

Raising the Bar on Quality Assurance

November 18, 2011

By [Doug Lederman](#)

The idea that regional accrediting agencies would appear to be competing over which can more aggressively prove that the colleges they oversee give students a quality education would have seemed farfetched a few years ago.

But with a set of changes that its governing body approved as part of a redesign of its accreditation process this month, the senior college commission of the Western Association of Colleges and Schools went beyond its peers in several key ways -- and in some cases sought to press further than some of its more visible member colleges wished, resulting in pushback and delays.

The [changes adopted by the WASC commission](#) followed more than [a year of deliberation](#) within the association of colleges and universities in California, Hawaii and the Pacific islands over the accrediting agency's efforts to define what level of educational performance is "good enough." Higher education accreditation nationally is under pressure from the federal government and the public to play a more aggressive role in assuring the academic quality of institutions (at the same time that others are pushing the agencies to play cop on the beat in protecting consumers, leading many to ask whether accreditors are being asked to do too much and to play roles for which they are not equipped).

In discussions unfolding in Washington, as part of an Education Department review, some observers have argued for taking some things off accreditors' plates, or ending their role in providing a necessary stamp of approval for institutions that wish to award federal student aid.

Like some of his peers, Ralph S. Wolff, president of the Western accreditor, has no interest in seeing his agency do less, and has promoted a discussion about how it must do more to assure the public of the quality of the institutions it accredits -- most notably in terms of the education they provide, an area on which, over time, most colleges have enjoyed significant independence.

"We do think we and the institutions have a public responsibility to stand behind the quality of education we provide our graduates, beyond just 120 credit hours and a 3.0 [grade point average]," said Wolff. "The big thing here we're trying to shift is from just ensuring that institutions are engaging in the process of assessment, to being about what the results are and what they mean. And are they good enough for us?"

But he and others at WASC acknowledge that the closer that accreditors get to treading on what colleges and universities have historically seen as their terrain – – defining not only what and how they teach their students, but what students are to have learned and whether they have learned it -- the greater the potential conflict between institutional and other interests.

"Institutions are used to the notion that not only has higher ed had autonomy as a sector, but that they themselves have been self-determinant" about key educational practices, said Anna DiStefano, former provost (and now a professor of educational leadership & change) at Fielding Graduate University and chair of WASC's accreditation redesign committee. "But there are legitimate expectations from the outside in, that if I or my kid go to school and get a degree, the student should be able to know something and do something at certain levels that were promised by the institution at the time the student enrolled."

Some of the commission's proposals to increase the agency's scrutiny of colleges drew little or no pushback. One major prong of the package is that the accreditation process needs to become more transparent, and with the commission's approval this month, WASC will now be the first of the regional accrediting agencies to make public on its own website all of its "action letters" (in which the commission announces whether it has reaccredited an institution or taken some punitive action instead) and the reports of its accrediting teams on which the commission based its action. The norm for accrediting agencies to date has been to release a list of institutions that were either approved or sanctioned in some ways, and lists of the relevant provision numbers, but little to no additional detail.

There was also overwhelming support for creating a new "offsite review process" to examine each college's performance on undergraduate retention and graduation. The commission plans to develop templates for defining and reporting common data on retention and graduation, and colleges will be

required to compare themselves against a set of "similar and/or best practice" peer institutions.

The consensus fractured, however, over two proposals. One would require institutions not only to define a "stated level of proficiency" for five skill areas for graduates (written and oral communication, quantitative skills, critical thinking, and information literacy) but to compare themselves to other institutions on at least two of those areas. The other was a suggestion that all institutions might be required to map their expectations for degree recipients to the Degree Qualifications Profile proffered by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

Most of the public pushback on those fronts came from the most visible and most prestigious institutions under WASC's purview, Stanford University and the University of California system. At a forum to discuss the proposals, according to several participants, John Etchemendy, Stanford's provost, urged WASC to delay consideration of many of them. Asked why, Etchemendy explained that a delay would give opponents more time to "convince [WASC] that [it was] completely wrong" in its approach to ensuring the quality of institutions, said Fielding's DiStefano.

