A dispute over the federal agency charged with reviewing college accreditors may come to a boil at a key review session next month, when the waning Bush administration will have one of its highest-profile chances to try to force colleges to do more to demonstrate how well they help students learn.

The federal agency is scheduled to assess five of the six main regional accreditation bodies and decide if they deserve renewed recognition.

Some of the accreditors say the session has the potential to play out as a politically explosive showdown between the Education Department and the accreditors and colleges that have been seeking to take control of decisions about how institutions' performances are measured.

Earlier this year, the review agency, the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, or Naciqi, penalized some smaller accreditors, like the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, for failing to require their institutions to improve how they demonstrate their students' performances. Naciqi board members criticized the association for having insufficient data, like test scores, to measure student achievement at the colleges it accredits.

And now leading accreditors are worried that they may have to face the same sanctions.

"They're apprehensive, given the past several meetings," says Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an umbrella group of accreditors.

Since Margaret Spellings became education secretary almost three years ago, Naciqi has been stocked with administration appointees who have demanded that colleges use more measurements based on outcomes, such as graduation and job-placement rates, as opposed to using "inputs," such as the test scores of new freshmen. And now Congress, concerned by Naciqi's behavior, is considering whether to curtail the Education Department's authority to appoint all the members of the panel and will debate that as part of proposed legislation to renew the Higher Education Act.

At the crux of the dispute are questions of what the government should be forcing colleges to measure, who should get to define those metrics, and what accreditors should be doing to monitor institutions' quality effectively.
Throughout her tenure, Ms. Spellings has pushed for an emphasis on student outcomes. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which she appointed, questioned whether accreditors do enough to hold colleges accountable for their performances and suggested greater use of tests like the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures student achievement in reading, writing, and comprehension.

"Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes," said the commission's final report, issued in September 2006.

But some accreditors and college officials believe that Naciqi, in trying to carry out goals of the Bush administration, has been making demands on accreditors to overhaul their methods without the clear authority under federal law and without giving accreditors sufficient notice to prepare for the new standards.

Even though Congress has repeatedly moved to rein in Naciqi — and leading college associations themselves have agreed to provide more data on student achievement — that might not spare the nation's most-influential accreditors from one more battle, during next month's review session, over the degree to which U.S. colleges must prove the value they provide.

"I'm not sure they care what Congress is saying," Steven D. Crow, executive director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' Higher Learning Commission, says of members of the federal review panel. His group is one of the accrediting bodies due for renewal next month by Naciqi.

Naciqi members who were contacted by The Chronicle declined to comment on the record, citing the need to maintain impartiality in the midst of the debate over the agency.

"Since, as a Naciqi member, I am sitting in the middle of all that, I think I will have to take a pass," said Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an outspoken critic of accreditors who was appointed to Naciqi this year.

**Tough Reviews of Accreditors**

Colleges need the endorsement of a federally approved accreditor for their students to remain eligible for government-subsidized financial aid. So Naciqi's push to have accreditors take a more critical look at how well colleges are serving students is crucial for the institutions.

So far the agency has taken that stance mostly with smaller accreditors like the American Academy for Liberal Education and the rabbinical and talmudic schools' group. Both groups failed to win Naciqi's endorsement for full, unconditional renewals of their accrediting authority in the past year, with Naciqi demanding more evidence of student-performance assessment.

But at the federal agency's most recent review session, in May, the panel indicated that, at least in some cases, it is also willing to take a tougher position with more-prominent accreditors. It voted against extending the accrediting authority of a division of one of the nation's six main regional accreditation bodies, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Technical and Career Institutions. Naciqi's complaints included the group's poor record of measuring student learning.

The five top accreditors up for review in December are North Central's Higher Learning Commission, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Colleges. The last group is due for a follow-up review at the session, after it was criticized in June 2006 by Naciqi on a series of matters, including the need "to more clearly define what
SACS itself considers acceptable levels of institutional success with respect to student achievement."

The sixth major group, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Higher Education, won Naciqi's endorsement for a five-year renewal this year.

**Accreditors Plot Strategy**

The six major associations, through their Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, have been debating how they should respond to what may come their way at the December review, said the council's chairwoman, Barbara A. Beno. Ms. Beno is also executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

The associations scheduled for review in December have received initial written reports from Naciqi setting out the expected areas of discussion, and none appear to seek broad changes in how much the accreditors focus on student assessments, Ms. Beno said.

But that is not necessarily reassuring, accreditors say, since Naciqi members often introduce such issues during the actual review sessions, or in final reports issued just days beforehand.

The division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges that accredits four-year colleges, for instance, received its final status report only about three days ahead of its Naciqi review in December 2006, Ms. Beno said. That report set out a series of new questions on its policies for monitoring student achievement. The representatives of the accreditor nevertheless managed to win the agency's approval.

"They sort of took a due-process line of argument, and they were successful in showing the department both that they do a lot of monitoring and that the feedback that they got was inappropriately late," Ms. Beno said.

The Education Department has promised to deliver Naciqi's final reports earlier than it has in the past for the December meeting, at least a week before, Ms. Beno said.

Mr. Crow remains skeptical that Naciqi has changed its recent approach. Several panel members have shown themselves to be determined to fault accreditors for not doing enough to measure outcomes, such as student scores on standardized tests, he said.

"Naciqi has become a spectator sport," Mr. Crow said, "because you never know what may happen at any given Naciqi meeting, and you never know what may be the new agenda of the day."

**Congress Weighs In**

Colleges and their accreditors have been helped by Congress. Ms. Spellings abandoned an effort to rewrite rules governing accreditation this year after lawmakers from both houses and both parties, led by Sen. Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, protested on behalf of the colleges. The lawmakers argued that Congress, rather than Naciqi or others in the Education Department, should take the lead role in defining how colleges should measure student achievement.

Lawmakers are also debating a proposal in the legislation to extend the Higher Education Act that would give colleges primary responsibility to develop the measures of learning that their accreditors would use to judge them. That provision is included in the Senate version of the bill but was struck from the House legislation in committee this month.

Congress also appears intent on limiting in other ways the department's ability to dictate how colleges' performances are assessed. The House bill includes language that says measures of student achievement should be considered "in relation to the institution's mission, which may include different standards for
different institutions or programs, as established by the institution." The version of the bill approved by the Senate contains similar language.

Both the House and Senate versions would also revamp Naciqi by giving Congress the right to select the majority of the review panel's members in order to limit the ability of the president to push his agenda on accreditation. The administration now names all 15 members.

The House version of the bill would also give colleges and accreditors an extra layer of protection against demands from Naciqi by creating a federal "accreditation ombudsman" who would try to resolve any complaints involving accreditation. The ombudsman, according to the House bill, would also collect data on such complaints and issue an annual report containing recommendations for corrective actions.

One Last Chance

Naciqi, however, still gets at least one last chance at its meeting next month to make its mark on accreditation before any reforms could take effect, which leaves accreditors worried.

Part of the reason they are worried, Mr. Crow says, is that the federal agency's zeal for change appears to come from Secretary Spellings herself.

At the public event last year at which she received the final report from her Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Mr. Crow said, the secretary looked straight at some of her Naciqi appointees and said she expected them to help her carry out the commission's recommendations.