

Challenging Accreditation As We Know It

An interview with Anne D. Neal

Anne D. Neal doesn't seem to mind being the lonely voice in the wilderness when it comes to the value of college accreditation.

She gets a lot of practice.

In late December, as a member of the National Advisors Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, Neal was virtually alone in her questioning of the major regional accrediting bodies that were up for renewal. She has been left to carry on the fight that accreditors and colleges provide some kind of measurable proof that students are learning.

It's an important issue in an era when higher education costs are skyrocketing.

"Accreditation does not equal quality," Neal said. "Most people assume that it's the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for a school. Unfortunately, the bar is very low."

This is not a new fight for Neal by any means. As president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, she has been highlighting the shortcomings of the accreditation process for several years. Her organization's most recent report on the subject—a follow up to a previous study—points out standards that are not only ill defined, but totally incapable of producing empirical data that can be used to measure quality.

The problem, as Neal sees it, is that accreditation has morphed away from

its original intent of a voluntary process schools used for self-improvement to a gatekeeper process with billions of dollars of federal financial aid money at stake.

Schools must be accredited by a federally recognized agency to remain eligible for federal financial aid dollars. The process is no longer voluntary and not necessarily about improvements in education, but remaining eligible for dollars.

It's time to decouple federal student aid and the accreditation process.

The net result, Neal said, is a process focused on inputs, not educational outcomes.

"It really has become the enemy of educational innovation," she said.

What Neal has argued is that the process needs to be decoupled. Accreditation needs to return to its roots as a voluntary process of self-improvement, while the Department of Education has enough tools to safeguard federal financial aid funds.

Her arguments seem to be gaining some traction. Some of the regional accrediting groups and their client schools have begun discussion of voluntarily posting measurable data.

While she has focused much of her efforts on the large regional accrediting

bodies, she has also talked about the positives and negatives of the national accrediting groups that work with many schools in the proprietary sector.

Neal discussed accreditation, its shortcoming and its future with *Career Education Review* during a recent interview from the Washington offices of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

You have said people need to understand that accreditation does not equal quality. If they can't trust that, how are they supposed to know?

That really gets to the very nub of the issue. I think most people assume that accreditation is a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. I think

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they assume if an institution is accredited this must mean it's a quality institution. This is a serious misconception and it's what the current debate is about.

I think that the accreditation process was developed to give Congress some assurance that the vast amount of student financial aid it was going to hand out was going to be directed to legitimate institutions, not diploma mills. But, in fact, as it's rolled out over the years it has become in many respects an intrusive, costly, secretive process and one which has a very low bar.

There are virtually no unaccredited institutions in the country. Most of the ones that do go on some sort of watch list are there because of financial reasons.

One of the things that we have argued, and will continue to argue, is it's time to decouple federal student aid and the accreditation process. We think that the existing financial certification that's done by the Education Department is sufficient to protect the consumer, and that by insisting that accreditation be returned to its original voluntary state, schools would be able to pick where they want to go.

They could use accreditors if they thought it valuable, and in the meantime



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of the *Harvard Journal on Legislation*. From 1980 to 1982, Ms. Neal specialized in the First Amendment at the New York City law firm of Rogers & Wells. She has also served as General Counsel of the Office of Administration in the Executive Office of the President, General Counsel and Congressional Liaison of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and editor of the American Bar Association newsletter, *Communications Lawyer*.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni empowers alumni and trustees on behalf of

academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. ACTA publishes numerous reports on issues affecting higher education.

Publications addressing accreditation include: *Can College Accreditation Live up to its Promise?* (2002); *Why Accreditation Doesn't Work and What Policymakers Can Do About It: A Policy Paper* (2007); *The Spellings Commission and You: What Higher Education Trustees Can Do in Light of the Department of Education's Recent Report* (2007); *The Spellings Commission and You: What Policymakers Can Do in Light of the Department of Education's Recent Report* (2007); *Ending the Standoff: How For-Profit Practices Can Inform Public Higher Education* (2007).

