Regional Accreditors Adopt Common Accord

A major landmark has been reached in creating agreements to assure consistent levels of quality in higher education offered by institutions that are expanding across the boundaries of regional accreditors. Each of the American regional accrediting commissions has adopted the same policy to assure the quality of institutions of higher education that operate sites in more than one region. This shared policy will provide fair and efficient review of institutions, wherever in the United States they might choose to open an off-campus site/operation.

The policy balances the need of growing institutions to be accredited by a single agency with the interests of local institutions and the public to make sure that colleges and universities from other regions are reviewed using similar standards. In order to accomplish this, the accreditor of an institution will accredit all of its off-campus sites/operations, but when one of them is located in another region, that regional commission will be afforded the opportunity to participate in the review of that site/operation, including sending visiting team members and voting on team recommendations. Input from the region in which the off-campus site/operation is located will be considered in the final accreditation action taken by the accreditor of the parent institution.

The institutional accreditors have also each adopted a policy that defines a separately accreditable institution. This policy will assist in determining when a branch campus operating in a region other than that of the parent institution would be accredited by the region in which it is located. ■

Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions
September 18, 2000

2001 CHEA Conference Update

Join CHEA in New Orleans!

The 2001 Council for Higher Education Accreditation Conference, **The Many Dimensions of Quality Assurance**, will bring together an outstanding group of higher education and accreditation leaders. The conference is to be held on January 22–24, 2001 at the Hotel Inter-Continental in New Orleans, LA. Additional information and conference registration materials may be found on the CHEA website *(www.chea.org)*.

The Honorable Thomas Ridge, Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, will open the conference and address the state of American higher education and the commitment to quality.

Mary Beth Susman, chief executive officer of Kentucky Commonwealth Virtual University, **James Duderstadt**, president emeritus and university professor of science and engineering at the University of Michigan, and **Mark Musick**, president of the Southern Regional Education Board, will focus on change in higher education and,

ANN PURCELL

RICHARD NOWITZ

especially, distance learning and new providers.

Andris Barblan, Secretaire general of CRE-Association of European Universities, will give us his perspective on key international quality review issues and initiatives underway in Europe.

Thomas E. Mann, W. Averell Harriman Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, will provide a perspective on federal policy and the challenges that await higher education with a new administration.

Other speakers include Roger Blunt (Blunt Enterprises), Sandra Elman (Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges), Peter Ewell (NCHEMS), Terry Hartle (ACE), Sally Johnstone (WCET), Pamela Pease (Jones International University), Nancy Randolph (Council on Social Work Education), Susanne Shaw (Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications) and many more.

For additional information, contact CHEA at (202) 955-6126. Conference registration must be received by December 20, 2000, and hotel reservations must be made by December 28, 2000. ■

FOCUS: Assuring Quality in Distance Learning

BY JUDITH S. EATON
President, CHEA

Presidents, chancellors, other college and university administrators, and trustees are called upon every day to make effective and immediate decisions about distance learning.[1] These decisions are supposed to result in shrewd investment in hardware and software, substantive assistance to faculty as they develop online teaching skills, thoughtful policies for future determination of intellectual property rights, and meeting students' technology needs with laptop computers and wired dormitories.

Obtaining reliable information on which to base these distance learning decisions, however, is a daunting task. Prior experience with site-based institutions, no matter how valuable, is no longer an adequate guide for presidents and other leaders. Distance learning decisions are made in an unfamiliar context: the potential of online enrollment, emerging new providers, the growing for-profit presence in higher education, renewed federal and state interest in regulation of higher education, and more and more questions about international distance learning. The scope, variation, and amount of information on these issues can be truly staggering.

Influencing all the decisions that presidents make about distance learning is a strong and steady desire to assure quality. Our willingness to take advantage of distance learning capacity is, in many ways, shaped by our confidence that we can continue to sustain and enhance this long-standing commitment.

In the fluid and sometimes volatile environment created by distance learning, we at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)—the national coordinating body for national, regional, and specialized accreditation—struggle to bring some order to the avalanche of information about both distance learning and quality assurance. What is an effective strategy for inquiry? How do we develop a framework for strategic understanding of distance learning? How do we assist our member colleges and universities with the right questions about quality?

