

## HIGHER EDUCATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT

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Congress is now considering the shape of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act [HEA] which is expected to set Federal priorities for colleges and universities for the next decade. The first HEA was adopted in 1965 to broaden access to higher education through various financial aid programs. In the words of the Institute for Higher Education Policy paper, *HEA: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act* (2003), “the HEA, in brief, is mostly about getting people into and through higher education” (p.1). The Act was reauthorized in 1968, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1986, 1992, and 1998, each time defining the terms by which students can receive federally funded financial aid. The present authorization will expire on September 20, 2004, thereby requiring the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress to consider extending or reauthorizing the Act.

Like earlier considerations of HEA, most of the issues either already addressed or pending for congressional hearings are about how to overcome various barriers to access and to complete higher education programs. These barriers include social, cultural, academic, and financial factors which diminish a student’s likely access to American institutions of higher learning.

Unlike any of the other reauthorizations in which only institutions whose accreditation is recognized by the Federal Department of Education are eligible to offer financial aid to their students, some congressional leaders want to make a highly significant change in the new HEA. Headed by Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wisconsin), they seek to disconnect accreditation and financial aid eligibility. Petri argues, accrediting associations, (such as the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association from which all of New Mexico’s public colleges and universities receive their accreditation) “do little to ensure educational quality” (Petri’s *Weekly Column* for his constituents, October 18, 2002). Many American college and university leaders, however, argue that the accreditation process is the major way of assuring quality. They note that accreditation is the foundation of trust between institutions and between a college and its stakeholders. A student can be assured that his/her degree from an accredited institution will be recognized by other accredited colleges and universities. Some accrediting agencies, in particular the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, are being aggressive in setting more rigorous standards including student learning outcomes. Seven New Mexico colleges and universities participate in the NCA quality process, AQIP, modeled after the Baldrige quality process in business.

Regardless of which side one takes with these arguments, institutional accountability is likely to be defined more precisely in the new HEA.

Another significant change being considered is whether American colleges and universities should be able to restrict transferred credit only from other accredited institutions. Educational entrepreneurs, particularly those outside of the United States, argue that such a restriction is in violation of the free trade agreements set forth in Chapter 12 of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) and the World Trade Act (WTA). These lobbies want their largely proprietary institutions to be recognized by the Federal government on a par with American accredited institutions.

[Some web sites for further investigation:]

The Institute for Higher Education Policy: *HEA: Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act/Issues and Options*. 164 pages. [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org)

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). [www.aascu.org](http://www.aascu.org)

American Council on Education (ACE). [www.ace.nche.edu](http://www.ace.nche.edu)

American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Lynne Cheney, founder. [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org)

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)

State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)). [www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org).