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## Online Colleges Blog

### 8 Higher Ed Accreditation Reforms That Need to Happen Now

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It's no secret that America's higher education system needs reform on a number of fronts, including the process by which colleges are accredited. Accreditation was initially created to ensure that colleges and universities met a certain standard of quality, but in recent years policymakers have taken issue with the way that quality is measured as well as the administration of the accreditation system as a whole. While reforming accreditation would be no easy task, many, including Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, believe that it's a necessary step to ensure that America's colleges and universities remain among the best in the world and to help higher education keep up with the myriad changes that have occurred in education since accreditation was first established. What needs to change? Here, we present some of the most commonly suggested changes to the current accreditation system that many policy experts believe must happen in the next few years to keep accreditation relevant.

1. **[Identify and report on student success](http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/dickeson.pdf)**  
 (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/dickeson.pdf>).

Studies have shown that college students at even accredited institutions are increasingly learning very little, and it's an issue the government isn't taking lightly. While colleges are largely against the ideas of over-specific guidelines for educational outcomes (they believe it undermines institutional autonomy), it's a common complaint that accreditation doesn't put enough emphasis on student success. Here, even universities and colleges have to agree that some reforms do need to be made. A common solution is to increase public access to information about student outcomes, including student success and educational quality, so students know what to expect before enrolling, though others have suggested varying levels of accreditation based on the performance of students, with only the very best schools achieving high distinctions.

2. **[Cater accreditation to online colleges](http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/accreditation-reform-dull-but-important-2/31840)**  
 (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/accreditation-reform-dull-but-important-2/31840>).

There has been a lot of discussion about creating new accrediting bodies that are based on educational mission instead of geographic location, much of it brought on by the increasing prevalence of online colleges, which don't really fit into the regional accrediting system that's currently in place. Peer review, the primary model for most accreditation today, works well when colleges are in fact actually peers, but when brick-and-mortar schools are tasked with evaluating a wholly online institution, things

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At [Online Colleges Blog](http://www.onlinecolleges.org/blog/) (<http://www.onlinecolleges.org/blog/>), we cover higher education and topics directly pertaining to online colleges and universities.

Due to the progression of technology, the state of the economy, and a shift in student demographics, higher education is evolving rapidly. Our aim is to acquaint you with the current trends and developments in higher education and digital learning.

You can expect to find an abundance of information available including scholarship data, financial aid guidance as well as career and study advice. Consider [Online Colleges Blog](http://www.onlinecolleges.org/blog/) (<http://www.onlinecolleges.org/blog/>) your one stop shop for everything related to online education. Thanks for joining us!

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can get tricky. In fact, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said this of online colleges, "The existing accreditation system was not designed to accommodate them and it would be a mistake to try to bend or warp its mission to do so. It can't be done." He believes that a new federal regulatory system needs to be designed to deal with online and for-profit colleges rather than trying to apply outmoded traditional accreditation guidelines to them.

3. **[Allow students at any institution to get federal aid \(http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/accreditation-removing-the-barrier-to-higher-education-reform\)](http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/accreditation-removing-the-barrier-to-higher-education-reform)**

Students who choose to attend a non-accredited institution are not eligible to get federal financial aid, which has been a major point of contention among critics of the accreditation system. While the accreditation system does keep potential diploma mills and other unsavory institutions from getting their hands on federal funds, it also stifles legitimate organizations who may not fit into the current accreditation model and who appeal to students who can't afford to attend them without government help. Some experts think a critical element of reforming accreditation is to make it truly optional, by removing the tie between federal aid for students and accreditation.

