

Testimony on College Accreditation

Dr. Jerry L. Martin
President, American Council of Trustees and Alumni

By federal law, college accreditors have a loaded gun pointed at the head of every college. They have the power to close the door to federal funding, including access for their students to the federal student loan program—access without which colleges today cannot survive. This is an extraordinary power for a private entity. It requires a strong burden of proof to show that this power is warranted.

The rationale for giving this power to accreditors is to ensure quality. That is what surveys show the public wants and that is what Congress thought it was getting when it authorized the accrediting system.

In theory, accreditors guarantee quality. Does the reality match the theory? College accreditation became a mandatory feature of the federal student loan program in 1952. Have they been successful in ensuring academic quality since that time? What is the evidence? Those are questions asked by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni in its recent study, *Can College Accreditation Live Up to Its Promise?* My comments today will focus on three areas: grade inflation, the curriculum, and academic freedom.

1. Grade Inflation. Grade inflation has been increasing over the last 40 years, not decreasing. Nothing is more essential to upholding quality and motivating academic achievement than giving honest grades. Another report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *Degraded Currency: The Problem of Grade Inflation*, summarizes current research on the topic. A comprehensive study by Columbia's Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton, finds that the percentage of A's has increased from 7 percent of all grades in 1969 to 26 percent by 1993. During the same time period, the C grades fell by 66 percent. The problem has grown worse since that time. Based on his ongoing study of grade inflation, Duke's Stuart Rojstaczer reports that, "The rise has continued unabated at virtually every school for which data are available." To cite one particularly timely example, the Boston Globe reported last week that, in the last two years, the number of A's and A minuses at Harvard actually increased from 46.4 percent to 47.8 percent. Every student graduates with honors who is not in the bottom 10 percent of his or her class. In spite of the pervasiveness of this problem, we are not aware of a single instance of a school being sanctioned by the accreditors for grade inflation.

2. Curriculum. Probably the most important question about a college is: What are students studying and learning—in short, what is the college curriculum? Most importantly: What courses are required for every student? Yet, there is massive evidence for the fact that, under the current accrediting system, the college curriculum has fallen apart.

A 1996 study conducted by the National Association of Scholars concluded that:

"[During] the last thirty years the general education programs of most of our best institutions have

ceased to demand that students become familiar with the basic facts of their country's history, political and economic systems, philosophical traditions, and literary and artistic legacies that were once conveyed through mandated and preferred survey courses. Nor do they, as thoroughly as they did for most of the earlier part of the century, require that students familiarize themselves with the natural sciences and mathematics."

Ten years ago, a comprehensive study by the University of California at Los Angeles team headed by Alexander W. Astin found that, although almost all colleges claim to have a core curriculum in their brochures, only 2 percent have a "true core curriculum"

According to the National Association of Scholars study, courses on English composition, which used to be an almost universal requirement, have eroded by one-third since 1914. Needless to say, the universities studied are all accredited.

When the American Council of Trustees and Alumni surveyed college seniors' knowledge of American history, it found that only one in four could correctly identify James Madison or George Washington or the Gettysburg Address. The study also found that, of the 50 colleges studied, not a single one required a course in American history and only five of them required any history at all. Needless to say, these schools are all accredited.

Instead of solid core requirements, many colleges now offer students a cafeteria-style menu of hundreds of often narrow and even odd courses. At various universities, the humanities requirement, which used to require broad courses such as History of Western Civilization, can be met by such narrow courses—these are all real examples—as "History of Country Music," "Movie Criticism," or "Dracula." The literature requirement, once a survey of English literature, can now be met by such courses as "Quebec: Literature and Film in Translation" and "The Grimms' Fairy Tales, Feminism, and Folklore." History requirements can be met by "History of College Football," "History of Visual Communication," or "Sexualities: From Perversity to Diversity."

In light of these courses, it is hardly surprising that the Association of American College's study, Integrity in the Curriculum, concluded that, as for what passes as a college curriculum, Cole Porter's lyrics sum up the situation: "Anything goes."

In theory, the accreditors should be the guardians of academic quality. In reality, it has taken enormous external pressure, including explicit Congressional directives, to persuade accreditors to address more directly issues of educational quality and student learning. In response, accreditors have added some general language like the following from the Middle States Association: "The kinds of courses and other educational experiences that should be included in general education are those which enhance the total intellectual growth of students, draw them into important new areas of intellectual experience, expand cultural awareness, and prepare them to make enlightened judgments outside as well as within their specialty." The North Central Association requires "a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual

inquiry.”

