

Using Accreditation to Make Transfer Credits Count



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In the higher education system, accreditors are supposed to serve as the main watchdog to ensure students are receiving a quality education at institutions across the United States. As the “gatekeepers” of taxpayers’ \$120 billion investment in federal financial aid, accrediting agencies play a key role in setting standards and determining which institutions can access this pot of money.¹ Accreditation involves a peer review process, where institutions in each accreditors’ portfolio provide some guarantee that other schools accredited by the same agency are meeting their basic standards for quality.

But far too often, this process fails to live up to its promise. Member institutions often approve other institutions as meeting standards worthy of accreditation, yet they will later refuse to recognize that school’s coursework as “quality” if a student decides to transfer to their

institution. This can significantly set back the 1.6 million students who transfer every single year.² A significant number of those institutions will not accept some, or even most, of the college credits earned elsewhere, even if the school from which a student is transferring is recognized under the same college accreditor.

That's why we propose that an accreditors' stamp of approval should require all institutions under the same college accreditor to accept the general education credits from their member institutions. Because in a peer review process, if an institution believes another school is a high enough quality that it should be accredited (thus allowing students to leverage their futures by taking out student loans to attend) it should feel confident enough to accept the credits students earn from that school as quality.

The Problem

Accreditation is a poor proxy for quality.

In order for an institution to become accredited, it must receive approval from one of the institutional accreditors recognized by the federal government.³ A school's decision on which accreditor to pick is usually based upon its mission, program offerings, and location. As part of the approval process, the institution must also go through an evaluation process, which includes a self-study, and an on-site evaluation, at which faculty and administrators from fellow member institutions assess whether that institution sufficiently meets its accreditors' standards of quality.⁴ To keep its accreditation, institutions go through subsequent reviews designed to ensure it is maintaining a sufficient level of quality. However, under the current accreditation system, being approved by a federally recognized accrediting agency does little to ensure strong outcomes for students. In fact, there are still nearly 100 accredited institutions that display a graduation rate of 25% or less. And there are 680 accredited institutions where most students won't graduate, earn more than a typical high school graduate, or be able to pay down their student debt.⁵

There is little incentive to hold institutions accountable through the peer review process.

In order to decide whether institutions are eligible to receive some of the \$120 billion in federal financial aid that's doled out every year, the federal government relies on the accreditation process described above. A fundamental assumption in this process is that quality is best maintained, and improved upon, when peers of an institution are enabled to assess an institution's ability to provide a high-quality learning environment for its students.⁶ Therefore, accrediting agencies require a peer review process, relying on member institutions within an accreditor's portfolio to determine whether its quality assurance standards are being met at a particular institution.⁷ However, this peer review process presents an inherent conflict of interest, as reviewers may have little incentive to report

negative findings about an institution whose faculty and administrators may be asked to assess the performance of the reviewers' institution down the road. And accreditation agencies are composed of, and funded through, the institutions they accredit.⁸ Therefore, if an institution ultimately loses its accreditation status, the body that accredits them will also lose membership fees, leaving it with fewer resources. As institutions are required to be accredited in order to gain access to billions of dollars in federal student aid, all parties in this process have little to gain (and much to lose) if an institution is called out as not meeting an accreditor's standards.

Accreditation does little to facilitate credit transfer between institutions under their purview.

Right now, decisions about whether to accept transfer credits are mostly left to the discretion of the receiving institutions. And despite the fact that each accrediting agency in the US has its own set of standards designed to guarantee a minimum level of quality, there are currently no policies in place that require institutions under the same college accreditor to accept each other's credits, even if they are similar institutions that offer the same basic type of general education courses meant to lead to an associate's or bachelor's degree.⁹ While some institutions make articulation agreements with each other that help credits transfer more easily, many do not. As a result, the US Department of Education estimates that the average transfer student loses almost half (43%) of their previously earned credits.¹⁰ This, of course, has an impact on both transfer students and taxpayers, who are often required to pay twice for the same classes taken at two different institutions. Students also lose out on additional wages from being out of the workforce longer while completing their studies. Yet this lax system works in favor of both accreditors and institutions. Without a law or regulation in place, accreditation agencies are unlikely to require the ability to transfer general education credits between institutions under their purview, even if those institutions all receive the same stamp of approval by the same group of peers.

