

CHEA President Discusses Policy Framework for College Success

An interview with Judith Eaton

A solid policy framework that examines the commitments and practices used by higher education to support student achievement is vital to determining whether or not efforts aimed to enhance “college success” are working, according to Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). “In addition to financial challenges—including budget cuts and endowment loss, coupled with money coming from the stimulus package and from the 2010 federal budget—colleges and universities now exist in a climate with a heightened sense of ‘public ownership’ of higher education,” Eaton said. “Along with an ever-greater emphasis on accountability, higher education increasingly is seen at the national and state level as the province of government as well as the province of the academic community.”

Eaton’s “Capstone” address was delivered at the Pennsylvania Governor’s Conference on Higher Education on March 18. The conference—whose theme was “Pathways to College Success”—was attended by more than 200 higher education leaders. “Who decides what success looks like?” Eaton asked. “At present, the four major actors who decide are higher education and accreditation, state governments, the federal government, and the private sector.

“For the higher education community and accreditation, success historically has been measured in terms of intellectual development, skills for life as well as work, and education as an experience beyond earning a credential,” Eaton said. “For state governments, success means

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greater participation in higher education, more graduates, and graduates who meet state workforce needs and contribute to the state’s economic development. For the federal government—particularly in the past three to five years—success means enhanced student achievement and performance by colleges and universities, both nationally and internationally, more efficient institutional operations and greater transparency. For the private

sector, success is measured by more graduates with better test scores and both technical and generic workplace skills.

“It is not enough to simply claim success,” Eaton said. “The climate in which higher education operates today strongly suggests that centralizing expectations of performance, whether at the state or national level, is at least under consideration. For higher education, any consideration of centralization must come from the grassroots level, led by faculty and institutions.

“Accreditation plays a vital role here, underscoring the importance of assuring that the academic community, not government, is responsible for overseeing issues related to academic quality,” Eaton concluded. “With the heightened sense of public urgency about higher education, we will continue to see a focus on student achievement as the *sine qua non* for college success. I am quite confident that our higher education enterprise will meet this challenge. As with other challenges we

have faced, higher education will not be found wanting.”

CER editor Michael Cooney spoke with Dr. Eaton following her speech.

***F**rom your perspective, what does quality education look like these days, in terms of standards for outcomes and accountability?*

What counts as quality education depends on the reason a student is in school, whether it’s a degree or non-degree pursuit, whether a person is there primarily for some kind of training, or if they are seeking a more comprehensive education. If it’s the latter, then we want to be talking about analytic thinking and reasoning and other skills like that—the generic competencies that are so important—and looking at the major as well, thinking ahead about education for work. If you’re focused more on career training, the tendency is to look at building



DR. JUDITH S. EATON is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the largest institutional higher education membership organization in the United States. A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an

association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities.

CHEA works with the presidents and chief academic officers of colleges and universities, accreditors, policy makers and higher education leaders around the world, providing authoritative information and leadership on issues related to accreditation and quality assurance, the federal government-accreditation relationship and enhancing public confidence in accreditation. CHEA is the only private sector body in the United States that “recognizes” U.S. institutional and programmatic accreditors for quality, scrutinizing these organizations and affirming that they meet CHEA’s quality standards. At present, 59 accreditors are CHEA-recognized.

Prior to her work at CHEA, Dr. Eaton served as chancellor of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, where she was responsible for leadership and coordination of 32 institutions serving more than 162,000 students statewide. Previously, she was president of the Council for Aid to Education, Community College of Philadelphia and the Community College of Southern Nevada, and served as vice president of the American Council on Education. She also has held full- and part-time teaching positions at Columbia University, the University of Michigan and Wayne State University.

A sought-after speaker on higher education issues both in the United States and internationally, Dr. Eaton currently serves on a range of boards and has authored numerous books and articles on higher education and accreditation topics.

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capacity in specific technical or professional areas.

How do you see that evolving, in terms of actually assessing whether students learn what they set out to learn?

I think faculty members do that now in a variety of ways. You can look at the overall results for a program, department, school or an institution and make a judgment. You look at what you expect to see happen, and what's been the history.

Given all the attention that Congress and other government agencies are putting on accountability, will that be sufficient as we go forward?

I think it depends in part on the type of education. In some cases, people are looking for very specific bright-line indicators of what's been accomplished. That often happens in technical areas or in professional areas where there's licensure or certification involved. I think with regard to liberal education or general education, talking about the baccalaureate degree and beyond, folks are looking for more in the way of direct evidence of what students can or cannot do. The main issue there is what form that evidence will take.

In a way, that's what I was trying to get at in my speech at the Pennsylvania Governor's Conference on Higher Education. Historically, it has been satisfactory to say that students with a baccalaureate degree have had certain kinds of educational experiences and they've earned these kinds of grades—those are indicators that the student has certain competencies. But there are a number of folks out there who are saying we need to go beyond that; maybe we need to test students, such as with some kind of exit examination,

or maybe we need other evidence of a certain set of competencies, like portfolios or something of that nature. Or maybe we need to use an instrument such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, to look at what students do over time and ultimately to compare those results.

