Eleven Reform Proposals for Higher Education: Executive Summary

Peter T. Ewell

The paper reviews eleven specific changes in accreditation structure or practice aimed at narrowing the focus and improving the effectiveness of the process. This argument assumes a planning horizon of at least ten years because some of these reforms will require changes in federal law or regulation, and virtually all of them will require changes in standards and review processes adopted voluntarily by accreditors themselves. Each proposal is framed as a challenge, which then suggests a concrete set of reforms.

1. Purpose. As currently framed, accreditation is about the quality of everything that an institution does. But this is far too broad a set of topics for accreditation to effectively examine. Instead, the primary focus of accreditation should be placed on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. This would mean more intensive and in-depth examination of curricula and pedagogies, and a much more intensive look at student outcomes. This renewed focus would be aided by changes in the language of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) to emphasize "student learning" in addition to "student academic achievement."

2. Governance. The current governance arrangements of accreditation as independent membership organizations make it very difficult for those involved to speak with one voice in matters of policy. A possible reform here would be to create a new free-standing federally chartered (but not federally owned) body to oversee and coordinate accreditors similar to the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Federal Reserve Board. This could also be done through Reauthorization.

3. Scope. The seven regional accrediting commissions vary substantially in the number of institutions they examine. This means that they are able to devote quite different amounts of attention to any given institution in a review. One alternative way to organize accreditation is by type of institution. Unfortunately, it is hard to delineate institutional types in a way that makes unambiguous distinctions among them. As a result, the best proposal is probably to retain a geographic organization but to gradually and voluntarily redistribute the number of institutions within each region so that there is greater balance across commissions in this respect.

4. Language. There is considerable variation across accreditors in language they use to describe things. As a result, it is difficult for observers to determine whether or not different accreditors are referencing the same things with different terms or are looking at different things altogether. This problem is particularly acute with respect to student learning outcomes. To address this, accreditors should be encouraged to voluntarily adopt aligned terminology for key features of the review process and to map or otherwise justify their expectations for students to some kind of external reference point like AAC&U's LEAP outcomes or the Lumina DQP.

5. Multiple Levels of Recognition. Currently, accreditation results in only one all-or-nothing outcome: an institution is either accredited or it is not. Establishing accreditation recognition at multiple

levels would allow accreditors to recognize above-standard performance and would provide the public with far more information than the current approach.

6. <u>Standard Dashboard Measures</u>. Current accreditation processes focus mainly on written documents prepared by institutions and reviewed by accreditors. But much information about institutional condition and performance can be succinctly presented—and, more importantly, compared—in numeric form. Accordingly, accreditors should develop a standard "dashboard" of ten to twelve commonly-defined performance indicators for use in the accreditation process.

7. <u>Peer Review</u>. Peer Review is central to the accreditation process and should certainly remain so. But peers often lack expertise in important matters, foremost among them the assessment of student learning outcomes. Accordingly, peer review should be "disciplined" by expert panels operating alongside the regular accreditation process in areas like assessment or fiscal condition. A first step here is determining what peer reviewers are good at and what they are not.

8. <u>Conduct of Review</u>. Most accreditation visits rely on only one approach to gathering evidence: group interviews of institutional staff by one or more visiting team members. But there are many additional evidence-gathering approaches available drawn from organizational consulting or the social sciences. These include mini-surveys, focus groups, audit methods, and field observation. Use of such tools could result in better evidence.

9. <u>Role of Students</u>. Students currently play almost no role in accreditation. Yet they are at the heart of the teaching and learning process. Not only could more focus be placed on examining student experiences as part of a site visit, students could also usefully be included on visiting teams and could help develop standards and review processes.

10. <u>Balance in Review</u>. The current accreditation process treats all institutions the same. This means that institutions with good track records get the same level of attention from accreditors as problematic institutions. The alternative is to adopt a "risk sensitive" approach in which the amount of scrutiny is proportional to the institution's track record of past performance. Such an approach could render the accreditation process far more efficient.

11. <u>Public Reporting</u>. Reporting on the results of accreditation reviews has improved considerably in the past decade. But it might be further improved through the development of standard report approaches listing the strengths and challenges of each institution determined in the course of a review and, as noted earlier, through the use of standard statistical performance indicators.

While they are to some extent interdependent, these challenges and proposed remedies are sufficiently separable that progress can be made on each independently. And progress can for the most part be met through voluntary actions on the part of accreditors themselves without imposing a government (federal) solution.