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Views

Time for a Shotgun Divorce

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By **Alan Contreras**

The irresistible force of the Cheneyist federal government has met the immovable object of colleges entrenched in their Eisenhower-era way of doing things, or so some commentators on the Department of Education's [recent attempt at negotiated rule making](#) would have it. If that were true, it would be a fairly traditional conflict that could be resolved through standard political channels.

Under those conditions, [the service of a critic such as Anne Neal](#) on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), the department panel that reviews accreditors, would excite little attention. Government and politics are joined at the hip, and Neal has been a visible and effective commentator on important policy issues, from a position roughly congruent with that of Republicans. Fair enough.

But that isn't the situation. What is really happening is that accrediting bodies, which are not part of any government, are being jammed in between the principals like trapped sheep and beaten from both sides. The feds beat them for not thinking or acting like enforcers. Their collegiate membership beats them for listening to The Idiots In Washington. The Department of Education is using accreditors as a human shield to absorb incoming fire from schools, while simultaneously insisting that the *accreditors*, not the feds, fight back, with ammunition supplied by the feds themselves.

Sorry, that's a foul. Can't do it that way. It's even inconsistent with the usual habits of the force-based Cheneyist government, which is usually quite willing to simply declare any opposition -- indeed, any discussion -- to be enemy action and begin stomping. Of course, arranging for a third party to be blamed for one's actions is as old as politics.

[Neal has argued](#) that the formal linkage between the feds and accreditors needs to come to an end. She is right. This civil union of the 1950s, so convenient in another era under other conditions, no longer works. Eligibility for federal financial aid should be decoupled from accreditation as soon as possible and determination of eligibility brought inside the Department of Education. The department does it already for foreign schools, albeit badly. The establishment of an eligibility unit inside the department would simplify the situation immensely. If ever a Republican president were to support additional staff for the department, this is where they should go. Democrats could hardly object: adding this function where it belongs would allow government to work more efficiently and colleges to have a much clearer idea of what standards they must meet. A fine bipartisan plan.

The feds are trying in a very crude, clumsy way to transform accreditors into things that they were never intended to be and *cannot* be effectively: enforcement arms of the federal government. If the federal government wants to impose standards on schools that want federal aid, fine. Standards must be met for most federal aid, and that is as it should be. But the feds should not hide behind a third party in a shotgun wedding, when the bride would rather be anywhere else and the children think their new daddy is made by Frankenstein.

The standards for eligibility for financial aid should be set through a rational, governmental rule-making process that establishes the standards -- just like every other agency does it. Well, I make no claims of rationality for all governmental decisions, but neither can I do so for all policies established by accreditors -- assuming that anyone can figure out what they are.

Various critics of accreditation argue that the process is intrusive, ineffectual, does not help maintain quality and is not worth keeping. That's a discussion that needs to happen between the colleges and their accreditors, separately from what standards the federal government expects colleges to meet for aid eligibility. I have seen good, bad and useless things emerge from accreditors during my years working in higher education, and the discussion needs to happen. Separately. It is not appropriate to try to answer those questions, which are not federal in nature, in the middle of a tug-of-war between colleges and the feds, by wrapping the rope around the necks of the accreditors in the middle.

There is no reason for accreditors to be attached to the federal government. Allowing this interspecific coitus to continue is simply a recipe for mutant policy offspring that can't be effective. End it now. It's time for a shotgun divorce.

Alan L. Contreras has been administrator of the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization, a unit of the Oregon Student Assistance Commission, since 1999. His views do not necessarily represent those of the commission.

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