



# BCC Insider

2024 CHEA/CIQG Annual Conference  
*Quality Assurance Matters*



*By Christopher D. Lambert, Principal, BCC Advisory*

A critical meeting took place last week when international higher education leaders converged in the Nation's Capital to lay the groundwork for crafting and planning for the renewal and reinvigoration of higher education. Hosted over the last week of January at the Capital Hilton in Washington DC, the 2024 Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) / CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) Annual Conference reached a global audience with meaningful discussions focused on the important quality assurance issues and timely topics that make a difference in higher education around the world. This year's conference featured diverse and unique voices that were unified in their messaging: quality assurance matters; student learning outcomes matter; and now, more than ever, accreditors and institutions must focus all efforts to strengthening higher education and to deliver on their promise to students.

## **The Politics of Higher Education**

It was not lost on conference participants that over the last few years, we have collectively witnessed an unprecedented amount of political engagement in higher education and not all of these "disruptors" have been positive. One of the common themes in the dialogue shared amongst conference attendees was that given the current rhetoric, meaningful efforts to improve learning and student achievement will continue be washed out by political saber-rattling, and that higher education will continue to be subjected to unwarranted political interference if stakeholders are not willing to set aside their varying perspectives on the value and purpose of higher education.

### **Politics as a Disruptor to Accreditation**

With this as a prologue, the most anticipated session of the conference came on January 30<sup>th</sup> with the *Politics as a Disruptor to Accreditation* panel that featured: **Barbara Gellman-Danley**, President, Higher Learning Commission (HLC); **Lisa Beatty**, Executive Director, Association for Biblical Higher Education; **Belle Wheelan**, President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); and **Jeffrey Alderman** President and CEO, Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP).



During this plenary session, panelists discussed in stark terms the impact of the unprecedented meddling of government into higher education affairs. The panelists conceded that some degree of political involvement is expected given that trillions of federal financial aid dollars are being poured into higher education. Panelists also clearly recognize that there is a pervasive feeling amongst policy makers that a significant number of students are not graduating and those that do are not getting a job where they are making sustainable wages. But ultimately, the panelists noted that policy makers and legislators are looking to accreditors and laying blame for saying that a particular college or university is a quality institution when the student learning outcomes might tell a different story. Panelists shared their unique perspective that accreditors continue to be held responsible for many things that are happening on college campuses that are really not their responsibility. As higher education continues to struggle under the weight of unprecedented federal scrutiny, the perception is that government, seeking cover for their own inability – or incompetence – to identify educational quality and regulate consumer behavior, find it easier, and politically convenient, to shift the blame to non-government accrediting bodies.

*Accreditors are not suited for the cultural wars. Accreditors are rightly focused on institutional quality.*

During the session, panelists pointed out that this continued intrusion by the federal government into academic affairs is fueled by a general distrust of higher education, which reached a boiling point on December 5, 2023 during the House Committee on Education and the Workforce hearing “*Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism*,” where it was noted that based upon the testimony of several high profile University Presidents, that lawyers and communications staff are taking over logic. As one panelist noted, antisemitism is not academic freedom. It is dangerous. College leaders need to be cognizant of freedom of speech that morphs into any kind of threat. Panelists agreed that while students should have a right to say what they think, there is no place on campus, or anywhere else in society for that matter, for threats or violence.

*We do not agree on the ends or the means in higher education.*

Another significant point made by the panel was that for large swaths of the public, the purpose of higher education is almost entirely focused on economic outcomes with most parents sending their children to college to meet their desired financial outcomes, not personal growth. Panelists noted that it is important to understand that policy makers, and the public to a large degree, disagree fundamentally about what higher education is about:

- Is the mission of higher education to prepare the workforce?
- Or to help students live better lives?
- Or is higher education about advancing knowledge?
- Should there be an expectation of a measurable financial return from a college education?
- Or are there other metrics beyond the financial that need to figure in the equation such as quality of life, well-rounded citizenry, and the spread of human knowledge to the benefit of society?



These tension points continue to drive the policy debates and the future direction of higher education. However, it must also be said that despite some of the significant challenges faced by the higher education accreditation community, hope remains. For each of the panelists, there was a singular reason why accreditation must continue to be relied upon as reliable authorities on institutional quality: **students**. Panelists noted that accreditors must be diligent in their willingness to change, adapt, and drop barriers in order to ensure that students receive a quality education and that higher education continues to fulfill its promise. And as was noted, that is exactly what higher education does: It brings people together to share divergent opinions.

The concluding message to the higher education community in attendance was clear:

- Don't let the political noise deter you from providing the services and instruction to ensure that students are successful.
- Tell the good stories. A lot of what the media reports are the stories that do not talk about the success of what is happening at institutions.
- Stay the course, fidelity to mission. Ensure what you are doing is aligned with your mission.
- Be courageous. Listen to people with different opinions.
- Stay attentive to what is happening at the federal and state level; and
- Always think of one stakeholder in everything that you do: **students**.

### Politics of Accreditation

On another political front, a significant highlight of the conference featured a plenary session on January 31<sup>st</sup> with **David Baime**, Senior Vice President for Government Relations at the American Association of Community Colleges; **Jon Fansmith**, Senior Vice President, Division of Government Relations and National Engagement, American Council on Education; and **Jan Friis**, Senior Vice President for Government Affairs, CHEA.

