

Good News!

I'd like to share some great news with you. Immediately after the NACIQI finding last December that AALE was only in partial compliance with the Secretary's criteria for recognizing accrediting agencies, we began making the case that, contrary to views expressed by some on the NACIQI, AALE was in full compliance with the criteria for recognition, particularly those centered on student/institutional success. The matter has been under consideration since. Last week, we received notice that the Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education, through the General Counsel's office, has recommended to the Secretary that not only should the limitation imposed in 2007 on new members be lifted, but that the Academy should be granted a renewal of USDOED recognition for five years (the maximum allowed). In short, this means that the Assistant Secretary agrees that the Academy is in full compliance.

Background:

In the name of strengthening public accountability in American higher education the U.S. Department of Education has made several attempts in recent years, primarily through its power over accrediting agencies, to require colleges and universities to provide quantitative as well as qualitative assessments of student learning. AALE has long held, that neither the government nor accrediting agencies should meddle with a college's mission; and requiring colleges to judge qualitative student learning by quantitative indices would seem to require meddling of a high order. Yet this is not the worst of it. There is also the question of how individual colleges and universities might be affected should this reform prove successful, an issue especially important to liberal arts colleges. Many of these aim at long term qualitative and abstract goals, such as fostering a love of learning or an appreciation of the continuing relevance of questions raised long ago, matters not easily approached by even the most determined quantifier. (This is not to say that AALE members, or liberal arts colleges in general for that matter, would have much trouble in scoring well on most quantitative measures of success - indeed, we think they are likely to produce superior results.) The difficulty is not in liberal arts colleges measuring up to a numerical standard; it is that an institution tends to aim at what it is being judged by. If success is now to be determined by how well it measures up to external benchmarks (e.g., producing graduates at a certain level) rather than by how well it meets its own mission, the full consequences of this change may be too far off to be seen.

Tellingly, this change is likely to come at a far higher price than the assessment movement has yet to acknowledge. A shift in what has traditionally been regarded as student success, for example, might well produce a corresponding relaxation in a college's traditional pursuit of its own unique, mission driven aims. The fact that it scores highly on external criteria will be of little comfort to a college whose students, faculty, and administrators who were drawn to it precisely because of their devotion to that mission.

Apart from disagreeing with the utility of replacing peer review and judgment with more "objective" measures of liberal learning, AALE has always respected a secretary's right, within the limits of the federal code, to interpret the regulations in their own way, and has always sought to conform itself to those expectations. Nevertheless, the Academy's public (due to NACIQI) disagreement with recent, and admitted changing interpretations of the regulations, had

the evident affect of convincing some that we had simply refused to meet the USDOEDs' recognition criteria. So it is with some relief, as well as pleasure, that I write to share with you this positive change of direction. In light of it, the Academy's Board has approved accepting new program and institutional applications.

I, and the Academy, thank those of you who have been supportive of our efforts throughout this trial, even when the limitation on new members was imposed, quite unexpectedly, last year. We are a small organization, and without your help our attempts to devise an assessment regime that met both the department's needs and our own would probably not have been successful. Indeed, the Assistant Secretary went so far as to state; "...the process AALE has developed for collecting and analyzing student achievement data is novel, innovative and rigorous."

So thank you for all the help and good wishes. They were, and continue to be, highly appreciated.

With the warmest regards,

Jeffrey D. Wallin  
Academy President