

Armed with Better Data, Will Accreditors Finally Have to Act?



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Twice a year, a body of accreditation experts known as NACIQI—the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity—gathers in a windowless conference space to debate the finer points of accreditation. And for the last two years, NACIQI members have come prepared with data on student outcomes to ask accreditors why some of their institutions are poor-performing and what they’re doing about it. This week, when NACIQI gathers for its Spring 2018 meeting, they’ll have even better information to guide their discussion—and accreditors will have fewer excuses to ignore problems at the institutions they oversee.

NACIQI was created by Congress nearly two decades ago to serve as an independent body to advise on the Education Secretary’s decision to officially recognize individual accreditors, the Department’s processes for evaluating institutions and accrediting agencies, and other issues related to accreditation. That’s an important charge for NACIQI; accrediting agencies are gatekeepers to billions of dollars in federal financial aid, since institutions can’t gain access to taxpayer dollars without their stamp of approval.

Concerningly, though, hundreds of institutions enrolling thousands of students are fully accredited and allowed to operate despite disturbingly poor graduation rates, loan repayment outcomes, and employment outcomes for graduates. While accrediting agencies sometimes look at student outcomes, there's little evidence they use those data to actually hold schools accountable, according to a recent report from the Center for American Progress.

In late 2015, shortly after the Department revamped its College Scorecard with dozens of new data points, NACIQI adopted a pilot project to try to address, in its own small way, these problems of poor student outcomes and stagnant performance in the higher education system. Under the pilot, NACIQI members said they would look at institutional data—graduation rates, debt levels, and repayment outcomes, for instance—and set aside a portion of each accreditor's presentation time to ask how well students were performing at the institutions accredited by that agency, its plans for improvement, and whether and how the agencies incorporate such metrics into their reviews.

To help NACIQI visualize student outcomes data and understand the performance of institutions within each accreditor's portfolio, the Department produced accreditor dashboards. These dashboards empowered NACIQI members to see the scope of the problem, benchmark agencies against each other, and know which schools are riskiest to students and taxpayers.

Despite increased scrutiny and the availability of the data dashboards over the last two years, accreditors have often begged out of NACIQI members' critiques, arguing that the data in the dashboards are incomplete. And for graduation rates, at least, it's true; for decades, the Education Department has collected only the statutorily required graduation rates of first-time, full-time students, which exclude roughly 53 percent of students. Until recently, graduation data presented an incomplete picture at schools

that enroll a large share of today's students, including those enrolling part-time or who have previously attended college.

But in this week's NACIQI meeting, accrediting agencies won't have that excuse to fall back on. For the first time, the Department has added new, comprehensive completion data to the accreditor dashboards. The rates, called Outcome Measures data, include all types of students—first-time and non-first-time, full-time and part-time. And the data on the dashboards are more generous than the old rates: They include both students who have completed an award or degree and those who have transferred to another institution, measured within eight years of entering years regardless of the student's program length.

On the whole, the Outcomes Measures data improve the rates significantly, from 48 percent of first-time, full-time students who complete their degree within 150 percent of the program length to 67 percent for all students who have either graduated or transferred to another institution within eight years of entering. But there's also evidence of significant problems at certain institutions. For instance, 487 accredited colleges leave over 75 percent of their students without a degree in hand; and at 74 institutions, only one in four students either graduates or transfers.

Within the Northwest Commission, the only regional accrediting agency up for review at this week's NACIQI session, twenty institutions reported completion rates at or below 25 percent. For instance, Northwest-approved Tillamook Bay Community College boasts only a 9 percent completion rate, and a 0 percent transfer rate—yet it's not clear that the accreditor has taken any action against the school. The College of Southern Nevada currently serves over 28,000 students, but only about 40 percent of its students had either left with an academic credential in hand or had transferred eight years after entering, leaving the rest degreeless. And while Northwest seems to be keeping an eye on the Art Institute of Portland (completion rate: 32 percent) through more frequent evaluations and by issuing a warning,

it appears to not taken action to provide a warning to the Art Institute of Seattle, where the completion rate is just barely higher, at 37%.

So this week's NACIQI meeting is something of an inflection point for accrediting agencies, and for the advisory body itself: Will these new data strengthen and focus the urgency around improving student outcomes at poor-performing institutions? Even more critically, will NACIQI continue to make these inquiries a regular feature of their review process going forward?

We hope it will. NACIQI has the potential to better ensure quality in our higher education system by continuing to question accreditors' attention to improving student outcomes at the institutions that fall short, sharpening their questioning as available data improve. And NACIQI can help to inform how the Education Department and Congress increase the rigor of accreditation to improve student outcomes. It's a critical first step to restoring a modicum of trust to the accrediting agencies that have too often fallen short.

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