

# ACCREDITATION:

## WHAT IT IS, WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT, AND HOW TO FIX IT

# ACTION AGENDA

### A CALL TO ACTION

Higher education accreditation is a process that is used to assess the quality of an institution or program of higher education. It began as a voluntary organization of institutions which, through a peer-review process, would provide a stamp of quality for colleges and universities. Accreditation became associated with access to federal government education funds in the 1950s. At that time, Congress sought to ensure appropriate use of GI Bill funds by empowering accreditation agencies to evaluate educational quality before approving an institution's access to the funds. After the Higher Education Act was signed into law in 1965, the role of accreditation was expanded even further through Title IV of that act to become the means of access to a range of federal funds, including both grants and loans.

Nonetheless, today there is scant evidence that accreditation serves to ensure quality. Instead, it often proves to be a costly and intrusive process for institutions, while doing little to ensure that institutions are actually able to produce the outcomes they purport to achieve.

*Below are steps that policymakers can take to improve public trust in America's higher education system by returning accreditation to a voluntary system of peer review, counseling, and support that leads institutions to better outcomes for students, taxpayers, and the nation.*

#### **Return accreditation to its core mission of monitoring for quality improvement, not gatekeeping for federal funds.**

Charging accreditors with the responsibility of serving as quality assurance entities for the purpose of federal student aid calls them to a purpose for which they are not suited. The current system encourages accreditation primarily to remain binary in nature—in terms of gatekeeping for Title IV eligibility—thereby giving students and parents a false sense that accredited schools have passed a meaningful test of quality when they have not.

#### **End the regional accreditor monopoly.**

The vast majority of Title IV student aid volume (over \$117 billion in 2016) is predicated on the actions of six regional accreditors in the United States. Yet in today's globalized cultural and economic landscape—as technological advances make alternative delivery models more prevalent—regional distinctions are less relevant in higher education and only hinder innovation. At a minimum Congress and the Department of Education, as a condition of recognition, should require accreditors to demonstrate the ability to operate nationally. They should also consider simplifying the complex process by which institutions can change accreditors, opening up paths for accreditors to differentiate themselves through focuses on different types of institutions with their various missions and constituencies.

#### **Refocus accreditation on the original standards it was intended to uphold.**

The Higher Education Act prescribes 10 standards—which include student success, curricula, faculty, and fiscal and administrative capacity, among others—that accreditors are required to apply when evaluating whether to qualify an institution to receive federal student aid. Yet a loophole in the law also gives unlimited, broad authority to impose additional eligibility criteria, leading some accreditors to threaten to withhold Title IV access to institutions for issues that often include institutional mission or governance. Because of the disastrous consequences of losing access to federal funds, institutions universally comply. Congress should end this “blank check” authority and clarify the law so that accreditors focus on matters of educational quality and do not intrude into areas that are properly left to state government or to boards of trustees.

#### **Create a consumer-friendly expedited alternative for reaccreditation.**

Accreditation has tended to focus chiefly on educational inputs, while paying less attention to educational results. Alternatively, Congress should establish expedited paths to reaccreditation, allowing institutions to maintain Title IV eligibility by certifying auditable data about key measures of academic quality and student achievement. An alternative to the federally-mandated accreditation system would reduce the cost of higher education by relieving institutions that have a proven track record of quality from the significant expense of complying with accreditation review. And, more importantly, it would make crucial information more readily available to the public.