

Archived Information

**Remarks of Kay Norton, President, University of Northern Colorado
before the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
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My name is Kay Norton. I am the president of the University of Northern Colorado, which is located in Greeley, Colorado. I am privileged to follow in the footsteps of leaders at Northern Colorado who care deeply and have thought at length about the shape of higher education in the United States. Bob Dickeson, who moderated the previous panel, led UNC through a period of tremendous stress and change in the 1980's, and has devoted his time since then to quality and access issues in higher education. Hank Brown, former United States Senator from Colorado, was my immediate predecessor as president of our university. He brought the perspective of a private businessman and an elected public servant to the task. I came to the presidency first through membership on the appointed Board of Trustees of the university, then as general counsel and vice president in the Brown administration. I have now entered my twelfth year of close involvement with the university after many years in a for-profit, commodity business unit of a Fortune 500 company. To be precise, I worked in the meat-packing business. I bring a different point of view to higher education; yet let me tell you that there are many more parallels than you might imagine at first between the business of producing a commodity and that of organizing and delivering excellent post-secondary education.

I often talk on campus about how much more difficult it is to know how you are doing in an environment which does not have the ready measure of a bottom line. We have to dig deeper to find motivation based on our public, educational mission. More important, we have to find ways to assess and describe how we are doing: did the students learn anything, and how do we know? Are we making a difference for the people of Colorado?

The lesson I have learned in comparing my former business and my current one is this: if we talk only about costs and price, we are in a commodity business, which is an untenable position for any United States enterprise, whether it be meatpacking or higher education. The United States is not going to be the low-cost producer. We must have a value proposition, a way of demonstrating quality, in order to command a premium in the global marketplace. To be sure, we have to be efficient and creative in how we organize ourselves to continue to provide unequalled access to higher education by increasing numbers of our citizens. But the real issue is quality. How do we prove world-class quality?

You have been briefed on the current complex web of federal, state and private regulation of higher education quality. Accreditation actually came first as a private, self-regulating activity. States in essence owned and operated systems of state higher education and addressed quality through budgeting and regulation. The federal government adopted accreditation as a proxy for quality as it entered the financial aid arena, post World War II. All three players in assessing higher education quality have become more active over time. None has ceded its role to any other.

States have become more active in addressing quality and accountability as pressures on state budgets from entitlement programs (K-12, Medicaid and corrections) have increased in the last twenty years. States have paid particular attention to high visibility areas which are matters of great public interest, such as teacher preparation in an era of school reform.

Colorado has adopted a system of performance contracts tied to access to voucher-like student stipends for undergraduates, with fee-for-service contracts for graduate education and specialized services performed by the institution.

Sometimes state efforts align with accreditation processes. Sometimes they parallel each other. Sometimes they conflict. Attached to my testimony is a summary of the University of Northern Colorado's array of accreditation activities, state regulatory requirements and voluntary quality initiatives. For example, the university is gearing up for two reviews of its teacher preparation program, one after the other in 2007 and 2008. The estimated total cost of NCATE accreditation for the university between 1999 and 2008 is \$528,950. We have to make decisions on a regular basis about what is, and what is not, a good investment in quality assessment—to the extent we are allowed to choose.

Continuation of the status quo, without consideration of expanding state activity and emerging alternative performance assessment processes such as the Baldrige system, will result in confusion, duplication and unforgivable waste.

In a perfect world, organizations would automatically focus on quality and not require goading by external processes, whether markets or regulation. The Baldrige ideal of continuous improvement would be a given. However, we have to rely upon human beings in a decidedly imperfect world. We all need direction and motivation. Why are we here? How are we doing? How do we know?

Many accrediting bodies have moved, with federal encouragement, toward a more outcome-based system of review. This is a welcome trend. Changes by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association allowed the University of Northern Colorado to integrate an institutional comprehensive planning process with decennial review.

However, specialized program accreditations are not necessarily so flexible. Some retain standards which appear to address issues more properly discussed at the labor relations bargaining table than in a discussion of student learning and advancement of knowledge. Even the federal guidelines for accrediting bodies contain a number of elements about inputs, rather than outcomes.

I am not calling for the federal government to take over the regulation of quality of higher education by in sourcing accreditation. I am also not a champion of requiring the states to develop 50 separate systems for addressing quality in lieu of accreditation. I do think that there is a clear responsibility on the part of the federal government to exercise leadership in defining what an organization must demonstrate in order to justify access to

the enormous federal investment in financial aid for students. Allow for the emergence of processes like the Baldrige performance excellence model and for creative state systems. Reward accreditation processes which focus on outcomes for students and society. Help us establish the value proposition that will keep United States higher education unquestionably the best in the world.