

Jason Altmire ([00:04](#)):

Hello, everyone. And welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I am Jason Altmire and today we are going to talk about accreditation. And we have a guest that can talk about that issue with more expertise than anyone else I know, and I think anyone else in the country, and that is Dr. Cynthia Jackson-Hammond. She is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The acronym is CHEA. And she has for more than 30 years held administrative positions across numerous colleges and universities in the United States, including having been a college president. And we are just so grateful for the work that she does most importantly. But Dr. Jackson-Hammond, thank you very much for being with us today on the show.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([00:53](#)):

Well, thank you so very much for having me. And I want to commend you for the correct pronunciation of accreditation. Too often people will say accreditation, and I want to just cringe a little bit. But thank you so very much for that acknowledgement.

Jason Altmire ([01:11](#)):

Glad to do it. But I think a good place to start right from the beginning is CHEA is the national association of degree granting colleges and universities that recognize institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. But you do much more than that. Can you talk about what exactly is CHEA? What role does CHEA play in the higher education ecosystem and who makes up your membership?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([01:37](#)):

Absolutely. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation was formed as a referendum from college presidents to make sure that their voices are heard as the authority for academic integrity, and academic quality and institutions. CHEA supports institutions and our membership reflects the institutions across the United States, all kinds of institutions, public, private, research one, liberal arts schools. And what the purpose of our advocacy for these institutions is to protect the institutional autonomy and to support the accreditation process.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([02:28](#)):

The way we do that is through the recognition of accrediting organizations who go into these institutions either as institutional accreditors or program accreditors. We give validation, and verification, and through rigorous standards that these accrediting organizations are sound, they are reputable, and they have the interest of the institutions at heart and providing a very clear basis to indicate that institutions are providing the kinds of quality experiences that students are seeking.

Jason Altmire ([03:13](#)):

And how is it different than the eligibility and recognition determinations that are made through the Department of Education?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([03:21](#)):

The Department of Education has a primary focus of providing recognition to accrediting organizations, who must also assume the responsibility of validating whether or not an institution can handle the

financial federal dollars that are allocated to that institution. Dollars like Title IV funding, Pell Grant, student aid. So, that is the primary purpose of the government's recognition. CHEA's differs is that we focus on academic quality and student success.

Jason Altmire ([04:04](#)):

And one of the key issues that I know you work on personally is CHEA recognition is available to accrediting organizations only if a majority of institutions or programs the organization accredits grant degrees at the associate level or higher. So, this means that a few accreditors that are recognized by the Secretary of Education often responsible for hundreds, maybe thousands of institutions, they're not eligible for CHEA recognition because their institutions focus on sub-associate degree programs. Can you talk about why that criteria exists and are you thinking about modifying that in any way?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([04:47](#)):

Yes, that's a very good question. As I said earlier, CHEA was formed as a referendum from college presidents. And college presidents had its focus as their focus, those degrees that were offered at the baccalaureate level or at the associate degree level. Over the years, we have seen that institutions are now changing their offerings. They are looking at certificates, they are looking at micro-credentials, they're looking at alternate ways of students being able to experience a collegiate academic portfolio. So, career schools or career institutions are doing the same thing. Over the years as things have changed, as the dynamics have changed, as the cry from the public, and from corporate and from career agencies are saying, "Hey, what about us?" We too are beginning to say, "Well, maybe we should think about expanding the opportunities for career schools to become CHEA recognized." We are given that some serious consideration. We hope to have some determinations about that in the very near future.

Jason Altmire ([06:11](#)):

That's good to hear. That's something that we hear about in our world here at CECU. It's important to some of our members and I'm glad to hear that you're thinking it through.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([06:21](#)):

I think what we have to remember is that, years ago there was always just this one traditional path to educational mobility and to employment opportunities. And with the onset of all these innovations, and technologies and how quickly people can receive those kinds of experiences, career opportunities through career schools have advanced significantly.

Jason Altmire ([06:50](#)):

And we hear about the triad in higher education and talk about it extensively in all kind of ways. And when something goes awry with a college or university, people often look first at the accreditors when they point fingers and cast blame, but they forget there's two other actors in that triad that oversee institutions. How do you see accreditors' role within the regulatory triad, and are there any improvements that you'd want to see regarding that type of shared accountability?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([07:21](#)):

When you're thinking about student success, there is a place for shared accountability on multiple levels. When accreditors go into an institution, they go with a set of standards of expectations of how

institutions are to perform and provide evidence that they are actually doing what they say that they are going to do. And when there is a disconnect between the accreditors or the state or the institution, there is a process, a procedure, a protocol to refute those decisions, to bring forth evidence that may have been missed.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond (08:08):

And I think that that's part of the benefit of having accreditors who go into a institution who are really basically peers. These are national peers, national experts who can see things from a variety of ways and with different lens. I think of the triad really as a very connected way of checks and balances. I do believe that as we continue to see education, and the collegiate experience and just an experience for academic success, that that grows stronger and that it is a collaborative process rather than a either or process.

