



Columbia's Accreditation at Risk?

A recent [press release](#) by the U.S. Department of Education has created a bit of confusion, leading [many](#) to [believe](#) that the Trump administration is seeking to revoke Columbia University's accreditation. As with most matters related to the byzantine process of accreditation, the truth is more complex and less attention-grabbing.

When colleges and universities apply to participate in student financial aid programs under Title IV, they are required to sign a program participation agreement (PPA) with the Secretary of Education. As part of this PPA, schools are [required](#) to certify that they are accredited by a recognized accreditor and are compliant with Title VI, Title IX, and a number of other federal statutes. Accreditors are not responsible for enforcing or assessing compliance with federal civil rights laws; that is solely the Department of Education's purview, as accreditors are private, nongovernmental bodies.

As part of his [executive order](#) aimed at reforming accreditation, President Trump now requires the Secretary of Education to notify accreditors when one of their member institutions are found to be in violation of Title VI or Title IX following an investigation by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The aforementioned press release ought to be read as the Department of Education fulfilling its charge by notifying Columbia's accreditor, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), of its findings. Simply put, the Department has no ability to revoke unilaterally Columbia's accreditation: Only MSCHE can do that. The [statutes](#) that govern the relationship between accreditors and the Department give broad latitude to the former to set their own standards and restrict the latter from interfering with this process.

Thus, the Department's suggestion that Columbia "no longer appears to meet [MSCHE's] accreditation standards" should not be read as an authoritative statement seeking to revoke or threaten Columbia's accreditation, but rather as the Department's opinion. And the Department has a point. According to MSCHE's [standards](#), an institution must "demonstrate on an ongoing basis" that it "complies with all applicable government (usually Federal and state) laws and regulations." Given that the Department's investigations have determined that Columbia's response to campus antisemitism constitutes a violation of federal civil rights law, MSCHE's own guidelines do appear to necessitate a response. This press release should mark the beginning of a long process where Columbia will have ample opportunity to work with both the Department and MSCHE to resolve this violation. MSCHE has already [stated](#) as much, noting that it expected to be notified of the Department's

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findings and stressing its commitment to follow the procedures outlined in the relevant statutes, regulations, and their own standards.

While this action by the Department appears to be little more than a procedural notification, recent developments at the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity

(NACIQI), a body tasked with overseeing accrediting agencies, provide additional, critical context. NACIQI's summer meeting—[previously scheduled](#) for late July—was recently pushed back to the end of [October](#) by the Department, without explanation. Perhaps coincidentally, the terms of six of the committee's 18 members are set to [expire](#) on September 30, giving Education Secretary Linda McMahon the opportunity to [fill](#) these vacancies. Combined with the fact that MSCHE's federal recognition is up for renewal [this year](#), it would appear that the Department has placed itself in a prime position to incentivize MSCHE to act on the matter of Columbia's accreditation significantly sooner than the three-to-five year window typically given to noncompliant institutions.

Admittedly, this is conjecture. One should expect that the Department of Education will allow Columbia the necessary [due process](#) hearings in response to the OCR's findings while MSCHE follows through with the processes laid out in its standards. If the Department of Education and Columbia are unable to negotiate an agreement that satisfies the government, this matter may be turned over to the Department of Justice to be resolved in the courts. In this scenario, the MSCHE's findings are unlikely to matter, as compliance with Title VI is an essential part of the PPA between Columbia and the Department of Education. As such, Columbia may find its participation in the Federal Student Aid program threatened regardless of its accreditor's findings.

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