



From the issue dated April 14, 2006

Federal Panel Floats Plan to Overhaul Accreditation

College leaders decry replacing regional boards with a national system

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 news came just as the chairman of the commission allayed another concern of college officials by publicly promising that a mandatory test of college students would not be among the panel's final recommendations.

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," says Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an umbrella group of accreditors. Ms. Eaton, who testified at a hearing the 19-member commission held in Indianapolis last week, argues that by creating national "quality standards," the proposal would have the unintended consequence of pressuring colleges to become more alike.

The proposal was contained in one of six discussion papers released by the commission. The proposals in them 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 national accreditation council "one person's bold idea."

"We discussed whether we should even put it in the paper," he says. "We decided that it is a good idea, and we wanted to

"Not since the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite has the need to improve science and mathematics education been as clear and urgent."

—Educational Testing Service



SCHOOL & COLLEGE
THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION TODAY

click to see a free copy

"Higher education has important work to do."

—American College Testing Program



SCHOOL & COLLEGE
THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION TODAY

click to see

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](#)



get it out there." But, he says, just because the proposal was included in the paper does not mean it will make it into the commission's final report. That report is due to Margaret Spellings, the education secretary, by August 1.

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

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

Ms. Lovett said the 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 an eight-page paper titled "The Need for Accreditation Reform." It was 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. They are private bodies, answerable to the institutions they accredit.

Mr. Dickeson's paper calls the current 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, the paper says, 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, says regional accreditors should collaborate more to show the public they are seeking common solutions to the problems higher education faces.

But, he says, a new, federally mandated national system 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 says. "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 calls for the creation of a National Accreditation Foundation through legislation enacted by the Congress and the president. Such an organization, to be structured as a public-private partnership, 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.

The organization would also 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, says, 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," says Mr. Dickeson.

Finally, the accreditation foundation would make the process more transparent by disclosing more information about the problems for which the accreditor has penalized 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, does not think a national accreditation body could salvage the system, but adds, "we're delighted they agree with us. It's a system that's broken."

But many other educators disagree. Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, which represents more than 550 private, nonprofit institutions, also thinks the accreditors 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 says.

"I'm not prepared to give up on them just now," he says of the regional accreditors.

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

Mr. Crow adds that the accreditors are 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, says that despite the report'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, says Ms. Elman. "I don't believe these astute individuals are aiming for anything that's in this

paper."

*Jeffrey Selingo
contributed to
this article.*

ENVISIONING A NATIONAL ACCREDITOR

The secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education is discussing the idea of creating a national accrediting agency for colleges. The proposed National Accreditation Foundation would be a private-public partnership with a governing board composed of representatives of colleges, business, industry, state and federal governments, and the general public. Its mission would be to:

- Create and maintain rigorous and transparent quality standards for the nation's colleges.
- Oversee new accreditation processes for colleges and their programs that are more efficient and effective than the ones in place today.
- Make accreditation decisions that determine whether colleges are eligible for financial aid and federal research support.
- Relay the results of such decisions to the public, to make colleges more accountable.
- Use funds from private and public sources to create and maintain a permanent endowment to finance its operations down the road.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Government & Politics

Volume 52, Issue 32, Page A1

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

Try 4 issues of The Chronicle
entirely at our expense

[CLICK FOR FREE OFFER](#)



So smart.
So easy.