4. **[Reform the peer review system \(http://centerforcollegeaffordability.org/25-ways/improve-competition/reform-accreditation\)](http://centerforcollegeaffordability.org/25-ways/improve-competition/reform-accreditation)**

A recent report from the American Council on Education revealed that colleges want to maintain the voluntary, peer-review-based system that is currently in place for regional accreditation. Yet the government isn't sure that a self-regulated system is the best solution, and in recent years has been trying to exert more control and oversight over accreditation agencies and the process itself. They think that colleges have a vested interest in keeping each other accredited, and that the system, to be truly effective, needs oversight from an independent third party. That's not likely to happen, at least not if colleges have anything to say about it, so some experts believe that compromise is the best solution for reform, allowing the current system to stay in place but with the government taking over some of the responsibilities that now fall on accreditors. Whatever the solution is, and it may be hard to find one that appeases both colleges and government officials, it's clear that something in the current system isn't working as it should, and reforms need to take place over the course of the next few years.

5. **[Enforce transparency \(http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college\\_guide/blog/the accreditation reform maze.php\)](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/blog/the_accreditation_reform_maze.php)**

With tuition costs soaring, parents and students these days want to make sure they're getting a good value for their dollar when they select a college. Yet under the current accreditation system, there's no mandate that colleges be open and honest about the success rates of their graduates, or that accrediting bodies take these things into account. It's one area where many critics see a lot of room for improvement, believing that more information needs to be released to the public at every stage of the accreditation process so that parents and students can be better informed.

6. **[Enact stricter penalties for institutions that are underperforming \(http://collegeaffordability.blogspot.com/2011/02/accreditation-reform.html\)](http://collegeaffordability.blogspot.com/2011/02/accreditation-reform.html)**

One big criticism of the current system of accreditation is that it doesn't move quickly enough to take action against failing institutions. Stronger, quicker action against these substandard institutions would prevent some of the problems that exist right now, like failing institutions keeping their accreditation long past the point where there's any chance of them making a comeback. This kind of laxity in policy hurts both the students and the accreditation bodies, and many believe that it's time for major changes. On the flip side, many have also suggested that the accrediting boards should make things easier on colleges that have a long track record of good performance, allowing them to forego the time-consuming process of full review.

7. **[Make accreditation more cost-effective \(http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/07/ace-panel-calls\)](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/07/ace-panel-calls)**

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[NACE Occupational Salary Survey](http://www.naceweb.org/research/salary_survey/?referral=research&menuID=71&nodetype=4)

[http://www.naceweb.org/research/salary\\_survey/?referral=research&menuID=71&nodetype=4](http://www.naceweb.org/research/salary_survey/?referral=research&menuID=71&nodetype=4)

[Report on Online Edu Quality](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/survey06.asp)

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[c.org/publications/survey/survey06.asp](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/survey06.asp)

[U.S. Dept of Education](http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/engli)

<http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/engli>

[University Parent](http://www.universityparent.com/)

<http://www.universityparent.com/>

**sustaining-changing-regional-accreditation).**

If accreditation agencies are going to be more demanding in what they expect of colleges and universities, then changes need to be made to ensure that the process isn't going to be cost-prohibitive for smaller educational organizations. Even today, college leaders at schools of all sizes are complaining about the rising costs of complying with accreditor demands, and if accreditation standards change those costs would only rise. New regulations should be put in place in tandem with other guidelines of student achievement and transparency to help getting and keeping accreditation a process that isn't financially damaging for institutions of higher education.

**8. Establish minimum standards for graduating students**  
**(<http://www.popecenter.org/commentaries/article.html?id=2651>).**

If accreditation is going to mean something, then many believe that students who graduate from accredited institutions should be able to meet minimum standards upon graduation. This means being able to read, write, and reason at a college-appropriate level. Why the push for this change? Recent studies of college graduates have shown that only 25% are considered literate at a proficient level, something policymakers see as a major problem. Some have suggested that accredited institutions have exit exams for students, with those who don't produce grads with sufficient scores penalized, or put on probation until they can work with an accrediting body to raise the scores. It sounds harsh, but with college tuition higher than ever, students need to be able to expect that accreditation will guarantee them a solid college education.

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