

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

© 2006 Dow Jones & Company. All Rights Reserved

Colleges, Accreditors Seek Better Ways to Measure Learning

By DANIEL GOLDEN
November 13, 2006

At the University of the South, a highly regarded liberal-arts college in Sewanee, Tenn., the dozen professors who teach the required freshman Shakespeare course design their classes differently, assigning their favorite plays and writing and grading their own exams.

But starting next fall, one question on the final exam will be the same across all of the classes, and instructors won't grade their own students' answers to that question. Instead, to assure more objective evaluation, the professors will trade exams and grade each other's students.

The English department adopted this change -- despite faculty grumbling about losing some classroom independence -- under pressure from the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. The association, one of the six regional groups that accredit nearly 3,000 U.S. colleges, told the University of the South that, to have its accreditation renewed, it would have to do a better job of measuring student learning. Without such accreditation, the school's students wouldn't qualify for federal financial aid.

The shift "does cut into the individual faculty member's autonomy, and that's disturbing," says Jennifer Michael, an associate professor. "On the other hand, it's making us think about how do we figure out what students are actually learning. Maybe having them take and pass a course doesn't mean they've learned everything we think they have."

Regional accreditors used to limit their examinations to colleges' financial solvency and educational resources, with the result that well-established schools enjoyed rubber-stamp approval. But now they are increasingly holding colleges, prestigious or not, responsible for undergraduates' grasp of such skills as writing and critical thinking. And prodded by regional accreditors, colleges are adopting various means of assessing learning in addition to classroom grades, from electronic portfolios that collect a student's work from different courses to standardized testing and special projects for graduating seniors.

The accreditors aren't moving fast enough for the Bush administration, though. In the wake of a federally sponsored study published in 2005 that showed declining literacy among college-educated Americans, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and a commission she appointed on the future of higher education want colleges to be more accountable for -- and candid about -- student performance, and they have criticized accreditors as barriers to reform.

Congress sets the standards for accreditors, and the Education Department periodically reviews compliance with those standards. Congress identified "success with respect to student achievement" as a requirement for accreditation in 1992, and then in 1998 made it the top priority. That imperative, along with the advent of online education, has spurred accreditors to rethink their longtime emphasis on such criteria as the

number of faculty members with doctorates. Since 2000, several regional accreditors have revamped their rules to emphasize student learning.

"Accreditors have moved the ball forward," says Kati Haycock, a member of the Spellings commission and the director of the nonprofit Education Trust in Washington, D.C., which seeks better schooling for disadvantaged students. "Not far enough, not fast enough, but they have moved the ball forward."

An issue paper written for the commission by Robert Dickeson, a former president of the University of Northern Colorado, complained that accreditation "currently settles for meeting minimum standards," and it called for replacing regional accreditors with a new national foundation. "Technology has rendered the quaint jurisdictional approach to accreditation obsolete," Mr. Dickeson wrote.

The commission didn't endorse that recommendation, but its final report last month cited "significant shortcomings" in accreditation and called for "transformation" of the process. In a Sept. 22 speech marking the release of the report, Secretary Spellings said that accreditors are "largely focused on inputs, more on how many books are in a college library than whether students can actually understand them.... That must change."

David Ward, a commission member and the president of the American Council on Education, a higher education advocacy

group, declined to sign the report, in part because he objected to its criticism of accreditors as overly simplistic.

Russell Edgerton, president emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, says "there's no question that American colleges are underachieving," but he argues that accreditors are rising to the challenge. "Ten years ago, I would have said that regional accreditors are dead in the water and asleep at the wheel," he says. But "there's been a kind of renaissance within accreditation agencies in the past five to six years. They're helping institutions create a culture of evidence about student learning."

Mr. Edgerton also thinks the federal government's emphasis on new accountability measures is flawed because it bypasses the judgment of traditional arbiters like faculty and accreditors. "The danger is that the standardized testing approach in K-12 would slop over into higher education," he says. "Higher ed is different."

Jerome Walker, associate provost and accreditation liaison officer for the University of Southern California, agrees that the administration's attacks on accreditors are unfair. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which accredits USC, "has been extremely sensitive" to student learning, he says.

According to the Western Association's executive director, Ralph Wolff, the group revamped its standards in 2001 to require colleges to identify preparation needed by entering freshmen and the expectations for student progress in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning and other skills. Its

accreditation process now takes four years, up from 1½, and it features a detailed, peer-reviewed proposal for improvement and two site visits, including one devoted to "educational effectiveness."

Historically, research universities like USC "used to blow off" accreditation, Mr. Wolff says. "Now this has become a real challenge for them in a good way."

Encouraged by Mr. Wolff, USC last year assigned the same two essay questions -- one about conformity, another based on a quotation from ethicist Robert Bellah -- to freshmen in a beginning writing course and juniors and seniors in an advanced course. A group of faculty then evaluated the essays without knowing the students' names or which course they were taking. The reassuring outcome, according to Richard Fliegel, assistant dean for academic programs, was that juniors and seniors "demonstrated significantly more critical thinking skills" than freshmen, and that advanced students who had taken the first-year course outperformed transfer students who hadn't taken beginning writing at USC.

Because the writing initiative is tailored to USC's curriculum, the results -- while helpful to administrators and accreditors -- wouldn't necessarily help the public compare USC to other schools. That is a big drawback as far as the Bush administration is concerned. "I have two kids in college now," says Vickie Schray, deputy director of the Spellings commission. "It's a huge expense. Yet there's very little information on return of investment or ability to shop around for the greatest value."

She adds, though, that it is a "misconception" to think that the administration wants to have "one standardized test for all institutions" or to extend the testing requirements of the "No Child Left Behind" law for K-12 schools to higher education.

Even so, one standardized test of critical thinking, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, is becoming popular. It adjusts for students' scores on the SAT and ACT college-entrance exams, potentially allowing more meaningful comparisons of the value added by colleges. The number of schools using the assessment has soared from 54 two years ago to 170 this year. Among those using the test this fall: the University of Texas at Austin, Duke University, Arizona State University and Washington and Lee University.

Roger Benjamin, president of the nonprofit Council for Aid to Education, which sponsors the test, says state officials and university administrators have been the principal forces behind its increasing use. "Accreditors are coming to the party, but a bit late," Mr. Benjamin says.

Meanwhile, Secretary Spellings plans to meet with accreditors in late November to discuss how to "accelerate the focus on student achievement," Ms. Schray says. Accreditors say they welcome the opportunity to tout their progress. "We have made a lot of reforms," says the Western Association's Mr. Wolff. "We'd like to bring the secretary up-to-date on the significance of these reforms and the impact they're already having on institutions."