

# Is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges Ensuring Quality for its Low-Income Students?



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This week, a governmental advisory committee known as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity ([NACIQI](#)) will make one of its most important recommendations affecting students and taxpayers—whether a group of college accreditors are qualified to serve as gatekeepers for schools that receive billions of federal dollars. To put this in perspective, each year the federal government disburses approximately [\\$110 billion](#) in grants and loans that students can only use if they attend an institution approved by one of these accrediting agencies. And one accreditor up for review this week—the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges ([SACSCOC](#))—oversees institutions that receive over \$30 billion, one-fourth of the entire federal student loan portfolio.

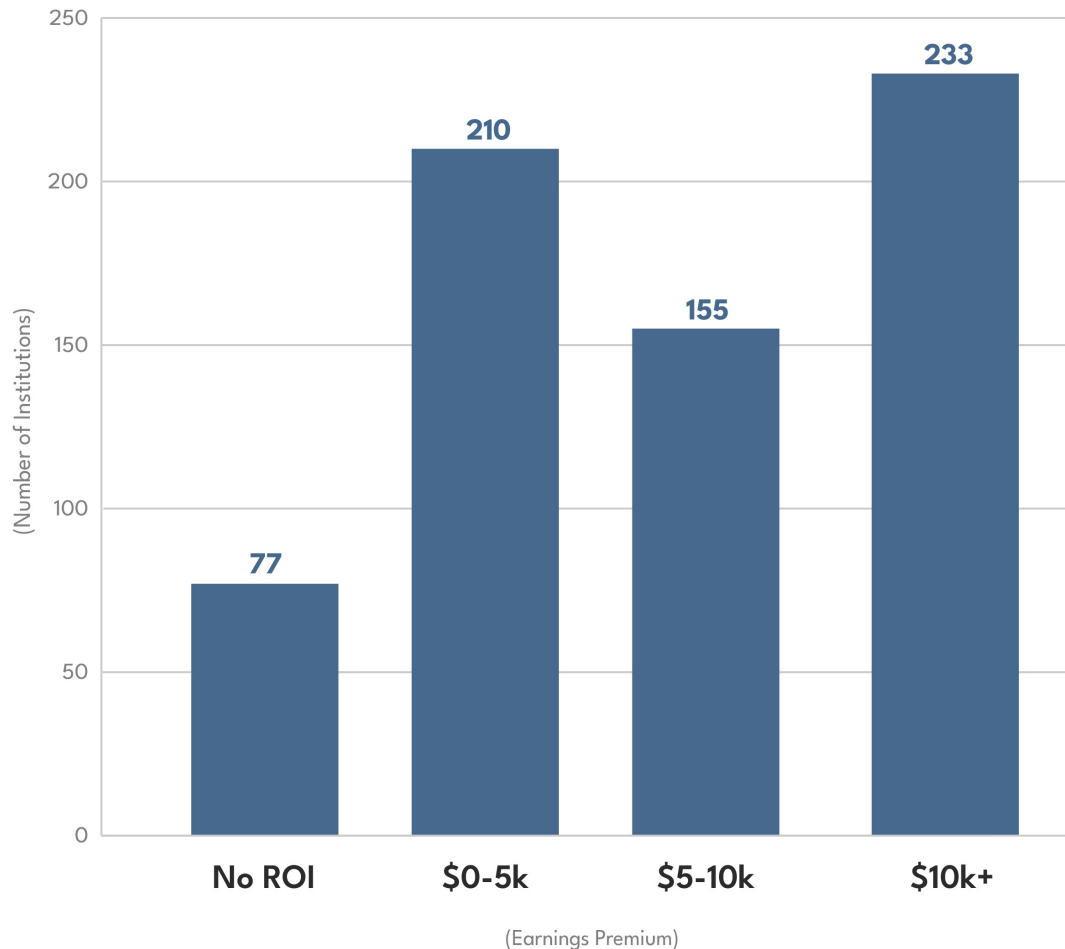
## About **SACSCOC**

SACSCOC is one of the largest college accreditors and is responsible for ensuring the quality of degree-granting schools located in the southeastern United States. It mainly accredits public and private non-profit institutions (98%), most of which predominantly award bachelor's degrees (59%). Overall, it oversees about 750 institutions that enrolled 4,138,149 undergraduate and 838,534 graduate students as of fall 2020. Over a third of undergraduate students (38%) who attend SACSCOC's member institutions come from low- and moderate-income backgrounds.

## **SACSCOC Leaves Many Low-Income Students Behind**

While SACSCOC's employment outcomes may look somewhat better in comparison to other accreditors that were recently up for review, the job prospects for lower-income students attending the colleges they accredit can be lackluster, if not worrisome. This raises the question: Are its efforts resulting in continuous institutional improvement in serving their most vulnerable students or are they leaving them even worse off than if they hadn't attended in the first place?

