

Today's News

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Lawmakers at Hearing on College- **Accreditation** System Call for More Accountability

By [RICHARD MORGAN](#)

Washington

A House of Representatives education subcommittee met Tuesday to assess the role of **accreditation** in higher education. Lawmakers largely criticized the country's 50-year-old **accreditation** process, claiming that it fails to ensure academic quality, lacks accountability, and drives up college costs for administrators and students.

Rep. Howard P. (Buck) McKeon, a California Republican and chairman of the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, which held the hearing, set the tone early on by saying, "If [a college] and its programs are **accredited**, the assumption by most is that it provides a quality education. The purpose of this hearing is to determine if that assumption is accurate." Leaning on Republican themes of accountability, Mr. McKeon said, "I am extremely concerned that **accreditation** agencies are imposing standards on institutions that have little or nothing to do with academic quality."

Describing what she perceives to be the fallibility of the current system, Laura Palmer Noone, president of the University of Phoenix, discussed the "somewhat onerous" process of having multiple **accrediting** associations deal with a single institution. The for-profit university, the largest private university in the country, has



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125,000 students enrolled at 38 campuses spread across 25 states, British Columbia, and Puerto Rico. More than 45,000 of its students earn degrees wholly online.

Ms. Noone criticized the "system of overlap" between federal, regional, and state **accrediting** agencies, saying, "It is obvious to us as an institution that we have taxed the abilities of the regional bodies to cooperate." The variety of standards among regional **accrediting** agencies is problematic, she said, because "compliance with these differences is not a question of simply meeting the highest level of standards, since the standards are somewhat inconsistent and at worst dissonant."

While the University of Phoenix has accepted the **accreditation** challenges as "a cost of doing business," she said, state-based "educational bureaucracies" are an unwelcome obstacle for a geographically diverse institution because "every state acts as if it invented education." The state-based difficulties, she said, create "a structural impediment to any real national initiatives" in **accreditation**.

The strongest critic of the status quo was Hank Brown, a former member of both chambers of Congress and a former president of the University of Northern Colorado. Mr. Brown echoed many of the findings of a report released this week by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which he said provided an "excellent overview" and "excellent suggestions" for **accreditation**. (See [an article from *The Chronicle*](#), October 1.)

He also described his "bizarre experience" with accreditors at Northern Colorado, saying they were often vague in their goals and criteria. "Colleges and universities that were allowing academic standards to slide and the curriculum to deteriorate with a hodgepodge of quirky, academically dubious courses nevertheless sailed

through their reaccreditation visits," Mr. Brown said, moving the discussion then to "scandalous" grade inflation at Harvard University and other prestigious institutions.

Largely defending the current system was Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education **Accreditation**, who called **accreditation** "an extraordinary example of a successful public-private partnership." Ms. Eaton conceded that the process is "decentralized and complex," but added that "**accrediting** organizations, institutions, and programs can and should vary considerably in the manner in which they address student-learning outcomes. A liberal-arts student cannot be expected to demonstrate the same learning outcomes as a dental hygienist. ... I have a great deal of concern with efforts to standardize."

Some legislators appeared unswayed. Rep. Thomas E. Petri, a Wisconsin Republican, said that the dependence on **accreditation** for a college's **federal student-aid** eligibility puts "too much on a one-switch decision," and that political agendas have "strayed" the **accreditation** process from its original purpose.

Mr. Petri noted that he has introduced a bill, HR 5501, which would remove the need for colleges to be **accredited** in order to receive **federal student aid**. Mr. McKeon asked with visible frustration: "Do [accreditors] do any interviewing of students? Do they do any interviewing of employees? Of people who employ students when they graduate? Anybody?"

After some silence from the panel of witnesses, Mr. Brown, the former lawmaker and university president, responded: "The time [accreditors] spend in the classroom is minimal, if it exists at all."

Rep. John F. Tierney, a Massachusetts Democrat,

was the lone Congressman at the hearing to caution against swift condemnation of **accreditation**. While noting the "considerable latitude" of the process, he warned that he had "some concern about rushing to conclusions."

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Group Criticizes Link Between Accreditation and Federal Student Aid](#) (10/1/2002)
- [Bush Administration's Proposals Reveal Growing Divide Between College Groups and U.S. Education Department](#) (9/20/2002)
- [Education Dept. to Emphasize Retention in Next Higher Education Act](#) (7/12/2002)
- [States Struggle to Regulate Online Colleges That Lack Accreditation](#) (3/23/2001)



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