July 16, 2014

To: Chancellors, Superintendents, and Presidents

From: Barbara A. Beno

Subject: Public Views of Accreditation

The attached article by author/researcher/commentator Kevin Carey appeared in the New York Times yesterday, and was immediately circulated among accreditors and Washington parties interested in accreditation, especially as Congress considers reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and the various interested parties participate in dialog about what needs to change and what needs to be retained. Kevin Carey is a frequent contributor to the national dialog on accreditation, and writes for the Times as well as the Chronicle of Higher Education.

There are many comments and concerns that readers can express about this article and about Mr. Carey’s perspectives on this region and accreditation in general, and I do not intend to mention all of them here. However, there are some ideas that I think we, as the Western Region, should consider carefully. Mr. Carey states that,

“The accreditor, an independent, non-profit body that determines whether colleges can receive federal financial aid, is the only outside organization with substantial regulatory authority over schools like City College. But like an army with no weapons other than thermonuclear bombs, its power is too potent and blunt to use. While accreditors can issue stern warnings, the only accrediting punishment of real consequence is closing a college.”

Mr. Carey’s words echo some of the other frequent comments heard from critics of higher education accreditation nationally. He refers to the “weapons” of an accreditor, and the “punishment” of an institution. He appears unswayed by the oft-asserted strengths and key characteristics of higher education quality assurance in the United States – that institutions voluntarily and substantively engage in processes that include collectively-approved standards, peer review, institutional self evaluation and commitment to quality, and willing adherence to the principles of disclosure and continuous improvement in order to advance higher education practice and to better serve students and the public interest.
Mr. Carey’s use of terminology like “weapons”, “bombs”, “power”, and “punishment” suggests a higher education community that responds only to such metaphorical physical pressure. Granted, recent events in our region have highlighted the increased need for higher education leaders to ensure that the basic structures of sound management, governance, and fiscal accountability are in place across our system on an ongoing basis. However, I would assert—as no doubt you would agree—that threats and severe consequences are not needed when colleges are integrally committed to practices that exemplify higher education ideals, as are many institutions of the Western Region.

Urgent consideration is needed about what we can do, as institutional leaders and as accreditors, to address with our peers the need to help pivot public perception through word and deed to demonstrate to the public—including individuals like Mr. Carey—and Congress that the higher education community subscribes to the quality assurance processes of a peer evaluation accreditation system, and that it is willing and able to be self-regulated. How can we guarantee, to the satisfaction of the public, that there are suitable levels of oversight pertaining to higher education operations and finance (oversight that is not only—or even primarily—from accreditation), and that our own professional commitments and interests can fully address academic quality issues without the need for greater external regulation?

The upcoming drafting of a new Higher Education Act will give the higher education community the opportunity to make the case for the peer evaluation system, but we should be also framing the issues in the context of our region. Over the next academic year, I trust we will find opportunities to discuss these issues from a higher education leadership perspective. I also welcome your comments and ideas at any time, as I and the Council for Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) work with lawmakers and policymakers in the coming months.
‘Too Big to Fail’ Can Also Happen in Higher Education

By KEVIN CAREY

For the last two years, the City College of San Francisco has operated in the shadow of imminent death. It is the city’s main community college, with 77,000 students, and in June 2012 its accreditor warned that chronic financial and organizational mismanagement threatened its future. If the problems weren’t fixed in short order, the accreditor said, it would shut down the college. A year later, the accreditor decided that City College’s remedial efforts were too little, too late, and ordered the campus to close its doors this July.

The political backlash was fierce. The faculty union lodged a formal complaint with the Department of Education against the accreditor, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, challenging its right to exist. A separate lawsuit was scheduled to go to trial this year. Politicians including the House minority leader, Nancy Pelosi,whose district includes part of City College, issued public condemnations. Finally, last month, with the scheduled closing date weeks away, the accreditor gave in. The college was granted two more years to improve, and most observers assume that the threat of dissolution has passed.

Most of City College’s woes, however, remain, and illustrate a larger problem in higher education. Millions of students are enrolled in colleges accountable to no one other than accreditors that lack the will and authority to govern them. Because the consequences of closing these institutions are so severe, they have become, in effect, “too big to fail.”

The San Francisco crisis has roots that stretch back half a century, to the 1960 creation of the state’s blueprint for public higher education. The California Master Plan established three institutional tiers: The best students would attend elite University of California research universities; the next-best would enroll in the California State University System; and the bottom 60 percent or so would start in two-year community colleges, with the possibility of moving to a four-year college later. It was a way to educate a rapidly growing student population inexpensively.

But when it came to running community colleges, the state fell short. Instead of being led by a single chancellor, like the universities, each of California’s 112 community colleges is governed by a locally elected board. The state also required the boards to share decision-making power with faculty unions.

A result has been chaos and dysfunction in many places. With no state leadership, and with boards and faculty unable to resolve their many differences, institutions like City College have achieved terrible results for students. According to the Department of Education, almost 70 percent of City College students fail to graduate on time, and only 14 percent transfer elsewhere. The widely used Community College Survey of Student Engagement found that City College’s academic practices are below par on every available measure, including student-faculty interaction and teaching methods that foster active and collaborative learning.

The accreditor, an independent, nonprofit body that determines whether colleges can receive federal financial aid, is the only outside organization with substantial regulatory authority over schools like City College. But like an army with no weapons other than thermonuclear bombs, its power is too potent and blunt to use.

While accreditors can issue stern warnings — more than half of California’s community colleges have received one since 2003 — the only accrediting punishment of real consequence is closing a college. That puts accreditors in a very difficult spot: allow a low-performing college to continue because they don’t want to risk facing the political backlash of shuttering a major public institution while leaving tens of thousands of students with no guarantee of another affordable college in their area.

Accreditors are financed and managed as membership organizations of colleges. Other colleges contribute volunteers to do site visits and evaluations, and college administrators are generally loath to condemn peers at other institutions publicly. As a result, only the worst-case colleges even approach facing meaningful sanctions.

California’s two-year college system enrolls 2.3 million people, about a quarter of all community college students in America. But to varying degrees, the predica­ments of unaccountable colleges overseen by ineffective accredit­ors exists nationwide.

Private nonprofit colleges are subject to little direct oversight, even though many of them receive a majority of their revenue from federal financial aid. For­profit higher education corporations have received greater scrutiny in recent years, including Corinthian Colleges, which is closing in the face of declining enrollment and multiple investigations into its marketing practices and job placement rates.

But Corinthian’s shutdown is happening in spite of the accredi­tation system. And federal reg­ulators are far less likely to scrutinize a public institution like City College.