Accreditation as Quality Assurance: Meeting the Needs of 21st-Century Learning

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Senators Harkin, Alexander and Colleagues:

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you. Today, as requested, I will address the structures and functions of accreditation, 21st-century changes in postsecondary education that demand changes in accreditation, areas for improvement in accreditation, and the recent success of the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation in addressing those needs.

The Structure and Functions of Accreditation

Accreditation in postsecondary education is a system of peer review begun in the late 19th century. It now includes six regional accrediting agencies that focus on whole institutions, largely degree-granting and not-for-profit, in their geographic area; more than 50 national accrediting agencies which have been concerned largely with vocational, technical and career institutions that may offer degrees or certificates; and a cornucopia of specialized accreditors that are field—and profession-specific. A small number of religious institution accrediting agencies exist as well.

Accreditation is designed to perform four functions——setting minimum institutional or program standards, building institutional or program capacity, assuring institutional or program

quality for third-parties such as the states and federal government, and providing consumer information.

- **Setting minimum institutional or program standards**

  The rationale for accreditation is to enable postsecondary institutions to engage in self-regulation by establishing explicit standards for themselves and creating a mechanism to enforce them. At the moment, those standards operate as a floor, delineating the minimum quality necessary for institutional or program acceptability. It would be desirable to create something more akin to a ceiling. This might be accomplished by shifting from the current pass-fail system of accreditation with gray areas in between to a system including varying levels of pass such as meets standards, exceeds standards, and substantially exceeds standards. Rather than giving institutions or programs a single grade of pass or fail, they could be rated in each of the key accrediting areas——— students/access and graduation rates, program quality, governance, and so on—as well as receiving an overall rating. The large number of accrediting agencies also means considerable variation in the nature and quality of the floor.

- **Building institutional or program capacity**

  For all intents and purposes, this is the way that accreditation has worked to create a ceiling. However, the result is a hazy system which appears to be the equivalent of “let a thousand flowers bloom.” A more differentiated system of ratings could be a vehicle for adding rigor to capacity building if it allows for institutional diversity.

- **Establishing quality assurance for third parties**

The most powerful form of third-party reliance is qualification for federal financial aid. This is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it is an acceptance of professional self-regulation in postsecondary education. On the other, it makes accreditation a high-stakes determination, which means giving the benefit of the doubt to institutions and programs and thereby lowering the floor. Providing realistic alternative routes to financial aid is the only possible ameliorative.

- **Providing consumer information**

  It has been suggested that accreditation provide the same sort of information as U.S. News and World Report or the popular college guides. This would be unfortunate in violating the confidentiality essential to self-regulation and peer review. However, publicly releasing more differentiated ratings and requiring all accredited institutions and programs to release standardized data in key areas such as access and graduation rates would make an important contribution.

21st-Century Changes in Postsecondary Education and Implications for Accreditation

Shifts in demographics, economics, technology, and globalization are likely to change who is going onto postsecondary education, the characteristics of postsecondary education, and the interaction of students and postsecondary institutions.

Student Demographics

Traditional students—18 to 22 years of age, attending college full-time and living in residence—now constitute considerably less than a third of undergraduates. The percentage is

likely to decline further as the price of college rises beyond the means of most families and as continuing education mushrooms, with baby boomers retiring and work demanding more frequent updates to skills. Today's traditional students are more consumer-oriented than their predecessors, expecting institutions to meet all of their wants—academic, counseling, room, board, support services, technology and social life. This is encouraging an expensive competition among institutions to add the newest and largest bells and whistles.

The emerging majority in higher education are part-time, working, and over 25 years of age. They are seeking institutions which offer them convenience, service, quality education, and low-cost. They are unwilling to pay for facilities, programs and services they do not use—fitness centers, elective courses, and intramural sports. They are prime candidates for stripped down versions of higher education, offered by online and non-traditional providers such as University of Phoenix and Kaplan, among others.