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consumers would be protected by the financial information in the setting that the Education Department does.

You've said the regional accreditors in many cases have become a way to keep innovation out. Is there anything some of the national accrediting bodies can infer from that? Are they better at fostering innovation, or would you lump them in the same category?

As I look at some of the various accreditors, there seem to be varying standards applied.

With the regionals, when you really start to delve into what are their measures of quality, they essentially have none. They leave it up to the institutions to define what quality is and then they allow the institutions to apply whatever their own designation of quality is, and further allow the institutions to grade themselves on whatever quality they've decided to apply.

Is it any wonder that if the student is writing the test, applying the test and grading the test that the student is going to pass?

I think that's the problem with regionals, whereas I think in some of the national accreditors there are much more obvious and vigorous standards.

What we've also complained about as we've looked at some of the accreditors is that they say they are concerned about institutional autonomy and that's why they want to leave it up to the institutions to determine what are the measures of student success. I think that makes very good sense; we do want to have institutional autonomy.

But, if they're going to believe in institutional autonomy, the regionals need to be consistent in their application. As we've looked at various case studies, it's remarkable how intrusive

they can be. They can insist that teachers have certain dispositions towards certain politically correct values. They can intrude on boards of directors in how they're operating and start to demand the composition of their boards.

What we've discovered is that too often many of the regionals have no difficulty being prescriptive and intrusive in areas that are beyond their privy, but when it comes to actually examining

quality, which is what they're supposed to be assessing for congressional and consumer purposes, that's where all of a sudden they're "hands off" and say they can't do a thing.

This is why we think the American people, and Congress for that matter, are both being duped. They think that this means quality and in fact it means virtually nothing.

Is this something that can be fixed or should we face facts that maybe this system just doesn't work at all and try to find something else?

I think if the accreditors were no longer the gatekeepers for federal student aid money you would essentially eliminate the problems that we're seeing now.

One option within the existing system is to welcome in additional accrediting bodies, but there have been few—and far between—that have come into existence recently; that's a fairly lengthy process.

So, I think the real solution is to end the gatekeeping process and allow accreditation to rise and fall on market demand. If institutions think accreditors can provide something valuable, they

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should hire them and utilize them and so much the better.

In the meantime, the consumer can be protected by the Education Department's financial certification, and, as I said earlier, for the most part institutions are put on lists now only because of financial issues.

I think we'd all be better off and institutions would be better off if they had the ability to decide how they want to use their money. If they want to use it on accreditors and think that's a valuable service, that'd be great.

As we look at the varying kinds of institutions out there, and the way the accrediting system is carved up now,

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essentially we have six very powerful regional monopolies with unchecked power. New schools, and sometimes old,

are faced with a labyrinth of standards often inconsistent and uncoordinated. Whether it's intended or not, what happens is it makes it very difficult and costly for new institutions to come into the picture. That has been a very regrettable consequence of the kind of cartel-like arrangement that we currently see given the vast powers of the regional monopolies.

As accreditors have traditionally focused on input, those inputs are often totally irrelevant to the ability of career schools and other schools to provide excellent education. It's obviously a different kind of product with different needs and different outputs. To be applying those kinds of standards across the board ends up homogenizing institutions and does a disservice, I think, to students who deserve a choice and deserve to be able to go to any number of kinds of institutions.

In this past year we saw efforts by the Secretary of Education and others to get

the accreditors to begin defining outcomes or measurable standards, an effort that essentially failed. Now we're seeing a voluntary effort, which begs the question, "How do we move forward?" How do you decide what is a standard of quality, because institutions are very different?

That's absolutely right! Clearly there are differing assessments of value-added in differing segments of the higher education marketplace.

Many schools have quite rightly pointed out that community colleges are different from major research universities and comprehensive institutions are different from career colleges. So, I think we clearly have to recognize and acknowledge that there are variations in institutions, and that those variations affect the determination of what value-added is.