Strategy for Inquiry

At CHEA, we track a limited number of important distance learning indicators: enrollments (numbers and locations of students enrolled), new providers (those offering distance learning outside traditional institutions), and quality review (how accreditors and other external reviewers assure quality in distance learning). There are other issues to which we also pay some attention—the role of faculty is one example—and we know that additional areas will become more important in the future.

Dividing distance learning into these more manageable areas of inquiry enables us temporarily to ignore material that, however valuable, is not germane to a particular inquiry at a particular time. For example, when we need information about quality teaching and learning in an online setting, material on hardware purchase is irrelevant.

In CHEA's inquiry into distance learning, we have found that some information just a few years old is already out of date. For this reason, we rely heavily on online sources, which are easier to update. We have found that some of the most reliable information about distance learning often is generated not by the higher education community, but, for example, by business or government. We pay particular attention to periodical literature, whether in print or online. We regularly check useful web sites and subscribe to listservs that are rich with information.

Framework for Understanding

How do we find out about distance learning enrollments and what other colleges and universities are doing? The U.S. Department of Education's *Distance Education at Postsecondary Institutions 1997–98* (//nces.ed.gov) is one important source for enrollment information. Another is *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs 2000*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (//chronicle.com/distance) provides extensive coverage of distance learning. Corporate reports such as Merrill Lynch's *The Knowledge Web* (May 2000; contact michael_moe@ml.com) and Credit Suisse/First Boston's *Education Industry Quarterly Report Card* (January 2000; contact greg.cappelli@csfb.com) publish regular enrollment updates and projections.

To satisfy growing distance learning enrollments, site-based institutions are creating exciting new models of teaching and learning. The University of Maryland University College (//umuc.edu) enrolls 40,000 students online and the University of Phoenix Online (//online. uophx.edu) enrolls approximately 12,000 students. The University of Illinois site (www. uillinois.edu/uionline) and the University of Wisconsin–Madison site (//uwmad.courses.wisc.edu), as well as its distance education clearinghouse (//uwex.edu/disted/home.html), are also valuable sources of information.

Who are the new distance-based providers of higher education? "New providers," those who deliver distance learning outside traditional site-based institutions, are increasingly important in considerations of quality. There is much to be gained from

visiting the web sites of virtual universities such as Western Governors University (www.wgu.edu), Jones International University (www.jonesinternational.edu), and United States Open University (www.open.edu). Other new providers include consortia such as the Southern Regional Electronic Campus (www.srec.sreb.org) and UNext's Cardean University (www.cardean.com). Corporate universities and corporate information technology certification programs are considered new providers as well (see Cliff Adelman's "A Parallel Universe," *Change*, May/June 2000). New providers also include those offering online courses and programs that are not affiliated with any institution.

Information that usefully organizes and categorizes these different modes of delivering distance learning and lists new providers is not easy to obtain. Help is available from Sally Johnstone and David Wolf's "Cleaning Up the Language: Establishing a Consistent Vocabulary for Electronically Delivered Academic Programs" (*Change*, July/August 1999). Diana Oblinger and Jill Kidwell's "Are We Being Realistic?" (*EDUCAUSE Review*, May/June 2000) also provides assistance. Ted Marchese's "Not-So-Distant Competitors" (*AAHE Bulletin*, Vol. 15, No. 9, 1998) offers insight and structure to the distance learning discussion. Linda Cannell's "A Review of Literature on Distance Education" (*Theological Education*, Autumn 1999) is a thoughtful treatment of many of the complex issues involved in distance learning.

Questions About Quality

Emerging quality issues in distance learning revolve around questions such as: "How do I know a distance learning course is as good as a site-based course?" "Is the same level and breadth of student achievement available online and on-site?" "What resources provide a reasonable expectation of quality in online teaching and learning?" "Can national, regional, and specialized accreditation as we know it assure quality in distance learning?"

CHEA has addressed some of these questions in its *Assuring Quality in Distance Learning* (1998), which provides an overview of quality issues and challenges for distance learning and accreditation. *Assuring Quality* is augmented by CHEA's *Distance Learning in Higher Education Updates 1–3* (1999–2000; www.chea.org/commentary) and *Core Academic Values, Quality, and Regional Accreditation: The Challenge of Distance Learning* (2000; www.chea.org/commentary).