Jason Altmire (08:56):

There's so much change occurring in higher education and there's so much discussion about the role of accreditors. And I'm sure you're familiar, there was a book called Accreditation on the Edge. It was written by Susan Phillips who's a past chair of Nesiki, and Kevin Kinser, very prominent higher education scholar at Penn State. And they argue that we're moving towards a world where accreditors focus less on quality improvement and more towards simply focusing on compliance. And I was wondering what your thoughts are. Do you think accreditors are being asked to do too much outside the scope of the core quality assurance function?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond (09:36):

I do have a great deal of respect for those authors, but quality means something. Quality is not obsolete. And the academic experience is more than just whether or not a student can't perform well on a particular test. It's what he or she can do, not only in that experience, but beyond the collegiate experience. So, for us to think about moving just to the compliance or the regulatory checkbox analysis, I think is a misrepresentation of what accreditors do when they are working with institutions.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond (10:18):

If it were a matter of just compliance, then that negates the whole nature of growth, personal development, being able to execute what you have learned, putting into practice any theoretical constructs that you may have developed while you are in that collegiate experience. So, academic quality is important. That means having the right kind of faculty, having the right kind of facilities, having the right kind of resources, being able to wrap around all of those things that are going to be necessary for a student to be successful. I would advocate that we need to always keep academic quality at the forefront over compliance.

Jason Altmire (11:14):

This was an issue that came up at your conference this year and the organization that you lead at CHEA does host one of the premier conferences in all of higher education. And thankfully, we're back to an in-person environment now. And I attended your conference in Washington recently and heard the viewpoint that was expressed, that pushback on the notion that accreditors are often criticized for

impeding innovation and they're criticized because they move too slowly or prevent new learning structures. At least that's the argument that some have presented. That came up in discussion and I was just wondering, why do you think institutions feel this way and how do we bridge that knowledge gap between perception and reality?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([12:02](#)):

I want to first say that the encouragement of innovation is one of CHEA's required standards for accreditors, which means that there is an intentionality that is required by CHEA for accreditors to support new processes. Now, what do we think about when we think about innovation? Sometimes we think it's just technology, but innovation can also be new experiences beyond technology. How you teach, how you learn, how you integrate service learning, how you have a different level of student learning outcomes that really reach into how students bring their life experiences into the classroom. So, innovation is not just technology, it is all of those vast experiences that support the student learning processes. So, we require that innovation be supported with institutions. I think we live in a society where everything is very, very fast. We get things very quickly. Everything is at our fingertips, everything that happens in institutions like higher education.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([13:26](#)):

I can tell you that higher education, especially in the last five years, has gone through a tremendous amount of change, of introspection, of what can we do to be better, how can we embrace continuous improvement? And unfortunately, the public does not see that transformative process taking place because it touches so many different aspects of higher education. So, we have to be patient as a society. We have to believe that our institutions or institutions for the common good, for the success of students, and we have to be able to hold them accountable to show us some of those innovative processes. And I think you're seeing a trend where higher education and accrediting organizations are working together to make that happen.

Jason Altmire ([14:24](#)):

Maybe as a consequence of these last few issues that we're talking about or in response to the public debate about them, as you know earlier this year, the Department of Education announced new rulemaking that will include accreditation and related issues. What do you think the department is aiming to achieve with the upcoming rulemaking?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([14:45](#)):

That's a really big question because the upcoming rulemaking has been around for a long time. And of course, the thought processes behind the Department of Education really changes a lot with the different administration that might be in place at the time. I am thinking, and I can't speak for the Department of Education, but I'm glad to see their accreditation is at the forefront and that there is a respect for the process that accreditors will be held just as accountable as the institution. And that there is a need for all of these entities to work collaboratively and together to make sure that our students are getting the best opportunities that are available to them.

