

Search The Site

[More options](#) | [Back](#)

[issues](#)

[Home](#)

[News](#)

[Today's news](#) [Current](#)

[issue](#)

[Special issues & data](#)

[The Faculty](#) [Research](#)

[& Books](#) [Government](#)

[& Politics](#) [Money &](#)

[Management](#)

[Information](#)

[Technology](#) [Students](#)

[Athletics](#) [International](#)

[Community Colleges](#)

[Short Subjects](#)

[Gazette](#) [Corrections](#)

[Opinion & Forums](#)

[Careers](#)

[Presidents Forum](#)

[Sponsored](#)

[Information &](#)

[Solutions](#)

[Campus Viewpoints](#)

[Services](#)

[Help](#) [Contact us](#)

[Subscribe](#) [Manage your](#)

[account](#) [Advertise with](#)

[us](#) [Rights & permissions](#)



As Federal Panel Prepares to Meet, Proposal for National Accrediting System Draws Fierce Criticism

By [BURTON BOLLAG](#)

Accreditors and some college groups are aghast at a proposal to eliminate regional accreditors and replace them with a national accreditation body. The proposal is contained in a discussion paper released late last month by the secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education ([The Chronicle](#), _____ March 31).

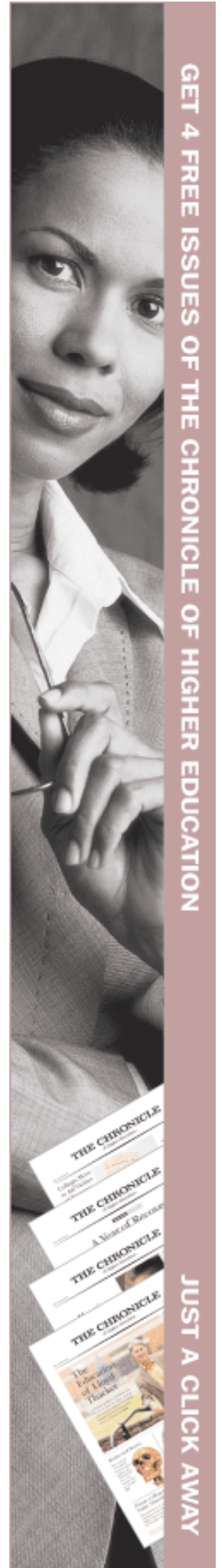
That news came just as the chairman of the 19-member commission lifted another concern of college officials by publicly promising that a mandatory test of college students would not be among the panel's final recommendations. The panel, which has held several rounds of hearings around the country in recent months, is scheduled to meet in Indianapolis today and Friday. It is charged with developing a national strategy on higher education and presenting its recommendations to Margaret Spellings, the education secretary, by August 1.

Even with few details, the accreditation proposal has drawn fierce criticism from regional accreditors and from leaders of the American Council on Education and the Council of Independent Colleges.

A national accreditation body would "undermine the strength and diversity of U.S. higher education," said Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an umbrella group of accreditors. Ms. Eaton, who is scheduled to testify at this week's hearings, said that by creating national "quality standards," the proposal would have the unintended consequence of pressuring colleges to become more alike.

The accreditation proposal was contained in one of six discussion papers released by the commission last Thursday. Two additional papers, on college costs and the federal student-aid programs, were released on Wednesday (see [article](#)).

The proposals in both sets of papers are not formal recommendations. Rather, "their purpose is to inform and energize the public about key postsecondary issues and inspire continued national dialogue around the future of higher



education in America," according to a written statement by the Education Department.

The panel's chairman, Charles Miller, calls the suggestion to create a national accreditation council "one person's bold idea."

"We discussed whether we should even put it in the paper," he said. "We decided that it is a good idea, and we wanted to get it out there." But, he said, just because the proposal was included in the paper does not mean it will make it into the commission's final report to Secretary Spellings.

Some higher-education officials say the idea may be worth considering. Representatives of several college associations said they were still studying the implications of a national system.

"Regional accreditors are historical artifacts," Clara M. Lovett, a former president of the now-defunct American Association for Higher Education, said during a panel discussion at a faculty conference in New York this week when the idea from the commission's paper was mentioned by an audience member.

Ms. Lovett said the regional accreditation system is based "on the way the world was 50 years ago," when institutions across state lines rarely collaborated or shared much in common. Now they do, even though some of them are accredited by different agencies. For example, she said, California and Arizona are under different regional accreditors, even though colleges in both states face similar issues.

"The boundaries of the regional accreditors are artificial," she said.

A Failed System?

The proposed change in how colleges are accredited was presented in "The Need for Accreditation Reform," an eight-page paper written by Robert C. Dickeson, a former president of the University of Northern Colorado and former vice president of the Lumina Foundation for Education, who is serving as a consultant to the commission.

Most higher-education institutions in the United States are accredited by one of six regional accrediting associations. The associations are private bodies, answerable to the institutions they accredit.