This demand for such education is likely to accelerate in today's global information economy in which the half-life of knowledge is growing shorter and shorter, causing students to return to postsecondary institutions throughout their lives, seeking just-in-time rather than just-in-case instruction, tailored to their personal needs in content, calendar, and learning style.

The migration patterns of Americans will also have an effect on higher education. Americans are moving from the Northern and Eastern regions of the country to the South and West. The Sunbelt is growing quickly due to this shift and immigration, creating a mismatch between the availability of higher education and student demand, particularly in California. This is likely to bring an influx of non-traditional, for-profit, and out-of-state higher education

providers to the region to meet the need, which promises to exacerbate the condition of Hispanic, black, American Indian and Southeast Asian populations as well as the poor, who have low high school graduation, college attendance, and college completion rates. Even those who attend college are likely to be over-represented in non-university-based postsecondary education.

Postsecondary Providers

The years ahead are likely to bring a dramatic expansion in the number and types of education providers. They will be for-profit and not-for-profit; brick, click, and brick and click; local, national, and international; and combinations thereof.

This will be propelled by a for-profit community that views higher education as the next health care, an industry in need of a makeover because it is high in cost, inadequate in leadership, low in productivity, and weak in technology use. Higher education is also attractive to the profit-making sector because it is a growth industry, countercyclical in enrollment, subsidized by government, dependable in cash flow, and a long-term purchase.

The convergence of knowledge producers will further spur the growth of non-traditional education providers. Today, content and technology companies—publishers, software and hardware makers, media companies, libraries, museums, and universities—are all trying to build their market using the same technologies and creating products that look increasingly like courses.

Students and Postsecondary Providers

The expansion of the postsecondary sector will offer students far greater choice in where, what and how they study. One can expect more mixing and matching—that is, studying at a variety of different traditional and non-traditional institutions, which can be expected to distinguish themselves by area of specialization, length of their courses of study, choice of instructional delivery systems, and cost. This, combined with advances in brain research with regard to learning and the development of software tied to those advances, will permit students to select the course of study most consistent with their personal needs and learning styles. Instruction is likely to be available to students 24 hours a day, seven days a week at the location of their choice—at home, at work, on the commuter train, on vacation, in the hotel room.

Postsecondary education is for the most part provider-driven. In years ahead, it will become increasingly consumer-driven in the manner of media.

Today, higher education is largely time-based. The amount of time in a classroom determines the number of credits earned, which when accumulated in sufficient number results in a degree. The idea of tying education to the clock makes less sense today. We recognize that all people learn at different rates and each person learns different subjects at different rates.

The shift of America from an industrial to an information economy is speeding this realization and action upon it. Industrial economies focus on establishing common processes and the American university with its course-credit system came of age during the industrial era. In contrast, information economies are concerned with outcomes. Process and time are variables. This is profound change, shifting the focus of education from teaching to learning. All of our educational institutions, pre-k through graduate school, are being pushed reluctantly in this direction by government, which is demanding specific outcomes data and accountability. Pre-

collegiate education is adopting this approach much more quickly than higher education, which ultimately will have the option of developing its own metrics or having the metrics thrust upon it by government.

Combine this with the expansion of non-traditional providers and the diversity of their educational offerings. Students, in the course of their postsecondary lives, are likely to have had an assortment of learning experiences which may vary from a few hours to several years offered by a host of different providers. This does not translate easily into credits and degrees. Moreover, postsecondary training by employers is more likely to focus on mastery than time. As a result, given society's shift from process to outcomes and the lack of common meaning associated with academic degrees beyond time served, it would not be surprising to see degrees wither in importance in favor of competencies, detailing the skills and knowledge students have mastered. Every student would have a lifelong transcript or passport in which those competencies are officially recorded.

Implications for Accreditation

The preceding observations are an attempt to read the tea leaves. They mark critical areas for change in accreditation. Several suggestions follow—some relate to the postsecondary system largely as it exists today and others to planning for more substantial changes in the future.