The Solution

To ensure that the peer review process and an accreditors' stamp of approval are more meaningful, accrediting agencies should require all institutions within that accreditation agency's portfolio to establish policies to accept transfer credits from comparable programs at their peer institutions. This should include the transfer of credits for all general education courses, as well as any courses required as part of substantially similar programs (i.e. pre-calculus at one institution should be accepted as satisfying a pre-calculus requirement at another institution). If an accreditation agency fails to meet this requirement within four years, it should be considered to be failing one of the criteria needed for federal recognition, which could result in it being de-recognized if no corrective action is taken. If during an

accreditation review an institution is shown to have no broad credit transfer policies in place, it should be sanctioned and risk losing accreditation, as it would then be failing to meet its accreditor's transfer policy standards.

Not only would this policy encourage a higher percentage of credits transferring between institutions (which would hugely benefit students) it would also increase the rigor of the peer review process. With this requirement, peer reviewers would have skin in the game and have to take a harder look at its fellow members' quality, as a student of any institution within an accreditor's portfolio may eventually be accepted by the peer reviewer's institution with credits in hand. As a result, those faculty and administrators would have more reason to truly scrutinize whether a school is meeting the necessary standards set out by their mutual accreditor.

To give an example of what this would look like, take a student who starts her studies at Miami-Dade College, the largest institution in Florida accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). After completing two years at Miami-Dade and earning an associate's degree, her partner gets a job in Alabama, and she decides to transfer to the University of Alabama at Birmingham to pursue a bachelor's degree in computer science, another institution accredited by SACSCOC. Without the proposed policy in place, she is at risk of losing more than half of her credits upon transferring.¹¹ However, if all institutions under the same institutional accreditor were required to accept each other's general education credits and relevant coursework, she would see most of her credits transferred, reducing the overall cost and time needed to earn her degree and begin her career.

Critiques and Responses

Some accreditation agencies are viewed as more rigorous than others.

We know that school type and sector have historically affected whether credits that are transferable between institutions.¹² For example, transferring credits from for-profit institutions may be more difficult than transferring credits from public or private non-profit institutions, or from a two-year college to a four-year college. Part of this difficulty may have to do with the type of accreditation each institution receives. For-profit institutions are usually nationally accredited, which is viewed by many in the higher ed system as less stringent than regional accreditation. So regionally accredited schools usually prefer to accept transfer credits from other institutions that have received regional accreditation status.¹³ As each accreditation agency sets their own standards, this policy will not address differences in the rigor of standards set by each agency (for example, protecting students who attend schools accredited by ill-reputed agencies like the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools).¹⁴ But it could create some positive peer pressure among institutions

approved by the same accreditor.

This won't solve all transfer issues, as many students transfer between institutions that have different accreditors.

While this policy does not fix the whole problem for transfer students who are losing credits and having to spend more time and money retaking classes, it would move the system toward a more logical approach to credit transfers. Since each accrediting agency has its own standards, this policy would only apply to institutions that have already agreed in a peer review process to share a basic level of educational quality, as defined by their shared accrediting agency. Additionally, the standards set by an accrediting agency can differ if they oversee schools with particular missions. For example, national accrediting agencies often oversee institutions that offer more career-oriented educational programs, while regional accrediting agencies often accredit institutions that offer primarily associate's and bachelor's degrees. And while not all institutions under the same accrediting agency are always similar in mission or student make-up, their general education classes should be able to meet the same basic standards, preparing them to obtain a high-quality credential or degree.

Institutions that view themselves as more elite may accept fewer transfer students if they are forced to accept transfer credits.

There may be concern that if this policy was enacted, some institutions that view themselves as on a different echelon would reduce the number of transfer students they accept, even though the school from which a student seeks to transfer meets the same basic level of quality established by their accreditation agency. While this is a legitimate concern, this change may also have the effect of raising standards for institutions that pride themselves on transferring a significant proportion of their students. For example, if a community college's standards do not align with other institutions under the same accreditation agency, when those peers review its quality, they may deem it necessary to strengthen the curriculum to better meet the general education requirements at other institutions. Over time, this could raise the bar for what's considered an acceptable general education curriculum across all institutions of higher education.

Conclusion

The peer review nature of our current accreditation system is supposed to hold institutions under the same accreditor accountable for maintaining a basic level of quality, but far too often, institutions refuse to accept the transfer credit of students attending other schools within their accreditor's portfolio. This, of course, causes students to lose both critical time and money when trying to earn a college degree. Requiring all institutions under the same college accreditor to accept each other's general education credits is a first step to helping

more students graduate, while reducing the time and costs required in order to do so.

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ENDNOTES

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