It is hardly surprising that, when the Office of the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Education reviewed the criteria of the North Central Association, it found them devoid of any “specific measures to be met by institutions” and insufficient for distinguishing between compliance and non-compliance. Such criteria ensure that colleges will pay lip-service to sound educational goals, but not that they actually deliver a solid education to their students.

Few and far between are the examples of colleges whose accreditation has been denied on grounds of educational performance. As DePaul University’s David Justice writes, “The truth of the matter is that regional accrediting associations aren’t very good about sanctioning an institution for poor quality.” In short, if meat inspections were as loose as college accreditation, most of us would have mad cow disease.

3. Academic Freedom and Intellectual Diversity. Freedom of inquiry is essential to the life of the mind. A robust “marketplace of ideas,” as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., called it, is the essential incubator of thought and learning. Professors must be free to pursue truth wherever evidence and reasoning lead. Students must be exposed to opposing points of view, be given the knowledge and skills necessary to make up their own minds, and be free from intimidation.

Yet it has been over ten years since Harvard president Derek Bok and Yale president Benno Schmidt sounded the alarm and warned the public that the major threat to academic freedom in our time is political intimidation on campus—which has come to be known as “political correctness.”

A 1994 study by Vanderbilt University’s First Amendment Freedom Forum found that more than 384 colleges had adopted speech codes or sensitivity requirements that threaten academic freedom. Currently, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has a database, accessible at its website, that contains hundreds of current policies restricting free speech.

And the Student Press Law Center finds that, since 1997, more than 370,827 student newspapers were stolen and destroyed by students who disagreed with their point of view. We are not aware of a single instance of accreditors raising a concern over this issue although it clearly diminishes the intellectual debate that is so essential to education.

A recent Smith College study showed a disturbing one-sidedness in the partisan affiliation of faculty members in the humanities and social sciences—a pattern so marked that, if race or gender were involved, it would be regarded as clear evidence of discrimination.

Diversity of ideas could be provided by outside speakers. But students and some professors regularly complain that panels on controversial public issues are almost always one-sided. Sometimes dissenting speakers are not even permitted to speak. Speakers as distinguished as Henry Kissinger and Jeane Kirkpatrick have been prevented from speaking because some students or faculty objected to their

views. Former Assistant Secretary of Education Chester E. Finn has summed up the situation by describing universities as “islands of repression in a sea of freedom.”

These restrictions on free and open debate are intolerable and clearly diminish students’ educational experience. And yet accreditors have failed to address these issues effectively.

If the accreditors are lax when it comes to enforcing standards of educational quality, what demands are they placing on universities? It is hard to find cases of a denial of accreditation where the financial solvency of the institution is not at issue. Yet, in this area, accreditors are largely redundant. The financial health of institutions of higher learning is already certified by the U.S. Department of Education. No institution may receive federal funds until the Department verifies its eligibility and certifies its financial and administrative capacity. In addition, as the accreditors themselves admit, the bond-rating services establish financial viability on the basis of a more thorough review than accreditors.

Accreditors mainly focus, not on educational performance or results, but on a variety of inputs, including the number of books in the library, the credentials and demographics of the faculty, student credit hours, what percentage of students live on campus, how many courses are offered at night, and so forth. They seem especially interested in procedures—shared governance procedures, appointment and tenure procedures, grievance procedures, program review procedures, and so forth.

Former U.S. Senator Hank Brown, who recently served as President of the University of Northern Colorado, reports that the accreditors did not ask what the students were learning but focused mainly on whether the faculty was happy.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported last month that accreditors told the University of North Dakota governing board to drop the institution’s Indian-head logo and Fighting Sioux nickname.

Meanwhile, Auburn University’s accreditation is currently threatened primarily because the board of trustees is said to micromanage the athletic program. “None of the problems relate to education,” reports The Chronicle. One has to wonder whether this is what Congress envisioned when it gave accreditors the power to cut off a university’s federal funds.

Accreditors have also had a pattern of imposing their own social philosophy on the colleges. As a result, some educational leaders have even had to face the prospect of incompatibility between accrediting standards and the very nature of their institutions. In the best-publicized instance of such conflict, Thomas Aquinas College was threatened in 1992 with a loss of accreditation due to the fact that its avowedly Catholic, traditional orientation had no room for the multicultural courses that its accreditor was prescribing. The Great Books curriculum at Thomas Aquinas was the very key to the school’s mission—so much so that there were no elective courses at all. As the college’s president, Thomas Dillon, said at the time: “In the name of advancing diversity and multicultural standards within each institution, [proponents of diversity] are imposing their own version of conformity and threatening true diversity among institutions.”

