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## **Higher-Education Leaders Debate a Testing Service's Proposal for Accountability Testing**

By KELLY FIELD

Washington

As the debate over assessing how colleges are performing heats up in Congress and in statehouses nationwide, a group of higher-education lobbyists, consultants, and accreditors met on Monday to discuss one proposed national accountability system.

The focus of the discussion was a report, issued last month by the Educational Testing Service, that calls for the creation of a system that would measure students' general skills, or "work-force readiness," along with their proficiency within their disciplines. The report, "A Culture of Evidence: Postsecondary Assessment and Learning Outcomes," suggests that the system could be incorporated into accreditation reviews by the six regional accrediting agencies (*The Chronicle*, July 11).

Monday's round-table discussion, held at the testing agency's offices here, was designed to solicit reaction to the proposal. The first question, from Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, was whether the report was driven by the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education's call for increased accountability in academe.

The commission, which is scheduled to meet this Thursday to consider the third draft of its report to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (*The Chronicle*, August 4), has recommended that states require institutions to measure student learning.

Mari Pearlman, ETS's senior vice president for higher education, said the commission was "absolutely a catalyst" for the testing service's report. She said she had met with Sally L. Stroup, the Education Department's former top higher-education official, to discuss a potential report after the panel began its deliberations last fall.

Several people attending Monday's discussion raised doubts about whether faculty members would embrace the recommendations in "A Culture of Evidence." The report suggests that panels of faculty members and professional associations be convened to determine "what constitutes adequate knowledge and preparation within broad major fields."

"If you were putting Vegas odds on faculty taking leadership on this, where would you put it?" asked Travis J. Reindl, director of state-policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Steven D. Crow, executive director of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, which is one of the six regional accrediting organizations, questioned whether it would even be possible for faculty members to come up with learning outcomes for some academic disciplines, given that many majors are less focused on skill sets than on general abilities.

"I defy anyone to determine what the learning outcomes are that constitute a historian," said Mr. Crow. As a professor, he added, "all I did was teach students to read critically and write. I could care less if they memorized dates."

But a leader of another accrediting group disagreed. "You have to know dates in order to be a well-rounded individual in life," said Belle S. Wheelan, president of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. "I don't have a problem separating work-force readiness from domain-specific knowledge because that's where a lot of the value is added."

Mr. Crow then introduced what he called "the big elephant" in the debate: "Who controls the information that is produced as a result" of measurement?

"There is a myth that colleges are not self-reflective," he said. "They are extremely self-reflective, but they want to control what they know. The higher-education community is scared to death about how the numbers will be used."

David Payne, executive director of the testing service's higher-education division, acknowledged concerns about how assessment would affect resources and "the pecking order" at colleges. "This is an issue we're going to have to acknowledge," he said.

As to whether testing could be used to rank colleges by student performance, Carol Dwyer, distinguished presidential appointee at the testing service, stressed that the report recommends comparisons among peer groups only.

"We can't see any way to put everybody on the same scale and have a master comparison," she said.

But Mr. Crow argued that such rankings are inevitable if the results of such testing are made public.

"You're talking about a tool that would allow that to happen," he said. "It will no longer be possible for schools to say, 'We're just really complex.'"

Mr. Crow also raised concerns about the report's suggestion that accreditation agencies be charged with integrating the accountability system into their reviews of institutions.

"It's one thing to say in the standards that institutions must do this; it's another to set some accreditation thresholds based on outcomes," he said.

And Ms. Wheelan said she would have no way of implementing the recommendation without the support of her association's member colleges.

"If my membership doesn't buy in, I have no way of enforcing this unless the Education Department puts it in the regs," she said. "That's where I get my marching orders."

To this, Ms. Pearlman replied: "That sounds like the only way this will happen will be through the hammer of the Education Department."

But Mr. Crow disagreed. Regional accrediting agencies, he said, "are not democracies in the sense that everyone's vote counts." Rather, he argued, the decision rests with the leadership in a given region.

There was a consensus, however, that accountability testing is coming whether colleges like it or not.

"Something is going to start being logged, counted and recorded," said Ms. Pearlman. If colleges fail to take the lead in establishing an accountability system, she said, the federal government "could impose something less desirable."

Mr. Reindl, whose association, along with the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, recently proposed its own accountability system (*The Chronicle*, July 11), agreed.

"The gas mileage we're getting out of the complexity factor is about to give out," he said. "We're trying to figure out a way to minimize the collateral damage by doing it ourselves."