The College Affordability Act Improves, But Doesn't Perfect, Our Failing Accreditation System

Common Definitions

Current Law	What the College Affordability Act Does	What Students Really Need
There are currently no standardized definitions across or within accreditors for the kinds of outcomes students might be seeking from higher education institutions (like completion rates or job placement rates). This makes it difficult for consumers to compare their likely return on investment from different schools and for taxpayers to know if accreditors are doing a good job of quality assurance when granting access to federal funds.	The Secretary will convene a working group made up of accreditors, institutions, and student advocates that will establish a common glossary of outcome measures and definitions for each measure. Accreditors may decide to use these measures to assess outcomes at the schools they review, but they may also use measures not listed in the glossary and can pick different measures for different institutions they approve if they so choose. Outcome measures in the glossary will fall into three buckets: completion (like graduation and transfer rates), progress towards completion (like retention rates and credit accumulation), and workforce participation (like licensure and job placement rates).	Congress should designate a list of key outcome measures that will be used by every accreditor to assess every federally-funded school using the same definition to allow for easy comparison of performance and return on investment depending on a consumer's top priorities and clear indicators of whether a school is providing a return on investment to both students and taxpayers compared to similar schools—as well as easy ways to compare the performance of different accreditors to their peers.

Examining Student Outcomes

Current Law	What the College Affordability Act Does	What Students Really Need
Right now, accreditors are supposed to be the watchdogs ensuring that higher education institutions only get access to federal grants and loans if they provide students a basic level of quality. But the accreditation process focuses more on things like how many books a school has in its library than on the outcomes students see when they pay to attend a school. The law currently requires accreditors to consider a "student achievement standard," but they can choose any standard they want with no guidance, and often accreditors pick things that have little to do with how most students fare (i.e. graduate school admittance rates). As a result, accreditors are approving schools for access to federal funds that have less than a 10% graduation rate, or where less than 1 in 5 students can pay back their loans. There is literally no bottom to how bad a school's outcomes can be and still be accredited.	Accreditors must measure student achievement by examining at least one measure selected from the glossary **or** another measure established by the accreditor in each of the following areas: completion, progress toward completion, and workforce participation. The accreditor may use different measures for different institutions it approves. For each measure it selects, the accreditor must set a performance benchmark it wants to see schools hit. Those benchmarks can be set at different thresholds depending on whether the institution primarily offers non-degree credentials, associate's, bachelor's, or graduate degrees. The accreditor can give special treatment to non-profit institutions based on factors like historical significance or whether the school is in an education desert (if it is the only institution available in its geographic area). Each accreditor must post on its website the list of institutions it accredits, the measures it uses to assess student outcomes, the benchmarks it sets for each measure, the rationale for selecting that benchmark, how that benchmark is used in the accreditation process, and the process it follows if a school does not meet a benchmark. Accreditors must also look at student outcome data by factors such as race and ethnicity to evaluate institutional improvement.	Congress should set minimum performance benchmarks on multiple student outcomes—such as graduation rates, successful loan repayment, and the number of students employed in a good job post-attendance—that schools must not fall below in order to receive federal funds. This would provide important consumer protections to ensure students are not encouraged to spend their limited federal grant money or take out federally-backed loans to attend an institution where they have little chance of getting a return on their investment. Congress should mandate that accreditors review and sanction institutions that fall below these basic minimum thresholds. Congress should also mandate that accreditors review and sanction institutions that fall below the minimum thresholds of performance, not just for their overall student population, but also for subgroups of students including Pell students and students of color.

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NACIQI & Secretarial Oversight

Current Law	What the College Affordability Act Does	What Students Really Need
The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) is an advisory body that oversees accreditation-related matters and makes recommendations to the Secretary of Education. Accreditors are reviewed by NACIQI at least once every five years to evaluate whether they are meeting certain standards—but those standards have little to do with student outcomes. Neither NACIQI nor the Secretary have to make publicly available any report on the performance of accreditors, the standards they use to approve schools, or the outcomes for students at the schools they accredit.	NACIQI will regularly evaluate the effectiveness of both the chosen student outcome measures and performance benchmarks each accreditor sets for themselves, and compare each accreditor's measures and benchmarks to their peer accreditors. Based on NACIQI's review and recommendation, the Secretary may require an accreditor to review or revise their benchmarks (but not the measures they have picked for themselves, which are 100% in the purview of the accreditor) if the Secretary determines that the benchmark has been set too low for that particular measure. Every year, the Secretary will issue a report with the following information for each accreditor: the number of institutions accredited in each sector, the number of students attending those institutions, the amount of federal financial aid going to those students, the number of Pell Grant recipients, the graduation rates at each institution, and the median earnings of students 10 years after enrollment.	As the purported watchdog of quality assurance, accreditors themselves should also be held accountable for student outcomes at the schools they accredit. Congress should require that an accreditor be regularly assessed based on the performance of the institutions they approve for federal funding, and if most schools they approve show negative outcomes for their students, an accreditor should no longer be deemed eligible to dole out access to federal funds. Accreditors whose schools consistently fail to meet basic performance benchmarks should be required to go up for review in front NACIQI more frequently than every five years. Congress should require that reviews on the quality of federally-funded institutions be posted publicly on accreditors' websites so that students and taxpayers can easily access them.