

# The Brave New World of Accreditation



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Accreditation has been much in the news of late and the subject of both congressional and executive action.

Last month, the Senate introduced the [Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act](#), which would, among other things, establish student outcome standards that accreditors would have to use to evaluate postsecondary institutions and [increase transparency](#) of accreditation decisions and the U.S. Education Department's (ED) oversight of accreditors.

For its part, ED has sent several communications, beginning in November of last year, to accrediting agencies concerning a new focus on transparency and student outcomes, and later clarification about the nature of accreditor flexibility and the department's oversight role.

Moreover, the higher education landscape itself is changing. Noting new non-institutional education providers and recognizing the need for alternative forms of quality assurance, the department, through its [Experimental Sites Initiative](#), recently announced eight winners of the [Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships](#) (EQUIP) program.

## A look at one proposal

In this environment, the [Center for American Progress](#) (CAP) last week released a [report](#) outlining its alternative to accreditation. The report's focus is not "a quality alternative" but rather a "gatekeeping alternative," said Judith Eaton, president of the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) (CHEA), who spoke on a panel marking the report's release. (CHEA is one of organizations selected for the EQUIP experiment.)

[Watch a video](#) of the panel discussion, U.S. Education Undersecretary Ted Mitchell noted that that it shouldn't be viewed as an "either or" proposition. While it's necessary to have quality assurance and to guard eligibility for federal student aid, it is not necessary for the same entity to be responsible for both, he said. There is a place for the traditional peer review by current accrediting agencies and for different entities to set minimum standards for eligibility, he added.

## Breaking it down

The proposed CAP alternative is intended to complement and not replace the current process of granting access to federal financial aid, said Ben Miller, senior director of postsecondary education at CAP and a co-author of the report. It has three components:

- setting high standards for student outcomes and financial health
- having private third parties set those standards
- leaving the data definition, collection and verification, as well as enforcement, to the federal government

This division of responsibilities would address the conflict of interest in the current system of having the same entity perform all of the actions, Miller said. Under this proposal, educational

providers would be evaluated solely on students' results and their financial health. Performance thresholds may differ based "upon the type of program," but the measure used in the formula would be uniform.

The report set four measures to gauge student outcome: completion, job placement, graduate earnings and federal loan repayment rates. CAP's proposed measures for financial stability or health differ from ones ED currently uses and would include ratios of assets to liabilities and debts to assets.

Third-party standard setters could include program accreditors, professional membership associations — such as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants — and academic membership organizations, like the American Political Science Association.

Under the plan, the federal government would select the third parties as well as the standards. In addition, the feds "would conduct continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of the standards," which is in contrast to the current system of periodic monitoring of the accrediting agencies, which is usually a five-year accrediting cycle.

### **Leeway for certain sectors**

Under the proposal, postsecondary institutions that meet the high thresholds would not be subject to the same level of review as institutions that are deemed "risky." It would accommodate for institutions such as community colleges and historically black colleges and universities that serve a high proportion of Pell Grant recipients or first-generation college students, Miller said. But he noted that "student demography is not destiny."

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