The accrediting system has a very low bar and it's also very secretive. As you know, institutions don't really even have to release any particular information. The consumer is left basically with nothing other than the accreditation stamp and doesn't know what to believe or what that means.

I think going towards more of a voluntary reporting system on the part of institutions would be ideal. I think the pressure that the Spellings commission has put on accreditors has helped to promote these voluntary efforts to make more information available to parents, taxpayers and others.

One of the top issues proprietary schools face is that institutions accredited by the big regionals many times won't accept credits from institutions that are accredited by the nationals. In the latest version of the HEA reauthorization, there is at least an effort to make that transparent. What's your insight? Is this a fight worth having?

It gets back to having an open marketplace that welcomes entrepreneurs and welcomes new kinds of schools and new choices.

Clearly, when you have a system that thwarts transparency and thwarts the transferability of credits, it makes it more expensive for students; it makes it certainly frustrating for parents, especially when it's not clear that the accreditors have any real sense of what quality is and there's not even a floor that's so bad that a school must be accredited. It does seem slightly hypocritical for them to then say, "I'm sorry, but our high standards require us to examine you more closely and to be suspicious of the fact that you may have gotten someone else's accreditation because we have such a fine system."

What is that system? I think "the emperor has no clothes" is largely the message that we have been finding.

The regionals have sort of gotten away with vague verbiage and I think many of the other accreditors have far more rigorous and far more obvious standards that they apply.

If I'm a parent or a student trying to make some choices, I don't really have much to go on, do I?

That's right.

I think one of the important things is for institutions to try to provide as much information as possible. We work with trustees and we think that rather than having these federally empowered review teams that it really should be the trustees' responsibility to oversee the quality of the institution.

Once you've passed the baseline financial certification in the Ed Department, rely on the trustees working with the constituencies at the school to make certain that they're producing a quality product, and the marketplace

to a great degree will be able to measure that.

As students are getting out and they're passing exams and getting licensures then clearly the schools are working. We'd like this to be a vibrant market rather than the cartel that we see now.

Looking into your crystal ball, do you see the will to change the system?

I think some major progress has been made, and there seems to be

a much greater consensus that accreditation has broken as it's currently operating. That seems to have been the upshot of the Spellings

commission and the discussion that's been going on now for really a decade.

I think there's growing awareness that, as it's now applied, accreditation is not an indicator of quality. I think that's progress. We see that parents go to the *US News & World Report* rankings; they're really desperately looking for ways to analyze and compare institutions.

The accreditation process certainly doesn't do any of that because it's so secretive. You really don't know if a school has done great or has barely passed or whatever. There's no way that the consumer knows and one of the positive upshots of the discussion about accreditation is the growing awareness that the public would like some transparency. They want to know how students are doing. They want to know if after they've spent a fair amount of dollars, can the kids pass tests?

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I'm hoping we'll see more and more voluntary efforts to be upfront to parents and taxpayers about what

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the institution costs, how long it takes to get through, what the general education program is when that's applicable, how students do on exams, what the

pass rates tend to be, etc. There are any number of data points that I think would be valuable for institutions to be offering voluntarily.

What has it been like to serve on this federal panel reviewing the accreditors? What have you learned about the process from those sessions?

I think one of the most telling things for me was when one of the fellow members said to me, "You know, I really would like to ask questions and raise some concerns, but I'm worried about my own institutions because they have to be accredited." Coming from an organization that does not have to be accredited gives me a greater liberty to ask questions, and I think that's very important.

It's a very fascinating issue. Most parents just don't know. They think that if this box of flowers has a little seal on it, it must be good, and if this college has a little seal on it, then it must also be good. But, the two really aren't the same. I think just trying to break that misconception down has been a valued exercise. There's a much greater awareness now of the problems of the "one size fits all."

All of these issues have come to the floor, and I think that's all for the good.

**Career
Education
REVIEW**

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