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## WILL REGIONAL ACCREDITATION GO NATIONAL?

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The U.S. Department of Education inserted a firecracker into the 2019 negotiated rulemaking on accreditation (see sidebar). Regional accrediting organizations — which accredit the vast majority of public and private nonprofit colleges — could now be free to accredit anywhere in the United States.

Until now, the work of each of the seven regional accrediting commissions (see below) was confined to a specific geographic area, e.g., the New England region or the Southern region. A college or university, to be regionally accredited, had only one choice: to turn to the accreditor in the geographic area where it was located. The University of Connecticut had to be accredited by the New England association; the University of Georgia had to be accredited by the Southern association.

Department officials said their goal was to open up the institutional accreditation system to competition. The agency's firecracker was, at first glance, a small one. The regional accreditors are not forced to operate nationally. They don't even have to consider institutions out of their regions that seek accreditation, even if institutions make such requests.

But, in the last few months, the firecracker went off. One regional accreditor, the WASC Senior College and University Commission, has taken first, albeit modest, steps to operate nationally. WSCUC will extend its reach and now consider, on a case-by-case basis, “applications from WSCUC-accredited and affiliated institutions that could result in WSCUC's accrediting institutions in states outside our current scope.”

Is regional accreditation becoming national a good idea? A bad idea? Are higher education, students and the public better off if regionals remain regional? What are the arguments, pro and con?

### FOUR REASONS WHY STAYING REGIONAL IS A GOOD IDEA

The arguments for staying regional are powerful.

Accrediting organizations, nongovernmental bodies that are tasked with examining and approving the quality of higher education institutions and programs, are answerable to the federal government because they play a role in controlling access to federal funds, whether for student grants and loans, research or programs.

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) periodically reviews these organizations for their effectiveness and competence based on federal law and regulation. When USDE wants to change these regulations, it enters into a negotiated rulemaking, a process required by law in which government officials consult with constituents in a field to revise regulations. This happened in 2019, with new rules in effect in July 2020.

The first two reasons for regional accreditation remaining regional are composition and culture. The individual regions vary considerably based on the types of institutions they accredit. For example, almost two-thirds of the New England institutions are private, and more than half of the institutions in the 19 states in the middle

### Regional Accrediting Commissions

- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)
- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)

of the country accredited by the Higher Learning Commission are public.

These regional accreditors have developed valuable expertise that is based on years of experience dealing with their predominant type of institutions. This is reflected in their standards and policies. Going national could readily

mean a diluting of this valuable expertise.

Second, different regions around the country have varying cultures. The region that includes Alaska and the region that includes Alabama are different, as are the regions that include Minnesota and Mississippi, Connecticut and California. While regional accreditor standards are similar in many ways, the values, preoccupations and focus that institutions bring to the accreditation review reflect these regional variations. There is benefit to preserving these cultural differences that are regionally driven.

And these cultural differences express themselves in variation in distinctive values held in each region. Smaller private higher education institutions may, for example, have a perspective on institutional autonomy that varies from the perspective of a large public institution.

Third, there are serious practical considerations — and more than a few financial challenges — associated with regional accreditors becoming national. These include the additional workload and expense for the accreditor in working across the country versus in a particular region. They also include the complexity and expense for institutions that are currently accredited by one regional moving to another. As one accreditor has put it: What is the gain when an accreditor in one region travels thousands of miles to accredit an institution when another competent accreditor is nearby?

Fourth, there is serious concern that eliminating regional accreditation means that institutions would embark on “accreditation shopping” or a “race to the bottom.” Institutions would seek the accreditor that makes achieving accreditation status the easiest.

### FOUR REASONS WHY BECOMING NATIONAL IS A GOOD IDEA

There also are powerful arguments for regional accreditation becoming national.

First, becoming national is acknowledgment of reality. All of the regional commissions currently operate outside their regions. They accredit institutions with online learning, available anywhere. They accredit internationally, especially the non-U.S. operation of the institutions within their regions. They accredit branch campuses and other locations in states outside of their respective geographic regions, a cooperative effort across two or more regions.

Second, becoming national increases growth opportunities for an individual regional commission. With the current pace of mergers and closings, the reality of the drop in student enrollment in higher education in the future and the competition of the expanding footprint of alternative education providers such as Coursera, edX and Google that are not part of regional scrutiny, some regional commissions are likely to shrink in both resources and influence. Growth opportunities can strengthen the importance

and impact of regional accreditation. Third, becoming national would mean that regional commissions further affirm the commitment to creativity and innovation in higher education. It would be a powerful signal that regional accreditation is further invested in high-quality education of all kinds in the future and further establish the accreditor as playing a leadership role in the significantly shifting higher education landscape. This commitment to innovation could also serve as a model for a number of their accredited institutions.

Fourth, and acknowledging the concerns mentioned above, competition may not be negative for regional accreditation after all. Competition could emerge as valuable to strengthening accreditation. Yes, some institutions might go accreditation shopping, but others will want the toughest accreditation around to prove the worth of their respective colleges and universities. And competition can strengthen the accrediting organizations themselves by their additionally focusing on value added.

### THREE REMAINING THOUGHTS

If there is a shift from regional to national, this is likely to be evolutionary in nature. As mentioned above, the 2019 negotiated rule-making firecracker leaves the decision to shift from regional to national to the accrediting organization itself. For regionally accredited institutions, a decision to change accreditors involves a great commitment of time and resources. Colleges and universities are likely to reflect carefully before making such a move. And the receiving accreditor may not be willing to accredit the institutions.

Then there is the issue of transfer of credit. There are already questions and speculation

about whether regional accreditation becoming national resolves this concern. For a significant number of institutions and students, transferring credits between currently regional and nationally accrediting institutions is a problem.

There is evidence that some institutions make decisions about transfer credits based on a sending institution's accreditor. Unless the sending institution is regionally accredited, the receiving regionally accredited institution will not consider the credits. However, it is difficult to see how regional accreditation becoming national solves this. Whether regional accreditation continues or regionals become national, the decision to consider and accept transfer credits is up to individual institutions, independent of the accreditor.

Finally, we've likely not heard the last word on this subject from the Department of Education or, perhaps, Congress. There are, at present, more than 40 bills that address accreditation in some way in the U.S. House and Senate, including a major bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. And the Education Department may have other firecrackers in store. Given the central role that accreditation continues to play in higher education and the country, further efforts to restructure regional and all other accreditation may be in our future.

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