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Today's News

Tuesday, October 1, 2002

Group Criticizes Link Between Accreditation and Federal Student Aid

 By [RICHARD MORGAN](#)

The federal government should no longer require a college to be **accredited** to award federal financial aid, a national group argues in a new report. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni questions the effectiveness of **accrediting** groups and calls for Congress to end the requirement when it reviews the government's main higher-education law next year.

The report -- titled "Can College **Accreditation** Live Up to Its Promise?" -- was released Monday by the council, which advocates a traditional curriculum and rigorous academic standards and was founded in part by Lynne V. Cheney, wife of Vice President Richard B. Cheney. It systematically attacks the country's century-old college-**accreditation** process, specifically criticizing a 1952 change to the Higher Education Act that ties a college's ability to participate in **federal student-aid** programs to **accreditation**.

Higher-education officials gave the report mixed reviews, with some staunchly defending the status quo for **accreditation** and others acknowledging the possibility for change.

Today, as part of the process of renewing the Higher Education Act, a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives is scheduled to examine the role of **accreditation** and how it affects the cost of postsecondary education.

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The trustees group's report holds that accreditors not only are unable to ensure that a postsecondary institution provides a quality education, they also "hold a gun -- the threat of withholding federal funds -- to the heads of colleges and universities." The nation's six regional accreditors, which **accredit** the vast majority of colleges, come in for especially heavy criticism in the report.

In blasting the checklists that **accrediting** groups use to assess colleges during site visits and peer-review sessions, the report says, "It is as if an organization decided which automobile would be allowed to be sold by checking to make sure that each car model had tires, doors, an engine, and so forth, and had been assembled by workers with proper training -- but without actually driving any cars."

The report also denounced what the council perceives to be the accreditors' political agenda. "Accreditors insist that a college's academic goals be subordinated to the accreditors' own social vision," the report says, adding that "some of the **accrediting** associations have clearly adopted a political agenda and have tried to use their influence to require colleges and universities to adhere to it. ... [But] educational quality does not depend on having any particular mixture of people from different backgrounds on the faculty or in the student body, or on a curriculum that covers a wide array of topics that supposedly appeals to different groups."

In an interview, George C. Leef, director of higher-education policy at the trustees' group and a co-author of the report, called the **accrediting** system a "cartel" of "arm-twisting" that "doesn't filter out anyone."

He proposed that **accreditation** shift to a free-market model, similar to the distribution of food

stamps. "Rather than **accrediting** all grocery stores for food stamps," he argued, "we make ineligible stores that commit fraud. So, instead of making Harvard and UVA and Amherst go through this process, we should focus on the few bad actors where students are really getting scammed."

As an alternative to **accrediting**, Mr. Leef suggested the creation of a Web site where students could testify to the quality of education they received at their institutions. Colleges with numerous reports of student dissatisfaction would then be inspected under Mr. Leef's plan.

Edward M. Elmendorf, senior vice president for government relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, denied that accreditors operate within a political agenda and criticized the council's report as doing nothing more than "picking around the edges at a standard that's proven and isn't questioned by others."

Mr. Elmendorf, himself a former site visitor and regional **accrediting** team leader, defended accreditors, saying that they "can turn an institution inside-out and upside-down, and they do. There's a stiff standard to bear."

Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education **Accreditation**, a coalition of **accrediting** groups, was more sanguine about the report. Although she called **accrediting** part of "the fundamentals of a sound institution," she said, "Is **accreditation** perfect? No. It's a social operation, a social institution. But, in balance, it has been the primary means for the past 50 years for academic soundness."

Noting the recent proliferation of for-profit colleges and distance-education programs, Ms. Eaton added that "in an environment where higher education is undergoing change, this

fundamental fixture of higher education is changing, too. This is an opportunity to ask a lot of healthy questions."

The report is available online at the council's [Web site](#). It can be viewed using [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#), available free.

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Bush Administration's Proposals Reveal Growing Divide Between College Groups and U.S. Education Department](#) (9/20/2002)
- [Education Dept. to Emphasize Retention in Next Higher Education Act](#) (7/12/2002)
- [Accreditors Offer Views on Distance Programs](#) (5/24/2002)
- [Republicans Seek a New Tone on Many Education Issues](#) (8/11/2000)



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