Mr. Dickeson's paper calls that system "a crazy quilt of activities, processes, and structures that is fragmented, arcane ... and has outlived its usefulness." Anyone doubting this, the paper says, need look no further than the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, a survey sponsored by the



Education Department. The latest results, released in December, show that the average literacy of college-educated Americans declined significantly from 1992 to 2003, and that just 25 percent of college graduates were deemed "proficient" from a literacy standpoint.

"If accreditation is to have any meaning," the report states, "achieving standards of literacy ... should be at the core of institutional approval by accrediting organizations."

The current accreditation system has failed, Mr. Dickeson's paper contends, in large part because the regional accrediting associations are controlled by the institutions they monitor. One consequence of this self-regulation is that the accrediting bodies are not transparent, and have long resisted demands to disclose more about the problems they find at institutions.

The system serves "institutional purposes, rather than public purposes," the paper contends.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education and a member of the commission, said regional accreditors should collaborate more to show the public they are seeking common solutions to the problems higher education faces.

But a new, federally mandated national system, he said, could become politicized and would be no more effective than the current system. "The process of accreditation is greatly improved over the last 10 years," he said. "I don't see how replacing the current system with one set up by the government would improve the situation. In fact it may make it worse."

Mr. Dickeson's proposal says Congress and the president should create a National Accreditation Foundation that would be structured as a public-private partnership. The foundation would:

- Create rigorous and transparent quality standards that institutions would be held to. In an interview, Mr. Dickeson said those standards would cover such areas as students' competencies in literacy and critical thinking, as well as the "values" they incorporated during their college studies.
- Establish new accreditation processes. The regional accreditors require institutions to carry out in-depth self-studies every 10 years or so. Those studies should be replaced, Mr. Dickeson said, by a "not so time-consuming" system in which institutions would continually update "key indicators" electronically. In addition, the volunteer teams of educators who periodically visit institutions would be replaced in part by professional

evaluators. "We've relied far too heavily on volunteers," Mr. Dickeson said.

- Make the process more transparent by disclosing more information about the problems for which the accreditor has penalized the institutions. The goal is to hold institutions more accountable and give prospective students and their families more information with which to compare colleges.

Uncertain Prospects

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an advocacy group that supports a traditional curriculum, agrees with Mr. Dickeson's analysis of the current accreditation system. That system has failed to uphold the quality of American higher education, the group says, and accreditation should no longer be a condition for an institution's students to get federal financial aid.

Anne D. Neal, the group's president, said she does not think a national accreditation body could salvage the system, but added, "We're delighted they agree with us. It's a system that's broken."

Many other educators, however, think otherwise. Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, which represents more than 550 private, nonprofit institutions, also thinks the regional accrediting associations have made significant improvements in the last dozen years. The accreditors have shifted emphasis from measuring inputs -- like the number of faculty members with terminal degrees -- to measuring outputs, by requiring institutions to develop ways to assess what students learn, he said.

"I'm not prepared to give up on them just now," he said.

Steven D. Crow, executive director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' Higher Learning Commission, said Mr. Dickeson appeared to want an accreditation system "that doesn't require lots of judgment, a system with cut-and-dried measurements."

Mr. Crow, whose organization is the largest of the six regional accrediting associations, added that the accreditors were all grappling with the challenge of raising the quality of higher education. "The idea that accreditors can somehow force colleges to do that is just crazy. It's more complex than that."

Sandra E. Elman, president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, a regional accrediting agency based in Redmond, Wash., said that despite Mr. Dickeson's arguments

to the contrary, basing accreditation on six regional bodies serves a useful purpose: It promotes diversity and makes higher education more responsive to the needs of local economies and society.

She thinks the proposed radical overhaul of the system will find little support. "I have spoken with members" of the higher-education commission, she said. "I don't believe these astute individuals are aiming for anything that's in this paper."

*Jeffrey Selingo
contributed to
this article.*

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Higher-Education Commission Releases Papers on Key Ideas It Is Considering](#) (3/31/2006)
- [Federal Panel Considers Giving Colleges a 'Gentle Shove' Toward Accountability Testing](#) (3/31/2006)
- [Many College Students Graduate With Low Proficiency in Math and Reading, Study Finds](#) (1/20/2006)
- [Congress Stops Giving Heartburn to Accreditors](#) (12/9/2005)
- [Report Recommends Change in Credit-Transfer Policy for Colleges That Receive Federal Student Aid](#) (10/19/2005)
- [Educators Cast a Wary Eye at U.S. Panel](#) (10/14/2005)
- [Study Suggests a Way to Gauge College Performance on a State-by-State Basis, Report Says](#) (10/13/2005)
- [Education Department Convenes New Commission to Develop 'National Strategy' for Higher Education](#) (9/20/2005)

[Copyright](#) © 2006 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Home](#) | [Chronicle Careers](#) | [The Chronicle Review](#)
[User agreement](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)
[Subscribe](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [Press inquiries](#) | [RSS](#) | [Today's most e-mailed](#)

The Chronicle of
Higher Education



**THE CHALLENGE OF
PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP**
JUNE 12 RONALD REAGAN BUILDING WASHINGTON, D.C.

A CHRONICLE
FORUM

Sign up today