National, regional, and specialized accrediting organizations are responding to these emerging questions by applying existing accreditation standards to distance learning and developing new standards (in familiar areas such as faculty and curriculum) for this purpose. Accreditors are applying these standards to distance learning initiatives within site-based institutions and to new providers when the latter meet the eligibility provisions of the accreditor. There has been less attention paid to unaffiliated online providers.

A number of accreditors also have developed guidelines or policy statements on distance learning. The eight regional accrediting commissions have built their distance learning practices on The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications' (WCET) "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs" (1996; www.wiche.edu/telecom/projects/balancing/principles.htm). The commissions are presently engaged with WCET in a significant expansion of these principles and practices. AACSB–The International Association for Management Education's *Quality Issues in Distance Learning* (July 1999) is another example of thoughtful attention to quality review challenges (www.aacsb.edu; the publication must be ordered via mail or fax).

For a faculty perspective on assuring quality, valuable sources are the University of Illinois' *Teaching at an Internet Distance: The Pedagogy of Online Teaching and Learning* (December 1999; www.vpaa.uillinois.edu/tid/report), the National Education Association's *A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members* (June 2000; www.nea.org/he/abouthe/dlstudy.pdf), and the American Federation of Teachers' resolution on "Ensuring High Quality in Distance Education for College Credit," adopted at its July 2000 convention (www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2000/distanceed.html).

We find help abroad as well. The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit's *External Quality Assurance for the Virtual Institution* (July 1999; contact director@aau.ac.az) and from the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's *Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning* (//qaa.ac.uk/dlg/intro.htm) are rich resources that carefully describe distance learning environments and offer excellent suggestions for quality review.

An effective strategy for inquiry, a framework for strategic understanding, and asking the right questions about quality all are part of CHEA's effort to organize and render coherent the plethora of information about distance learning and quality. We know that the price for misunderstanding distance learning is very, very high—especially in terms of our commitment to the quality of our colleges and universities. ∎

---

[1] As used here, "distance learning" refers to online teaching and learning, as well as academic support and student support services that are electronically delivered.

CHEANEWS

Publications

The Common Data Project. A CHEA Occasional Paper prepared by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and the CHEA Task Force on Common Data. ($24.95)

The Competency Standards Project. A CHEA Occasional Paper prepared by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. ($24.95)

Core Academic Values, Quality and Regional Accreditation: The Challenge of Distance Learning. A CHEA Monograph by Judith S. Eaton.

Internationalizing Quality Assurance in Higher Education. A CHEA Occasional Paper by John Petersen. ($19.95)

The 1999 CHEA Almanac. The first CHEA compendium of providers of external quality review and commentary on current quality review issues and challenges ($55).

To order CHEA publications or for additional information, call (202) 955-6126 or visit our website at www.chea.org.

Statement on Transfer and the Public Interest

The CHEA board of directors approved a CHEA statement on transfer and the role of accreditation at its September, 2000 meeting. The statement is the work of a CHEA committee of national and regional accreditors joined by chancellors and presidents, state executive officers, researchers and policy leaders.

While affirming that the primary responsibility for decisions about transfer of credit rests with institutions and especially college and university faculty, the committee probed the role that accredited status plays in these decisions. Committee members pointed to the changing environment for transfer, with more students wanting portability of credits, "new providers" of higher education such as virtual institutions and programs and expansion of web-based education delivery.

The committee, building on the 1978 Joint Statement on Transfer and Award of Academic Credit, urged that institutions and accreditors take four considerations into account when examining transfer policies and practices.

Institutions and accreditors need to assure:

- **Balance:** that transfer decisions are not made solely on the source of accreditation of a sending program or institution.
- **Consistency:** that the considerations that inform transfer decisions are applied consistently.
- **Accountability:** that students and the public are fully and accurately informed about their respective transfer polices and practices.
- **Commitment to Innovation:** that flexibility and openness characterize approaches to alternative methods of managing transfer.

The statement is being distributed to all CHEA institutional members and participating organizations and will be available at *www.chea.org.* CHEA's next step will be to convene a group of national and regional accreditors to further explore how these considerations can be effectively addressed on college and university campuses. ■

The CHEA Chronicle

Printed by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20036-1135
Tel: (202) 955-6126 • Fax: (202) 955-6129
E-mail: chea@chea.org
www.chea.org

CHEA

Council for Higher Education Accreditation
One Dupont Circle, NW • Suite 510
Washington, DC 20036-1135