acceptable to a great number of institutions and are worthy of further consideration. For example, we support efforts to indemnify accreditors. We also believe that streamlining accreditation statutes and regulations to make them less intrusive has merit as a concept, although this effort would need to be undertaken carefully to ensure it was not overtaken by those wishing to increase federal controls. In addition, we support the more nuanced review process, allowing accreditors more flexibility to design systems for expedited review.

We also support the Draft's option to reconsider the type and amount of data collected by accreditors and its potential burden, as well undertake a comprehensive study of the increased costs of accreditation review. We agree that the quality assurance enterprise often collects too much data and the wrong type of it, and that the institutional burden of collecting this information often outweighs its utility.

We thank the Committee for the time and effort that it has invested in preparing the Draft of options and appreciate your consideration of our views as you move forward to fulfill the Secretary's request.

Sincerely,

Molly Corbett Broad
President

MCB/ldw

On behalf of:

American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
Association of American Universities
Council for Higher Education Accreditation
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities