

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

Accreditation

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? (Who watches the watchers?) —Juvenal

“Accreditation has played a role in the bloat that has taken place in higher education administration, and it is time to right size bureaucracy and allow institutions to redirect their resources to students and teaching.” —Betsy DeVos¹

Why is accreditation reform needed?

College accreditation began as a voluntary means to advise American institutions of higher education on “best practices.” Additionally, it signaled to prospective students and their parents that the accredited school offered a quality education. Its presence in the grand scheme of academia was minimal, but this light touch ended with the passage of the 1965 Higher Education Act.² The new law changed accreditors’ roles by making them the gatekeepers for higher education’s federal funding. That is, institutional accreditation began to be

required for schools to participate in student financial-aid programs or to receive federal research grants. Since then, accreditation has grown into a powerful regulatory apparatus that demands schools conform to burdensome government mandates.³

Moreover, accrediting agencies have been allowed to operate as a cartel in the decades since. There are currently six institutional agencies; until recently, institutions were assigned to accreditors by location. Colleges and universities could not choose a different accreditor even if their regional agency proved unsatisfactory. This permitted the agencies to put excessive demands on schools, driving up costs and forcing the imposition of politically inspired policies.

1. Federal Register, “Student Assistance General Provisions, The Secretary’s Recognition of Accrediting Agencies, The Secretary’s Recognition Procedures for State Agencies,” Nov. 1, 2019.

2. Education Next, “College Accreditation, Explained,” Jun. 13, 2018.

3. To read more from the Martin Center about accreditation reform, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/accreditation/>.

Gathering information for the accreditation process can be time-consuming and expensive, but the real cost comes when colleges comply with accreditation mandates. Former University of Florida president John V. Lombardi noted, “[Accreditors] blackmail us. If they say your department of astrophysics needs 12 spaceships and you have only 10, you had better get the other two.”⁴

Furthermore, this cartel-like status permits the accrediting agencies to stifle creativity, innovation, and regional specialization in higher education. The costs and mandates they impose are a high hurdle for new institutions and programs. If institutions wish to receive federal funding, they must be accredited by the U.S. Department of Education (through the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, a board convened by the Department).⁵ This gives the accrediting agencies powerful incentives to promote policies favored by the federal education bureaucracy and reduces the advantage of allowing states to serve their constituents’ specific geographic needs.

Despite considerable regulatory authority, regional accrediting agencies seem to do little to improve education at the vast majority of academic institutions. Malcolm Gillis, former Rice University president, noted, “The accreditors are not interested in what or how the students learn, but how many square feet of classroom space we have per student.”⁶ Few schools are

actually punished for sub-par academic performance, even those with terrible graduation rates, admission standards, and professional exam scores.

One problem is that the accrediting agencies shy away from basing their analysis on what is really important, an institution’s outputs—how much students learn and how well they are prepared to enter the workplace—and instead focus on inputs, such as expenditure per student or the longstanding reputations of peer institutions. According to a Harvard Business School study, of 31,699 accretor actions that occurred between 2012 and 2021, “only 2.7% were ones in which an accretor disciplined or sanctioned a college for inadequate student outcomes or low-quality academic programming.”⁷

Instead, the overwhelming number of accretor sanctions are for financial problems. Often, the sanctions imposed and the negative publicity accompanying them impede an affected school’s ability to increase paid enrollment, which is the best path for such struggling schools to achieve financial stability. Still, sanctioning is rare; most schools stay accredited as long as they submit to the accretor’s mandates, jump through the required hoops, and pay the fees needed to keep the accreditors in business.

Programmatic accreditation also needs reform. While it is intended to ensure the quality and rigor of specific academic programs, programmatic accreditation can impose significant disadvantages for both students and universities. For students, the process often leads to increased tuition and fees, as programs pass along the costs associated with maintaining

4. William Honen, “Some Say College Accreditation Is Out of Control,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1998.

5. The Center for American Progress, “The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity: Overview and Resources,” Feb. 22, 2023.

6. Andrew Gillen, *The Case for Escape Hatches from Higher Education Accreditation*, Texas Public Policy Foundation, Apr. 2020.

7. Stig Leschly, Yazmin Guzman, *Oversight of Academic Quality and Student Outcomes by Accreditors of US Higher Education: Evidence from the Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs*, Harvard Business School Postsecondary Commission, Spring 2022.

accreditation. Additionally, the rigid requirements set by accrediting bodies may limit program flexibility, making it harder for institutions to innovate and adapt curricula to meet evolving industry needs. For universities, compliance with programmatic accreditation standards can be resource-intensive, demanding substantial time, administrative effort, and financial investment.

This focus on accreditation can divert attention from other key aspects of education, such as developing interdisciplinary courses or investing in student services. Furthermore, accreditation bodies sometimes enforce outdated standards that may not align with current educational practices or employer expectations, thereby constraining universities' ability to modernize and compete.

Fortunately, in 2020 the U.S. Department of Education under Betsy DeVos relaxed requirements that schools submit to specific regional accreditors and allowed them to choose their own.⁸ This made possible the potential for serious reform.

8. Federal Register, “Student Assistance General Provisions, The Secretary’s Recognition of Accrediting Agencies, The Secretary’s Recognition Procedures for State Agencies,” Nov. 1, 2019.

Recommendations

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and state education regulatory bodies take steps to give states and institutions more autonomy. Other policy recommendations must be addressed at the federal level.

Universities should:

- Explore ending requirements that schools accredit individual programs unless those programs are subject to licensure demands (such as nursing, accounting, law, and so on).

Policymakers should:

- Allow colleges and universities the ability to choose their accreditors. This will introduce competition and eliminate cartel-like behavior on the part of the accrediting agencies.
- Enact a law preventing accreditors from imposing mandates that violate state law.
- Encourage states to develop their own accrediting organizations.

Model Policies

- [Accreditation Autonomy Resolution](#), the National Association of Scholars
- [Accreditation Choice Act](#), the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal

Further Reading:

From the Martin Center:

- [The ABA Retreats From Its Diversity Mandate—or Does It?](#) by Mark Pulliam (Oct 16, 2024)
- [New Accreditors Are the Future](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (Oct 7, 2024)
- [A New Accreditor Has Money in Mind](#) by Samuel Negus (May 10, 2024)
- [How Universities Should Choose Their Next Accreditor](#) by Jenna A. Robinson and Adam Kissel (Mar 12, 2024)
- [A Win for Accreditation Choice in North Carolina](#) by Adam Kissel (Oct 12, 2023)
- [Does College Accreditation Work?](#) by Richard Vedder (Jul 28, 2023)
- [Accreditation Reform Is Alive in North Carolina](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (Apr 27, 2023)
- [Let Colleges Choose an Accreditor](#) by Adam Kissel (Feb 3, 2023)
- [Time to Rethink University Accreditation](#) by George Leef (Nov 4, 2022)

Other Sources:

- [The Politicization of Higher Education Accreditation](#) by Adam Kissel and Timothy J. Rosenberger, Jr., Texas Public Policy Foundation (August 2023)
- [The Case for Escape Hatches from Higher Education Accreditation](#) by Andrew Gillen, Texas Public Policy Foundation (April 2020)
- [Accreditation and Licensure Brief](#) by the National Association of Scholars
- [Why Accreditation Doesn't Work and What Policymakers Can Do About It](#) by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (July 2007)

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of general education, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/accreditation>

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

THE JAMES G. 
MARTIN CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

353 E. Six Forks Road Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400

Fax: 919.828.7455

www.jamesgmartin.center