Jason Altmire ([15:35](#)):

CHEA has announced an arbitration program, which I think is very innovative and interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([15:43](#)):

We have found over the years is that sometimes when an institution receives a unfavorable decision that may not have a body or a impartial group that can serve as an arbitrator, if they wish to refute that decision. In the past, refuting a decision by an accrediting organization, can be very costly, can be very, very time-consuming, be very laborious on the institution and does not uplift the institution, and because the morale is so marginalized by that time. CHEA who firmly beliefs in supporting institutions as well as recognized organizations, serve as an arbitrator between those two principles.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([16:45](#)):

So, with the arbitration, if there is a unfavorable decision and the institution wishes to have a impartial voice to speak to the accreditor, then CHEA stands in that space. And we are trained arbitrators. We do not serve as the arbitrators, but we provide training for impartial arbitrators who come from all over the United States. And so, they go in and they will look at the evidence, they will render a decision based on what their findings are, and that becomes a non-binding decision, which means that the institution can still go forth through the department to make another appeal for the decision if they so choose to do so.

Jason Altmire ([17:41](#)):

Yeah. It's really important that you are taking that on, because the institutions want to be able to have a say in resolving disputes and have their voice heard. So, I commend you and we at CECU commend you for taking on a controversial and difficult issue. So, thank you for doing that. I wanted to close by asking about an issue that I know you are following very closely, and CHEA has been involved in the response. And I would say ground zero for the political debate around higher education is happening in the State of Florida. And as you well know, Governor DeSantis, among other things he's done related to higher education, has signed a bill that requires state colleges and universities to seek reaffirmation from different accrediting organizations at the end of every review cycle. And I was just wondering, what is CHEA's perspective on this? What are the implications of this bill? And most importantly, do you think this is something that we could see move into other states?

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([18:47](#)):

This is very alarming for CHEA, it's very alarming for those Florida institutions, and in many cases, it's very alarming for regional accrediting organizations. Never before have we seen states legislation encroach so aggressively on higher education. The thought of academic freedom, institutional autonomy is being trampled upon by some of these very aggressive legislative acts they're going on in Florida. I think it's going to be very problematic, because the way the cycle runs, before an institution can complete a cycle with one accrediting organization, it has to begin its approach for another accrediting organization. When that institution approaches another accrediting organization for consideration, it does not mean that the accrediting organization will accept that institution.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([20:03](#)):

There are really good reasons why an acceptance may not be there. It may be that the culture of the institution may not be in alignment with the particular accrediting organization that it's seeking. It may be that it may be too cult prohibitive. And to be perfectly honest with you, when the accrediting organization has been with an institution for quite a while, it knows the culture of that institution. It knows the mission of that institution. It knows the expected outcomes. It becomes a partnership. Not a partnership where you overlook certain inconsistencies, but a partnership of trust, that the relationship would be objective and would be unbiased. So, for Florida to say, "Every seven years you have to go and look for another partner," it's kind of like a marriage. Every seven years, you go find another partner. That's very, very disconcerting.

Jason Altmire ([21:19](#)):

And just as we wrap up, I think an obvious question a listener might have is, well, what is the other side of this? Why did Florida consider this? And it's because of a couple of things that happened with her two flagship universities. At Florida State University, there was a presidential search. There was a high level politician who was in the running and did not get the presidency. The accreditor was involved in pointing out that, that individual may not be as qualified for that role as others who had applied for it. That irritated some in the political world in Florida. And then at the University of Florida, there were faculty who were called to be expert witnesses in a case that involved a very political hot button issue that would've been against the wishes of the leadership in the political environment in Florida.

Jason Altmire ([22:14](#)):

And the accreditor also got involved in that when the university told those faculty they were not allowed to serve in that capacity. And as a result, the state legislature and Governor DeSantis decided to make this change to put some pressure on the accreditors, and that's why that played out. But as Dr. Jackson-Hammond has mentioned, there are great concerns among accreditors and schools, universities and colleges of the impact that that would have.

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([22:44](#)):

I am most concerned that this kind of encroachment will bleed into other states. And we are seeing some of that happen very aggressively in the last couple of months with Texas, and Tennessee and other states that seem to not have a great deal of regard for institutional autonomy or for academic freedom, or a great deal of disregard for its faculty, its students, and the communities.

Jason Altmire ([23:19](#)):

Definitely an important issue to keep an eye on. I want to thank Dr. Cynthia Jackson-Hammond. She is a long time, very influential leader in higher education. Currently, the president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Dr. Jackson Hammond, thank you so much for being with us,

Cynthia Jackson-Hammond ([23:39](#)):

And thank you so very much. It's been a pleasure to be with you.

Jason Altmire ([23:43](#)):

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