Are Accreditors Federal Agents?

Well . . . it’s complicated.

We say in our publications that accrediting agencies are non-governmental, independent, non-profit organizations and that membership is voluntary. Technically, these are correct assertions. But as with many aspects of higher education, it’s not quite that simple.

The peer-review model of accreditation arose from the academy. It did not descend from the government. Beginning in 1885, institutions in contiguous New England states came together in response to an evident need to verify the quality of the learning provided among their members. The organization began a process we now call “accreditation,” which was refined over time. Similar organizations were soon formed, moving accreditation toward America’s South and West. By 1962, when the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was formed, the core processes of peer-based accreditation had been refined and generally accepted as an effective means to assure and foster educational quality in higher education.

When the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) was passed by Congress, among its eight sections was “Title IV: Student Assistance.” This section authorized direct financial assistance to students enrolled at institutions of higher education. With an eye to ensuring integrity in the use of taxpayer funds, not allowing Title IV funds for students at sub-standard or fraudulent institutions, the government elected to rely on existing quality assurance processes – accreditation – to verify schools deserving of Title IV funding.

Thus, accrediting agencies became gatekeepers for very large government expenditures – by some calculations, now well over $150 billion each year. Without accreditation by a US Department of Education-approved accrediting agency, an institution can’t apply to receive Title IV funding. If an institution loses accreditation, its loss of Title IV funds typically precipitates its financial collapse. This, of course, places a rather confining definition on the meaning of an institution’s “voluntary membership” with an institutional accreditor.

As you can appreciate, with vast federal dollars being effectively screened by accreditors, there has been increased scrutiny of accreditors to ensure they are equal to the task. Through eight subsequent reauthorizations of the HEA, the government’s oversight of the gatekeepers has become more granular and prescriptive. Along with ensuring that accreditors are reliable evaluators of educational quality, we are increasingly expected to also address national concerns about college cost and access, equity, consumer protection, public information, student achievement, institutional stability and accountability, and educational innovation.

This trend has created a very nuanced and fluid relationship between the federal government and institutional accreditors. While accreditors’ roles and points of engagement with their institutions are not antithetical to the interests of the federal government, it seems at times that legislative anxieties about higher education are being channeled through accreditors.

One desired outcome of peer-based accreditation is to help shield institutions from the tug of swinging political opinion and the power of special interest groups. Yet the political process itself is not immune to these waves of public sentiment as they may weigh on higher education. Regional accreditors, through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) seek to
exercise a collective voice with our federal counterparts to ensure that, in the end, student achievement and institutional mission and autonomy are honored. (See [https://www.c-rac.org](https://www.c-rac.org))

It’s a misleading question to ask if accreditors are federal agents. We resist being viewed as deputized officers of the government. At the same time, we seek to fulfill our gatekeeper role, as a collaborative partner with the government, with integrity and economy. We enter into this alliance with the passionate conviction that peer review – relying on educators to appraise the work of education – is a proven process. With all due respect for our federal partners, we observe with careful circumspection any trends to federalize the accreditation process, to turn over the work of quality assurance to bureaucrats who are many steps removed from the actual work of higher education.

We remain, then, diligent agents of accountability on behalf of a government that is deeply committed to the power of education to shape the future of our society.