In an interview, Stephanie Kalfayan, vice provost for academic affairs at Stanford, said that while university officials were pleased that WASC had streamlined its process, "no one here thinks that what WASC is trying to do for quality assurance will really assure quality.... All this is going to do is to create a new set of requirements, and lead institutions to develop a convoluted new set of ways to comply with them."

Timothy P. White, chancellor of the University of California at Riverside and a member of the WASC commission, sought to mediate disagreements between his UC colleagues and leaders of the Western accreditor. White noted that there is a "natural tension" that arises when accreditors that oversee diverse types of institutions seek to define and assure quality across them, and that WASC's efforts to define the skills that graduates should have and the levels of proficiency they should reach highlighted that tension.

While WASC had been discussing possible changes for the better part of a year, White said, faculty members at the University of California had begun to examine the changes only when WASC circulated the proposals in October, asking for

feedback within three weeks. “A different set of people started paying attention to this, and we felt we didn’t have enough time on our campuses to think through the implications of these changes.”

That, he said – not outright opposition to the prospect of requiring external validation of learning outcomes or of using the Degree Qualifications Profile to define graduation outcomes – prompted UC to ask the commission to delay decisions on those changes until February.

But he acknowledged that university officials were concerned that a requirement that WASC-accredited colleges use the Lumina degree profile to define what graduates should be able to do would “have the unintended consequence of homogenizing all institutions within a given region.” He also said that UC officials would prefer a voluntary approach to external benchmarking of graduation proficiencies; UC officials expressed fear, Wolff said, that making external benchmarking mandatory would inevitably require all institutions to adopt some kind of standardized testing of its graduates.

“We don’t have any interest in being part of a system that dummies the University of California system down – we need to have enough commonality so everybody’s held to a high standard relative to who they are, but that allows flexibility for institutions to have different missions,” White said.

“We understand the importance of the public understanding who we are and what we do,” he said. “We don’t think we can take a pass on answering those questions just because we’re UC.”

In bristling at accreditors’ demands for outcomes-based accountability, though, UC and Stanford are very much in league with leaders of other elite institutions who are increasingly questioning the utility of regional accreditation as it exists today. Princeton’s president, Shirley Tilghman, has urged the Education Department’s accreditation advisory committee to consider an alternative approach in which institutions of different types would be reviewed differently, such that financially sound, academically strong institutions might meet accreditors’ quality assurance demands in different ways from other colleges.

Wolff is sympathetic to the idea that it makes little sense to “drive all institutions through the same drill on every issue,” and said that WASC (if freed by the Education Department) is open to approaches that would allow the commission to

impose different requirements on different institutions, based on their financial health, academic rigor, and other attributes.

But “I disagree that [highly selective colleges] are not accountable to us or to the public about the proficiency of their graduates,” Wolff said. “The commission doesn’t buy an argument of exceptionalism for certain categories of colleges.”

So while WASC has delayed action, for now, on the requirements that all institutions compare their students’ performance on some or all of the five “graduation proficiencies” to peer institutions, the commission did mandate that each institution define a “stated level of proficiency” in those areas (written and oral communication, critical thinking, etc.).

That means that even high-profile institutions like Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley will, possibly for the first time, have to state clearly what they expect their graduates to be able to do in those areas, to show “how the proficiency is to be assessed, and to demonstrate that graduates consistently achieve or surpass the stated level of proficiency.” They are expected to do that not just for graduates collectively, but by major.

Many questions remain to be answered, DiStefano said, such as how specific those “stated levels of proficiency” must be (“we don’t want them to be meaningless, general statements”) and whether the commission can require institutions to compare their results to others, she said, without “reducing things to some sort of single metric that doesn’t capture what we believe is really a complex set of competencies.”