- Expand the scope of institutions eligible for accreditation based more on student enrollment choices than institutional characteristics such as degree-granting status.
- Follow student academic careers to gauge the nature of their educational progress in a system in which they may study with multiple providers.

- Develop common standards for regional accrediting associations in order to avoid non-traditional providers shopping for the easiest possibility, and also to provide a common or shared set of standards for postsecondary education and greater cohesion in the current patchwork system.
- Develop additional categories for accreditation—meets standards, exceeds standards, substantially exceeds standards—in order to go beyond the floor that accrediting currently establishes; to aid institutions in capacity building; and to inform consumers. Institutions should receive ratings in key areas such as academics, governance and finances as well as an overall assessment.
- Place primary emphasis on the outcomes of postsecondary education, determining what data institutions should provide to the accreditor and what information to the public. This could be a vehicle for providing more frequent updates to accreditors and reducing the paperwork, hubbub, and cost associated with accreditation, all of which are substantial today
- Plan for an outcome- or competency-based system of postsecondary education. What would competency-based postsecondary education look like? What is the definition of a competency? How can we insure that competencies go beyond vocational skills and knowledge to include civic and personal outcomes? (The danger is that higher education will "unbundle" in the same fashion as media with the possible loss of essential activities and services.) What are the appropriate assessment and transcript recording mechanisms and actors? Should institutional accreditation be rooted in the competencies a postsecondary institution seeks to achieve? What is the meaning of traditional process

concerns in outcome- or competency-based education in areas such as facilities, teaching methods, the role and kinds of faculty employed, support service such as libraries and staffing? Where does responsibility for access, completion, employment, financial aid, and so on rest in a world in which students may have educational experience with a host of providers? What role should accreditors play as these changes unfold—shaping or reacting? My preference is leading.

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP):

A Model for Reforming Accreditation for the 21st Century

CAEP is a product of the merger of two specialized accrediting associations—the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education and Teacher Education Accrediting Council. Based upon a major study of teacher education in America, I had been very critical of the oldest and largest of the two accrediting agencies, the National Council. My study found very low standards for accreditation; a higher proportion of less selective than highly selective institutions accredited; no significant differences in achievement between the classes of graduates of accredited and unaccredited institutions; employment of cookie-cutter process-based criteria for accreditation rather than outcomes; and expensive and heavily time-consuming accrediting requirements.

CAEP redesigned teacher education accreditation to meet the needs of the 21st century. In merging the two existing accrediting associations, it established a common set of standards for teacher preparation. It expanded the pool of teacher education providers to be considered for

accreditation to include all providers. It raised the floor for accreditation, requiring, for example, that students admitted to teacher education programs have at least a B average and test scores on nationally normed exams in the top third by 2020. It required a more rigorous teacher education program, demanding, for instance, an intensive clinical experience. It created a ceiling for teacher education, establishing several rankings for accredited institutions which included exemplary programs. It required outcome data for accredited institutions on k-12 student performance in graduates' classes. It also mandated annual reporting of key data such as graduation rates, placement rates, pass rates on licensure exams and default rates as well as surveys of employers and graduates. This offers both an early warning system of problems at accredited institutions and potential consumer information.

CAEP was able to accomplish this for a number of reasons. First and perhaps most important was leadership from the association president and board chair. Second was creating a broad coalition of stakeholders, including critics, to develop the new requirements. Third was vision, an understanding of the changes that were occurring in higher education and the impact they would have on accreditation. Fourth was developing a process and calendar for carrying out the changes. Fifth was need: Teacher education was being widely criticized and there was pressure for the field to update and raise standards.

The CAEP example shows that accrediting associations have the capacity to make the changes required for 21st century learning. The Federal government has the ability to accelerate such changes in accreditation. This would involve carrots and sticks. In terms of carrots, it would be useful to develop an RFP and funding for accrediting agencies to merge, modernize and create

common standards. In terms of sticks, it would be useful to take the lessons learned through the RFP process and establish accreditation association recognition criteria for the 21st century.