

Comments on SARA Governance

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Both the Commission and the regional higher education compacts have given a great deal of thought to how we can assure that the SARA framework is effective, responsive to the needs of higher education and the public, and sustainable over the long haul.

All the Commissioners supported the recommendations of the Commission on governance. Peter and I both had a hand in drafting those recommendations, and our role today is simply to review the recommendations and comment on the thinking behind them.

I think the most important operating principles for SARA's future success are the four principles that got us this far:

1. wide participation,
2. openness to and careful consideration of all legitimate concerns,
3. a serious commitment to solving real problems, and
4. a commitment to building trust and a willingness to compromise and agree based on trust and trustworthiness.

In the end, those principles are the ones that led to the SARA framework, and those are the ones that will sustain it over time.

The states, of course, have the ultimate authority to decide whether to employ the SARA framework and whether to accept reciprocally the authorization of other states. Their voluntary participation in the regional compacts, their willingness to be accountable for their individual roles and responsibilities, and their willingness to hold each other accountable through the regional compacts are fundamental to the success of this plan.

I believe that the regional compacts, by virtue of the other services they offer to the states, their broad leadership on substantive educational issues, and their accountability to governing boards appointed by the states are ideally situated to implement the SARA framework. This is important work that requires legitimacy, expertise, and a network of relationships among the states and among institutions of higher education within the states. While some might favor a separate, specialized entity to do this work, I think it is much more likely to be done both effectively and in proper proportion as part of the credible, highly regarded regional compacts serving a variety of purposes in American education.

It is the responsibility of the regional compacts to implement these agreements in a way that wins the support and continuing participation of both states and institutions. The compacts need a continuing delegation of authority from the states to act on their behalf, and they must earn that delegation by virtue of their performance and effectiveness in creating a credible, broadly representative governance structure and administering the reciprocity agreement effectively, efficiently, and fairly.

In meeting their responsibilities the regional compacts will need to recruit an operating board with broad institutional and state representation and sufficient stature and expertise to govern the work. The regional SARA boards must be able to make and sustain difficult decisions should problems occur with any state failing to meet its responsibilities. The objective, of course, will be to create the conditions that will motivate effective practice and responsible compliance within the states, not to create a police power that needs to be frequently exercised.

The national coordinating board plays an important, but limited role. It does not have delegated powers from the states, nor is it a “super-board” with overarching authority over the regional compacts. But it will play a critical role in the national legitimacy of the SARA framework, advocating for participation and reporting to the public on the institutions and states participating in SARA, providing a vehicle for receiving and disbursing fees to support SARA, and providing a vehicle for adjudicating any disputes that may arise between regional compacts. Service on this board should be an important responsibility for state, institutional, and association leaders with expertise in accreditation, distance education, and consumer protection.