

Negotiated Rulemaking Testimony
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Good morning. My name is Barbara Gellman-Danley, and I am the President of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) – the regional accreditor serving 19 states and close to 1000 colleges and universities. I am also the current Chair of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the importance of regional accreditation and its impact on American higher education.

C-RAC submitted a letter with specific recommendations for the negotiated rule-making process; therefore, I will concentrate today on one area of interest to HLC and its members. **Innovation.** I believe you will be excited about the work our agency is doing to promote innovation and find ways to build an accreditation system responsive to the dynamic changes of the 21st century.

In 2016, the Higher Learning Commission launched its strategic plan, entitled Beyond the Horizon, aptly named to be forward-looking and visionary. It has five tenets that spell out the word V.I.S.T.A., Value to Membership, Innovation, Student Success, Thought Leadership and Advocacy. With generous support from the Lumina Foundation, initiatives were established to support two parts of the plan – Innovation and Student Success. In light of that plan, I want to tell you about that work and the critically important need to introduce flexibility and vision into the negotiated rulemaking discussions. Our project participants are in the process of presenting unprecedented ideas for higher education, and without a shift in the regulations, some will likely never see the light of day. Why does this matter? Accreditors are strong influencers and opinion leaders in higher education, and we want to remove the anchors that keep new ideas and innovation tethered to the shores of the past.

For one initiative HLC established a think tank of nationally-recognized leaders; we call it the Partners for Transformation. It includes leaders such as Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University, a national leader in higher education innovation (or as he calls himself, a “knowledge enterprise architect”). We also have representation from alternative providers and several types of colleges and universities as well as Arthur Levine from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, who frequently reminds us that we are operating with a very old model from an agrarian society in higher education, despite living in a technological world. In addition to the Partners, we are receiving incredible recommendations from an Innovation Zone initiative and two on Student Success, all made up of some of the greatest thinkers in our industry.

What are they telling us? **Keep regional accreditation but make it stronger.** Remove the shackles of old regulations that we are responsible for enforcing, even if we know they have little to do with our main mission – quality assurance. Re-examine the credit hour. Allow us to try experimental, pilot programs without going through arduous approvals at the federal and state level, while also protecting our consumers. Let us move forward in new ways to serve these students, and if something fails, treat that as a learning experience without fear of punishment from either the accreditors or U.S. Department of Education. Do not sit on the sidelines as other groups are formed to look at quality assurance and add complexity. Clarify opaque definitions and processes, such as “regular and substantive faculty interaction.” Pilot regional accreditation innovation projects that include alternative providers, new forms of credentialing and recognition of the differences among institutions.

Our rules with these planning groups are simple – we are listening, not directing the thought papers they are developing. Our goal is singular, allow regional accreditors to be positioned to assure that this country strengthens its already remarkable fleet of institutions that serve our learners, of all ages and backgrounds.

My “ask” today is simple. As negotiated rulemaking evolves, include us in the discussions. Do not place too much in one group; create appropriate sub-groups, such as INNOVATION. Be courageous. Create an environment where innovation can take place for the sake of our students and the future economic and intellectual growth in this country and globally. See beyond that horizon, looking forward to new ways we can increase educational attainment. I encourage policymakers to listen to us as experienced educators and leaders who are committed to creating the most functional regional accrediting system for the 21st century. And I implore you to take the recommendations of our HLC innovators into consideration.

Let’s use this opportunity to work collaboratively as two critical parts of the Triad – the federal government, the states and regional accreditors. The Higher Learning Commission has a long history of working closely with our states; we invite the federal government to join us. Focus on the only stakeholders that matter, the students. Step off the shores where we are held by the sands of the past and ride the waves of innovation in higher education. I assure you that regional accreditors can be the lighthouses to help guide the journey.

Thank you.