



Five Bipartisan Principles for Accreditation Reform

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Accrediting agencies are tasked with providing a level of quality assurance for higher education. With an accreditor's stamp of approval, colleges unlock access to billions of dollars in Title IV funding—federal loans, grants, and campus-based aid. Unfortunately, accreditors do not consistently deliver on their role and fail to hold institutions accountable for poor student outcomes.

This system needs significant reform. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni and Third Way agree that the following five principles should be prioritized by policymakers in improving accreditation to better support the interests of students and taxpayers.

1. Quality assurance is bipartisan—accreditation reform needs to be, too.

Despite declining confidence in higher education driven by concerns related to cost, value, and political bias, quality assurance enjoys broad, bipartisan support among voters. Overwhelming majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents want federal and state governments to evaluate colleges and universities and would support reforms to increase transparency and accountability at these institutions. While both parties have made some attempts at structural reform, true bipartisan efforts have struggled to advance.

Policymakers and the public agree that, given the massive public investment into higher education, there needs to be some mechanism that ensures that colleges and universities are effective stewards of taxpayer funds and are serving their students well. Meaningful, durable accreditation reform would enjoy popular support and address the issues causing the public's confidence to sink.

2. Quality assurance must include holding institutions accountable.

The Higher Education Act requires accreditors to be a “reliable authority as to the quality of education” and prevents other actors (such as the Department of Education) from specifying which variables they must use to assess colleges and universities. Despite this broad latitude to act as the independent watchdogs of higher education, accreditors rarely bite to protect students from ineffective institutions. Studies have found that less than 3% of accreditor actions involved penalizing an institution due to poor student outcomes or academic programming, and less than 1% of accredited institutions lose accreditation.

This status quo is indefensible. Accreditors must go beyond merely protecting students from diploma mills. Federal funds should not be freely flowing to institutions that leave their students with crippling debt instead of a degree and a meaningful set of skills and knowledge. Simply put, accreditors cannot credibly claim to be guarantors of academic quality when hardly any of their efforts are spent on ensuring high academic standards. Accreditation needs to hold institutions accountable.

3. Accreditation needs to be an effective measure of quality assurance.

Agencies consistently accredit colleges with abysmal student outcomes, unlocking the pot of Title IV dollars without providing adequate oversight. More than 35% of accredited colleges fail to graduate half of their students, and those schools receive more than \$20 billion in student aid annually. Students are more likely to stop out of these colleges than graduate, which in turn leaves them less likely to find good jobs and repay their debt—meaning taxpayers are funding weak outcomes from which they may never see returns.

Accreditation must deliver on the goal of quality assurance. Students and families need reliable information from accreditors about institutional quality, including information on learning outcomes, academic standards, and financial outcomes like return on investment and loan repayment. Students deserve to attend programs that will help them cross the finish line and equip them with the skills to thrive in the workforce, and taxpayers deserve to trust that their dollars are used responsibly.

4. Accreditation needs to provide value to institutions.

Accreditors generally allow institutions to set their own goals on academic quality and student achievement. By focusing on educational inputs and processes rather than outcomes, accreditors have created a system that appears primarily concerned with checking boxes over encouraging real improvement. As a result, each year colleges and universities need to spend billions of dollars on a bureaucratic practice that offers few tangible, institutional benefits. This cannot continue.

As organizations with a national vantage point on higher education, accreditors are uniquely positioned to identify new, innovative practices that can offer real benefits to students and institutions. Accreditors need to live up to their responsibility of ensuring educational quality by partnering with the institutions they serve and providing tangible assistance such as expert data, national benchmarks, and best practices.

5. Congress needs to modernize accreditation to consider student outcomes.

Meaningful reform will require Congress to modernize accreditation legislation to consider student outcomes. Current legislation does not require accreditors to set benchmarks for student outcomes, and it prohibits the Secretary of Education from setting those standards for accreditors. Congress should require accreditors to consider student outcomes—including results from nationally normed assessments, as well as borrowing levels and retention, graduation, and loan repayment rates—in order to ensure access to quality postsecondary institutions.

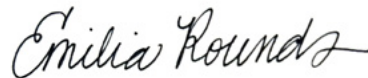
Legislation should require accreditors to work with the institutions in their portfolio to establish target levels for key student outcomes to maintain access to Title IV funds. Accreditors can then use those standards to hold schools accountable if they fail to meet the mark. Agencies should also have to use reliable data from federal, public sources, like the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, to measure outcomes. These data should be disaggregated whenever possible to identify how institutions are serving student subgroups, and the data should be publicly available on accreditors' websites.

Conclusion

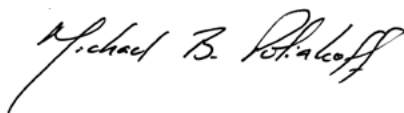
Accreditors are asleep on the most important part of the job, and students and taxpayers are paying the price. Agencies must ensure that students have access to high-value programs and that taxpayer dollars are used responsibly. Accreditation needs comprehensive, lasting reform to ensure that this system delivers on its promise of quality assurance. Congress must act in a bipartisan fashion to modernize legislation that will hold accreditors accountable and prioritize student outcomes. The bipartisan principles outlined in this piece can guide such reform efforts.



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