May 22, 2014

Carol Griffiths
Executive Director
NACIQI
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Director Griffiths:

The Association of American Universities, a nonprofit association of 60 American preeminent public and private research universities, appreciates this opportunity to share its views on accreditation, as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) considers recommendations to the Secretary of Education on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. AAU was actively involved in deliberations in 2011, providing four sets of written comments and oral testimony on ideas for accreditation reform. We look forward to a continuing dialogue as the committee prepares its second report to the Secretary.

We believe that the accreditation process performs an integral role in U.S. higher education. It reflects a fundamental responsibility for all institutions to demonstrate the ability to provide a quality education in return for federal student aid. The nature of accreditation has changed dramatically in recent years at the same time that our system of higher education has become much less local and much more diverse. With such a diverse higher education system, many have concluded that the accreditation process is not effectively meeting its core functions of assuring basic compliance for the purpose of federal student aid eligibility and effectively facilitating self-improvement through peer review.

We agree with the 2011 NACIQI Higher Education Act (HEA) recommendation to retain linkage between accreditation and eligibility for federal funds. The federal government is providing public funds to enable students to pursue an education, and accreditation, if properly carried out, is the government’s best indicator that an institution is capable of providing a quality education consistent with its mission. The accreditation process is designed to be largely a complementary one. The federal government (Department of Education) should focus on financial integrity and stability issues (primarily non-academic compliance issues), and accreditors—as non-federal entities—should have responsibility for academic evaluation as a tool for determining quality, allowing for flexibility and informed academic judgment. Indeed, the key strength of accreditation is its reliance on peer review and candid assessments of institutional and program quality by individuals who are engaged in higher education.
Our model of assuring institutional quality has made the American system of higher education the most creative and diverse in the world. But we can be even better. While our members report many positive interactions and outcomes through the accreditation process, the system faces major problems that need to be addressed to effectively curb fraud and abuse, and crack down on poor performing institutions without infringing on the academic freedom and autonomy of institutions with a proven record of success.

For the purpose of this document, we will focus on two major problems and potential solutions.

1. Cost-Benefit Disparity and Regulatory Burdens

We believe that it is very important to avoid drifting into a system in which the cost of data collection and reporting requirements for accreditation are excessive without any commensurate benefit to students. In the last decade, reviews at many AAU institutions have become increasingly onerous and time-consuming for senior administrators, faculty, institutional researchers, and information technology officials, with costs for some in excess of $1 million\(^1\). In some cases, in responding to regulations, guidance, or sub-guidance issued by the Department of Education, accreditors are forced to revise their procedures in a way that results in confusion and even more bureaucracy, while the ability of institutions to provide quality programs that fit their unique mission is diminished. Institutions are often subject to different interpretations and liabilities as regional staff try to decipher regulations and sub regulatory guidance. AAU provided NACIQI with these details through our written and oral testimony in 2011.

While we agree with the need for an increased focus by accreditors on schools that do not provide meaningful educational experiences for their students (or operate without integrity or basic competence), it seems that accreditors are often unable to distinguish between institutions with a long record of high performance and those without one.

2. Inappropriate Assessment Measures

A second major concern among our institutions is the pressure to apply assessment mechanisms misaligned with their mission that detract from institutionally driven means to improving learning. The Higher Education Opportunity Act specifically prevented the federal government from regulating on student achievement. Now, however, some accreditors are demanding and defining direct evidence of student achievement in a manner viewed by faculty as bureaucratic compliance without benefits for students, to the detriment of the assessment effort as a whole on campus.

A recent survey of AAU members showed that while efforts to assess and improve undergraduate student learning are expanding, few of our members use standardized tests because they do not match up to appropriate learning outcomes for their institutions or programs, they do not assist in improving learning, and the tests have methodological and logistical drawbacks. Most of our members find that the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and other such tests are significantly flawed and do not connect to their own learning criteria, and provide little information on how or where to improve student learning. They do, however, use a wide-

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\(^1\) AAU is working with the Task Force on Government Regulation of Higher Education, co-chaired by Chancellors Nicholas Zeppos of Vanderbilt University and William Kirwan of the University System of Maryland to address these, and other, accreditation regulatory issues.
range of methods (quantitative and qualitative) to assess and improve learning...all of which are discipline-specific, program-level assessments that are faculty driven, rather than standardized.

From our perspective, there are two potential solutions to the problems outlined above.

1. Expedited Review

To address the problem of cost-benefit disparity and over-regulation, we endorse the NACIQI HEA recommendations and the ACE accreditation report, *Assuring Quality in the 21st Century: Self-Regulation in a New Era*, urging that accreditors should have full authority, and be encouraged, to implement expedited review procedures for institutions with a record of stability and successful performance. Risk-adjusted scrutiny is a standard and indispensable regulatory practice. Risk-based assessment would allow accreditors to focus more on institutions that present the greatest potential for serious academic or financial problems, and to take quicker action against failing institutions, all while decreasing the burden and intrusiveness of the process on well-performing institutions. Most importantly, this system would serve the interests of students because the accreditors would be addressing real risks to educational quality.

In sum, we request that the Administration and Congress support an amendment to the HEA that would provide unequivocal authority and flexibility to accreditors to design and implement a system of expedited review.

We also oppose attempts by the Department of Education to require accreditors to take on additional roles. Accreditors should not be asked to serve as enforcement agents for the Department. The federal government should help ensure that the Department takes direct actions against institutions for infractions. The Department’s authority to take action against a college or university is used very rarely and unevenly. When accreditors are carrying out appropriate responsibilities, we support removing obstacles, to the extent they exist, that prevent them from acting quickly against substandard institutions. If changes in the law are necessary to achieve this goal, we stand ready to get appropriate measures enacted.

2. Student Achievement

We want to be clear about our institutions’ unqualified commitment to achieving student success and we strongly support a system in which all institutions, working with their institutional accreditors, are expected to provide evidence of such success. The demonstration of quality is a fundamental responsibility, but the kinds of quality and the methods used to measure it will differ depending on the mission of the institution.

AAU helped to lead an effort of the six presidential higher education associations and seven regional accreditors in July 2013 that culminated in a consensus statement, “Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement” (attached).

While the exact content of these criteria and the methods for measuring them will differ, all IHEs should be expected to provide evidence of success in three areas: evidence of student learning experience (institutions should be able to describe the kinds of experiences they expect students to have inside and outside the classroom), evaluation of student academic performance, and post-graduation outcomes (e.g. completion, job placement, post-graduate work, civic participation etc.).
Importantly, institutions should be able to determine which instrument they use to measure progress in these areas. We believe that measures of all kinds work best if they are integrated into the teaching and administration of colleges, closely linked to the curriculum students are learning, and analyzed on a regular basis.

In sum, the current language prohibiting the federal government from regulating student achievement standards should be preserved. We may need to clarify that the current language requiring accreditors to have standards that assess success with respect to student achievement should not be interpreted as a requirement that institutions adopt quantitative, value-added general assessment measures.

The principles statement mentioned above is an example of how the community (institutions and accreditors) has been proactive in this arena, without the interference of the federal government. We view this as an important indicator of how we plan to continue to work together in coming months and years.

In conclusion, we believe that accreditation plays a critical role in U.S. higher education. We are committed to strengthening the current system to respond effectively to concerns about accountability and transparency, while also allowing university leaders the appropriate institutional autonomy to manage their institution according to its unique mission and academic standards.

Sincerely,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
President