## Economic Premium for Low-Income Students Who Attend Schools Accredited by SACSCOC



**Source:** Author's calculations using College Scorecard data. See: <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/providing-low-income-students-the-best-bang-for-their-educational-buck>

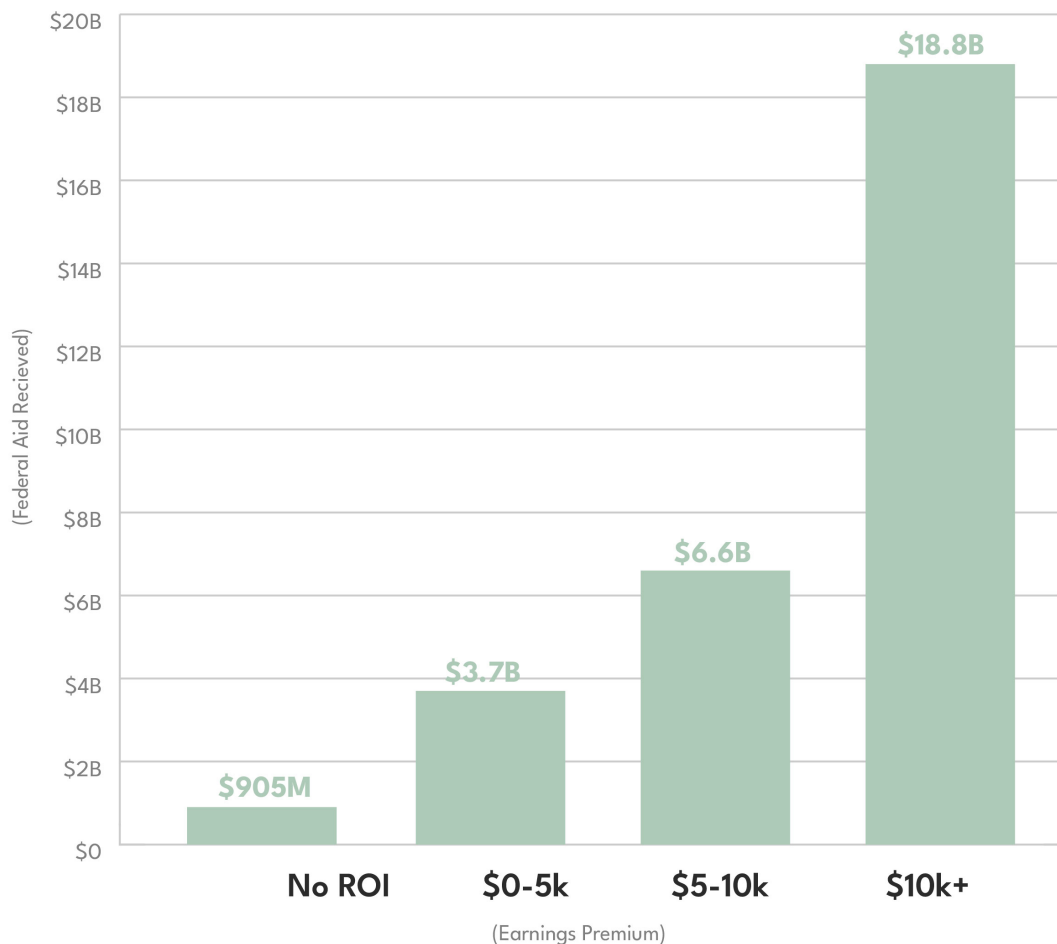
While over a third (35%) of SACSCOC's institutions leave the typical low-income student earning a strong premium after they attend—\$10,000 or more than their peers with no college experience—many others leave these students with no additional earnings premium whatsoever. Four out of ten SACSCOC accredited institutions (287 overall) leave the average low-income student earning no more than \$5,000 more in comparison to a high school graduate with no college experience. And 77 of these actually leave their low-income students with no economic premium at all, even ten years after they enrolled in the institution.

## Nearly \$1 Billion In Federal Student Aid, But No Economic Return for Low-Income Students

Seventy-seven institutions may not sound like a lot, but when you take the size of SACSCOC's portfolio into account, the federal money disbursed to these institutions adds up. As an approved gatekeeper of taxpayer dollars, you'd expect that all students—including those from low-income backgrounds—would have odds better than a coin flip of earning an economic premium on their educational investment, right?

### **THIRD WAY**

## **Federal Student Aid Dollars Disbursed Compared to Earnings Premium for Low-Income Students at SACSCOC Schools**



**Source:** Author's calculations using College Scorecard data. See: <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/providing-low-income-students-the-best-bang-for-their-educational-buck>

The good news is that most of the federal student aid flowing to SACSCOC member institutions does show their low-income students earning more than a \$10,000 premium within ten years after initial enrollment. However, over \$4.5 billion of the government's federal student aid portfolio is disbursed to low-income students who attend a SACSCOC accredited institution that offers limited to no economic ROI whatsoever. And nearly \$1 billion of this is disbursed to students who enroll in

institutions where low-income students earn even less than a high school graduate, resulting in a poor return on their educational investment.

## Conclusion

These outcomes for low-income students show substantial room for improvement and raise questions about whether SACSCOC is effectively delivering on its promise to all students at institutions it approves for accreditation. Ultimately, it will be up to the US Department of Education to make a determination on whether this accreditor is granted a renewal. But at this week's meeting, NACIQI should be looking closely at SACSCOC-accredited schools' outcomes for students and asking these questions to better ensure that this federal accreditor is meeting its obligation to ensure educational quality and continuous improvement for all who enroll.

### TOPICS

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