During this stimulating and thoughtful discussion, the panelists provided an overview of state legislation and lawsuits that are currently impacting accreditation, including mandating that institutions regularly change accreditors, a significant challenge that originated in Florida and is now spreading to other states like North Carolina. One of the most fascinating points made by panelists is that accreditation is in fact a surrogate for higher education in the eyes of policy makers, and that there is a real frustration with what policy makers see as a lack of accomplishment in achieving the goals they have for higher education. It was noted that despite the nuances that exist within the accreditation community, policy makers are indifferent to the differences in accreditors, and as a matter of course, disagree with direction of higher education. As a result, policy makers are seeking to take sweeping action through legislation.

*Policy makers don't like what they are seeing from higher education, and everything is fair game.*



Across all aspects of society, particularly in government, accreditation remains obscure to a large degree. While those within higher education understand the critical role that accreditation serves, in a more general sense beyond the halls of academia, no one really understands the intricacies of accreditation, the purpose that it serves, or the value that it provides. More importantly, the increased



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intrusion by the federal government into accreditation provides the most meaningful avenue for policy makers to direct higher education activities on college campuses. As a result, accreditation is very uniquely positioned, and has an extraordinarily important role to play in serving as a mediator between government and the colleges they accredit, and more importantly, as a bulwark against direct federal intrusion into academic affairs. Currently, there are almost daily reminders across the higher education landscape that when a vacuum in accountability and leadership exists, government will move in to assert its political will.

*Never overestimate the ignorance of your legislature regarding the role of accreditation and the process involved.*

What was not lost on the panelists was that higher education is faced with a huge challenge in that there has been a significant and measurable drop in support of higher education over the last decade. For an increasing number of institutional leaders, there is an eroding of trust in government given that the political whims of the US Department of Education are dictated by the particular party in office and their political goals and aspirations for higher education. There is little doubt that politics have diminished the public’s trust in higher education across the board. The public has diminished respect and less regard for higher education, and this lack of faith is engendering waning respect for accreditation as well. This can be seen in the data over the past few years where:

- Vast percentages of Americans with a high school degree pursuing a college degree has decreased significantly;
- There are increasingly a number of high paying jobs that don’t require a college education; and
- The cost, and the debt incurred in pursuit of higher education, continues to serve as a barrier for future generations of students.

### **Accreditation’s Role in Driving Institutional Change**

Outside of the political debates that continue to engulf higher education, the CHEA/CIQG Conference focused on providing strategies, techniques, and resources to institutions so that they may make more effective use of the accreditation process to impart meaningful institutional change. Two sessions of note included, *“Leading, Learning and Logistics: Implementation of an Effective Accreditation Process”* presented by **Dr. Nanette Smith** from Rhodes State College. During this high-energy presentation, Dr. Smith provided participants with insights and innovative strategies and processes to ensure accountability, agility, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement throughout the self-evaluation process; to support and ensure effective accreditation efforts; and to maximize opportunities to educate stakeholders on the critical importance of accreditation. Dr. Smith provided



participants with practical and useful information designed to help institutions establish a structure and framework; develop a consistent process with timelines; engage in constant communications and periodic reviews; and in identify emerging leaders throughout an accreditation process.

Under this umbrella of continuous improvement, on the other side of the accreditation coin, **Colonel Stuart Helgeson**, President ; **Christine Royce**, Trustee; and **Robert F. Smith**, Provost, of Valley Forge Military College provided a unique session that provided a meaningful presentation on the firsthand experience of how one institution addressed and resolved an unexpected accreditation sanction, and how it used the experience to improve institutional effectiveness. Beyond having the best session title at this year’s conference, which evoked one’s inner Bilbo Baggins, the “*There and Back Again: An Unplanned Journey from Sanction Back to Compliance*” session was clearly designed to provide participants with a meaningful review of how an accreditor’s sanction became a catalyst for change that stimulated institutional self-reflection and renewal.

For this institution, shifting their perspective on how they engage in accreditation, particularly when there was a sanction, provided a refreshing and meaningful perspective on the true nature of continuous improvement that is embedded in the accreditation process. While no institution engages in the accreditation process with a goal of getting sanctioned by their accreditor, given the core focus of accreditors on institutional accountability and effectiveness, there is no doubt that a sanction, if taken head-on by an institution, can in fact lead to meaningful change within operations, student services, and program deliverables.



Christopher D. Lambert is a distinguished educational professional with a career spanning over 27 years in the field of higher education accreditation. Throughout his career, Christopher has held key leadership positions, notably as the Associate Executive Director at the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC), and as the Executive Director for the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET), both of which are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as reliable authorities in the assessment of education quality. Christopher’s commitment to knowledge sharing and extensive working relationships within the higher education community reflect his dedication to fostering collaboration and promoting excellence in education.

Throughout his career, Christopher has served on hundreds of accreditation visits, trained thousands of post-secondary school leaders on best practices, and supported over ten thousand accrediting agency actions. He has been a trusted advocate for the postsecondary career college sector, actively participating in legislative, regulatory, and policy discussions at the state and federal level, and having drafted testimony on Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act as part of accrediting agency appearances in front of the House Committee on Education & the Workforce; Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; and National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity.

## BCC Advisory

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