That same year, the accrediting association was denounced by president Gerhard Casper of Stanford for “attempting to insert itself in an area in which it has no legitimate standing.”

Similarly, accreditors threatened to sanction Baruch College on the grounds that 18 percent minority representation on the faculty was not enough and Westminster Seminary because composition of the governing board was not gender-balanced.

At the time, Education Secretary Lamar Alexander wrote, “I did not know that it was the job of an accrediting agency to define for a university what its diversity ought to be.”

Secretary Alexander took decisive steps to correct the problem—at least with regard to formal criteria. Since that time, the problem has gone underground. Each accrediting team has enormous latitude to apply its own particular brand of social philosophy and can do so with relative impunity since rarely is the accrediting process made public. At Tulane, for example, the president announced in 1995 that, to comply with accreditors’ demands, 50 percent of all faculty hires outside the Medical School would have to go to minorities—a quota of precisely the sort the Supreme Court has consistently ruled unconstitutional.

A heavy-handed insistence on demographic quotas is not as dangerous, however, as dictation of what intellectual approach faculty should present to their students. At an urban public university, to cite one 1999 case, the accrediting team actually had the gall to tell the institution to alter its mission along ideological lines: “The College mission and vision and department goals and objectives, as well as the assessments, should be developed around global concepts of race, class, and gender”—the three code words for a politically correct agenda.

If we judge accreditors on their performance, it is a record of persistent failure. On their watch, colleges have experienced runaway grade inflation, curricular disintegration, and the closing of the “marketplace of ideas.”

Our original question was: Is the life-or-death power over colleges and universities that federal law gives accreditors warranted? Since the rationale for the power is to ensure quality, the question becomes: Do accreditors ensure educational quality? The answer must be a resounding No. They do not ensure educational quality. In some respects, they make it worse. Their power is not warranted.

What is the solution?

The ideal solution is to delink the federal student loan program from accreditation. A much simpler procedure—and one infinitely less costly and inefficient—could be set up within the U.S. Department of Education to certify qualified institutions. It could be similar to required reports and penalties for fraud used by the Securities and Exchange Commission. This should be sufficient to identify the institutions that are “colleges” in name only.

In addition, for public universities, there are already two sources of accountability.

First, trustees are appointed to represent the public interest and, with the assistance of ACTA, are becoming increasingly active and expert in overseeing quality. The City University of New York board of trustees raised admissions standards, removed remediation from the senior colleges, and now requires that students pass an independently administered examination before they move to upper-division course work. Boards of trustees in a number of states are taking proactive steps to demand more rigorous core requirements for their students. None of these improvements were the results of accreditors' recommendations.

Second, state higher education agencies—such as the Colorado Commission on Higher Education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia—are embarked on what has been called an “accountability revolution.” They are framing performance measures that look at educational results and not just inputs. Former U.S. Senator Hank Brown, a former college president, reports that, while the accreditors did not ask questions about what students were learning, one agency did—the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Meanwhile, Virginia’s State Council now collects and annually releases the results of institution-based assessments of student learning to help ensure academic quality.

The regional accrediting associations function as de facto cartels. Monopolies are not good at self-correction. The best medicine is competition. If Stanford, Baruch and Thomas Aquinas had had an alternative in 1991, the accreditors would never have become so high-handed. If current accreditors are so reluctant to apply meaningful standards of quality, why not allow alternatives that will?

There are two promising alternatives that can provide much-needed competition.

First, the American Academy for Liberal Education was founded explicitly to set a high academic standard in the liberal arts and provides an alternative to the regional accrediting associations. Less than ten years old, it has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education and accredits a number of colleges and academic programs, such as honors colleges. These colleges take pride in being able to meet the high standards upheld by AALE—it is like a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval—and thereby assure potential students and their parents that this is a school of unusually high quality.

Second, Congress should consider Senator Brown’s suggestion that perhaps the states could accredit institutions—on a purely voluntary basis—if they so chose. Originally, the Higher Education Act did allow states this option. New York has done so in nursing and vocational education without problems but, since the early 1990s, this opportunity has been denied to other states. Whereas accreditors have shown great reluctance to become meaningfully involved in educational standards and student learning, the states have shown an intense interest in making sure their colleges and universities provide a first-rate education to all their citizens.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni hopes that Congress will address these important issues of educational quality and accountability and encourage competition among accreditors.