

SACSCOC Proposed Legislative Agenda---2017

1. Distribute legislative brochure to attendees at the SACSCOC Annual Meeting.
2. C-RAC will review, and update as necessary, current policy recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.
3. D'Arcy Philps (C-RAC lobbyist) will assist in developing talking points, messages and FAQs around the key issues.
4. Once new Administration takes office, identify Presidents with members on the House and Senate Education Committees to contact those members via letter, call or visit, to discuss the specific issues.
5. Distribute list of issues to all SACSCOC members for their use and information.
6. Draft a letter, talking points, etc., for SACSCOC members to send to their legislators.
7. Schedule visits to the Hill for BSW to visit.
8. Draft op-ed for *The Hill* about the dangers of federal control over higher education that identifies what accreditors are doing to address institutions with low graduation rates.
9. Set up editorial board meetings with key national outlets (USA Today, WSJ, and Washington Post) about the benefits of accreditation and the dangers of federalization of education. Consider inviting Senator Lamar Alexander and Molly Broad to attend.
10. Set up phone conversations and deskside briefings with individual reporters at major outlets about key challenges.
11. Develop regional op-eds in key states/Congressional districts bylined by business and public members of accreditation commissions that shows why accreditation is up to the task of improving outcomes and ensuring that federal financial aid is not wasted.
12. Create infographics on a) how accreditation helps ensure that students have the best education possible; b) the dangers of federal standards and using narrow measures as a means of evaluating quality; and c) what regional accreditors are doing to address institutions with low performance. \
13. Place key allies on shows like the Diane Rehm Show or Kojo Nnamdi Show (NPR) and PBS Newshour over whether the federal government should set standards for higher education.
14. Draft commentaries for key national trade publications on what accreditors are learning about assuring quality in open-access institutions based on lessons from the report.

Suggested Themes and Talking Points on the Role of Regional Accreditation

Regional Accreditation Works. The regional accrediting commissions collectively accredit approximately 3,500 institutions of higher education, and in 2015 alone, granted accreditation to 13 new institutions, reaffirmed 299, and placed 40 institutions on warning or probation. And, of course, this does not count the hundreds of instances in which accreditation teams have identified areas for improvement as part of their review process, which has resulted in measurable progress on campuses throughout the nation on scores of issues, large and small, with little or no fanfare.

Regional Accreditation is Local Control. While not perfect, regional accreditation is doing exactly what was expected of it when it was created. Rather than the federal government having direct oversight over all components of every college and university in America, regional accreditation is a peer review process focused on institutional quality that is led by those closest to the action – not bureaucrats in Washington.

Regional Accreditation is Expanding Its Use of Metrics. As increasing scrutiny is given to the issue of college affordability and important metrics like graduation and loan repayment rates, C-RAC Members pledge to focus even more attention on those institutions that perform poorly in these areas. We are not afraid to close or sanction institutions that continually underperform, and have done so on many occasions. But, our first priority will be to help institutions that fail to meet acceptable metrics produce better results for their students before they reach the sanctioning phase.

America's Diverse System of Higher Education Institutions are Not Well Served by a "One-size Fits All" Approach to Regional Accreditation. While we pledge to use metrics like those mentioned above to inform the actions we take, we also recognize that these metrics are not perfect. A single "bright line" metric applied to all schools equally often fails to take into consideration important differences in student populations, fields of study and institutional histories. We believe America is best served by a higher education system that celebrates and supports all types of students at all types of institutions. Careful judgement, along with the right mix of applied metrics that focus on multiple measures, is required to truly measure the quality of any institution. Ultimately, a thorough job of accreditation requires us to measure institutions on their own merits; often this means some will require more attention during the accreditation process, some less.

Higher Education Needs Better Data. Sadly, the institutional performance data supplied by U.S. Department of Education that is currently being used to make important judgements about institutions is of very poor quality; this fact significantly taints any actions taken by ED, states and accreditors that are based solely on this information. As a result of this situation, ED's attempt to produce a college scorecard is misleading, often inaccurate and at times inconsistent with other data put out by the very same Department. We urge Congress and the Administration to do whatever it can to improve the quality of data, including the consideration of a student unit record system that is used to measure school progress.

Accreditation Works Best Without Political Interference. Federal policymakers expect regional accreditors to take action whenever a problem is identified at a particular college or university, yet we are criticized when we don't. Members of Congress, Governors, legislators, etc. also criticize the accreditors when they remove an institution from membership for failing to meet quality assurance standards for an extended period of time.

That is why we continue to be surprised and saddened each time Congress and the Administration disrupts the process and attempts to insert itself into decisions made to hold individual institutions accountable for their actions. Accreditation decisions should be based on facts and careful deliberation, not political considerations.

Accreditation is Just One Part of a Triad Responsible for Oversight of Federal Student Aid. Regional accreditors are proud of the role we play in the federal higher education system, but our role is limited to quality assurance. ED has the responsibility of assuring the administrative and fiscal integrity of financial aid programs. State governments are responsible for issuing licenses to institutions that operate in the state. Unfortunately, many policymakers and members of the media get these roles confused and tend to assign responsibilities to regional accreditation that are supposed to be handled by ED and the states. We urge ED to work more cooperatively – particularly when it comes to sharing information in a more timely and comprehensive manner and coordinating the work of its program reviewers and the Inspector General – with the other members of the triad focused on the same overall goal as gatekeepers of federal student aid.

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