

SARA Comments

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The state authorization reciprocity framework is an important step forward for American higher education. I'm grateful for the participation and persistent, patient collaboration of everybody who played a role in getting us to this point. Thank you – especially Secretary Riley, Peter McPherson, members of the Commission, especially Paul Shiffman, Crady deGolian and all the members of their SARA drafting team, and especially Dave Longanecker, his colleagues who lead the regional compacts, and those who worked with them on this project.

This is important for many reasons, but I'd like to focus on the reason I think is most important. Distance education, delivered through the internet, made the place-based state regulatory structure of the 20th century obsolete. In the context of distance education that structure has become a burden, often an expensive burden for colleges and universities. Simultaneously it has become an unmanageable administrative problem for states. It needs fixing, and SARA gives us the means to fix it.

But in the long run, I believe that relieving those burdens, while important, is not the most significant accomplishment of this work. The SARA agreement is a step forward for access, and a step forward for efficiency. It also can be and should be a step forward for quality.

Every single American who can benefit now needs to enroll and complete a postsecondary degree or certificate. And as they pass through life, many, perhaps most of them will want and need additional postsecondary education beyond that initial credential. We are asking them to pay a lot of money for that education. And we are asking the taxpayers to subsidize higher education so those who can't pay the price can still learn. Both the students and the public deserve a quality product for their money.

But truth be told, our quality assurance system has not been, and perhaps is not yet up to the task. The states have varied substantially in their attention to quality assurance and consumer protection. Some may be over-zealous, but others have been asleep at the switch. Accreditors take their responsibilities seriously, but we often have confusion, no national consensus on the qualifications that warrant a postsecondary credential. And while the traditional mechanisms are generally accepted and respected, neither the academic community nor the public seems to **fully** believe that the accreditation/quality control system is as efficient as it should be. Nor do they **fully** believe it is working well enough to serve students and the public interest.

America deeply values and strongly prefers decentralized state authority and the mechanism of professional self-regulation to meet these needs. But all of us involved in accreditation and state consumer protection need to demonstrate that decentralized state authority and professional self-regulation are up to the task.

If SARA reduces regulatory burdens on institutions without also improving the quality of education and services to students it will have failed. We can achieve those improvements if all of us in higher education and higher education public policy work toward a renewed consensus about the substance of quality in postsecondary education and hold ourselves collectively accountable for delivering it to students.

In a quiet conversation with Secretary Riley during a Commission meeting we discussed what is really most important about all this work. We agreed that what really matters is not the regulatory mechanisms, nor who has what powers. What really matters is our shared values, our community consensus on what is the right way to serve students, and our community's determination to hold ourselves accountable to high standards.

Toward that end I have some aspirations. They are:

- That every state participates in SARA and that SARA leads to consistent, effective, and “right sized” consumer protection practices in the states;
- That SARA helps lead to more consistent, effective, and “right sized” quality assurance and quality improvement practices by accreditors;
- That institutions increasingly internalize the values of providing the best possible education to every student; and
- That SARA leads to more trusting and productive partnerships between the professional educators involved in accreditation and the necessary legal authority of the states in the service of higher education.

It has been a privilege to be part of this work thus far, and I am confident that working together on the next steps we can realize the full potential of what we have accomplished.