The debate is not only about the importance of student achievement, but how we describe it, and what counts as evidence for it. There's more and more interest in some of the tools that I mentioned in the speech.

Is there a future for self-regulation of higher education through accreditation, or, as some people suggest, are we heading towards creating a ministry of education in this country?

I think that to the extent that accreditation successfully takes on these various challenges working with institutions, yes, there is a strong future for accreditation. But the challenges are out there. We've been saying for a very long time that we need to borrow

the best of peer professional review, which is very rich and valuable with attention to the kind of accountability that is being called for today. That's not easy to do. That's where the discussion is, but I am concerned about effectively addressing the kinds of accountability expectations that are out there right now. I'm worried that, over time, people won't have the confidence in peer and professional review that we want them to have.

What do you see as the state regulator's role in terms of accountability and outcomes?

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I think they've been very clear about certain messages. That is especially true for the public institutions. In exchange for the investment of public dollars, the

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states want to know more about what happens to students. They want more information and they want it to be readily available. Something like the Minnesota state system of "dashboard indicators" is one way of responding to that.

A lot of states, as you know, want unit record data; that is, they want to be able to track students longitudinally from the very beginning of education through the doctorate level. That's going to be their evidence about what is happening to students and for making a judgment about education.

Many states have performance reviews and performance reporting, and they say that funding ought to be contingent on achieving certain goals at the institutional level. Right now we're seeing a bit of an acceleration of a conversation about institutional performance that's been happening at the state level for at least 20 years. In part, I think it's being driven by the importance of higher education to the economy. It's also being driven by the national accountability discussion, and by the growing importance of states working in concert, because so many students move and so many institutions now are operating in more than one state.

One issue that's near and dear to the proprietary sector's heart is transfer of credit. Do you see that CHEA will be making any effort to further address that issue?

We don't have any immediate plans for that. That doesn't mean we would not return to it if conditions warranted. We've said that schools really ought to consider all transfer requests that come from an institution that is accredited by a recognized accreditor, and that we want accreditation to be part of the solution and enhancement with regard to student mobility. We'll need to see what comes up over the next few years.

There is language now in the *Higher Education Act* about transfer of credit. I don't know what will emerge from that; the negotiated rulemaking may result in some changes, but I don't know. Also, it appears that more and more states are taking up the issue of mandating transfer, and what that's going to mean.

Do you see a point where national accrediting agencies and regional accrediting agencies will have mutual respect and reciprocity?

I think the mutual respect is there a good deal of the time. With regard to reciprocity, are you talking about if a school is accredited by one organization, the other organization acknowledges that?

I'm asking more in terms of whether equivalent courses will transfer between institutions, regardless of whether a school's accreditation is national or regional.

I think the heart of that issue is whether the coursework is equivalent or not, and right now that decision rests more on the judgment of the faculty. That's why we at CHEA think it's so important to at least consider all credit transfer requests.

Along the same lines, do you see a time when CHEA would allow ACCET and

the other national organizations that represent primarily proprietary institutions into membership?

We have eligibility criteria right now that the majority of entities accredited by an accrediting organization must be degree-granting. I don't know the answer to your question, but we are starting to have some discussions about that at the board of directors' level.

I noticed when I was looking at the programs at your annual meeting that there's little representation from the nationals or the proprietary education sector. Do you think that might change?

I disagree with you a bit there. We have had many programs that include attention to the proprietary sector, and we have discussed the

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transfer of credit issue, especially the national-regional issue, for years. We have had all kinds of presentations and speakers and panels on the growth and development of the proprietary sector and its changing role in higher education and in the country. It may be a little misleading, in that the topics for our sessions may not include the terms "proprietary," "for-profit," or "career-related," but the people we bring together at our conferences are from all the different sectors. If we want to have a discussion about accreditation standards,

we talk to everybody, including the for-profit accreditors.

We have approximately one million students getting ready to graduate from college into an abysmal job market. The whole promise of higher education, of working hard, getting a degree and going out and getting a good job just seems like it may be unattainable for a lot of people this year.

I do agree that we do not have what looks like a favorable job market right now. I'm hoping that

it's temporary. I'm hoping that all that's being done here in Washington with the stimulus package, the budget, and the additional support

for higher education will help that situation and we'll see the economy start to rebound soon. But I don't know how higher education can be exempt from the struggles that we're all facing right now.

What worries you these days about higher education? For example, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to address placement issues.

I would say that we have a very significant challenge to address in terms of the changing expectations of higher education's role in society, especially over the last four to five years. This might include more direct assistance with economic development at all levels, or accommodating an increasingly diverse student population, or doing even more with education for work—making sure the full range of higher education opportunity is out there (and by that I'm really referring to the incredible growth of the for-profit

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sector). There's this very strong sense of need for higher education in this country, and making sure that it's at the highest level of quality. It's essential to people, and that's very different from years ago.

What are you optimistic about? What's going right?

If you look at the history of higher education, and the history of accredita-

tion, we've always met the challenges we've faced. So, for all that we're concerned about the economy, or about the kind of quality issues that you've raised, or about accountability—show me a time in American history when higher education did not rise to the occasion and meet the needs of the people. I don't think there is one. So I'm very optimistic about that.

**Career
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REVIEW**

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