

**TORCH
REPORT**

SACS  **COC™**

News from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

Bold Actions Toward Workforce Alignment

As we move further into 2026, I want to share several important updates that reflect both our progress and our growing commitment to supporting institutions as they prepare students for meaningful careers.



Dr. Stephen Pruitt

Over the past month, our conversations with campuses, state leaders, and national partners have continued to reinforce a shared truth: every institution contributes to the workforce, and those contributions look different depending on institutional mission, student populations, and community needs. Honoring that diversity while strengthening clarity, transparency, and alignment remains central to the work ahead.

This month's update focuses on how we are advancing that commitment, including through our new Lumina Foundation grant and significant activity in our Substantive Change process.

Workforce Alignment: A Shared Priority

I am pleased to share that SACSCOC has been awarded a new grant from the Lumina Foundation to support an ambitious two-year effort to strengthen how institutions across our membership understand, articulate, and demonstrate their contribution to workforce as part of their mission and accreditation narrative. This initiative will help institutions better leverage workforce and labor-market information in program planning, credential development, and mission-driven pathways for students. This work is anchored in several core truths.

Workforce is not one size fits all. A technical college, a comprehensive university, and an R1 research institution all contribute to the workforce, but they do so in different, mission-aligned ways.



Above: During his recent visit to The Bahamas, SACSCOC President Stephen Pruitt met with national and university leadership following the Commission's decision in 2025 to grant the University of The Bahamas candidacy status for membership.

We must respect that as we move forward.

Our role is to support, not prescribe, those contributions. The goal is not to create uniformity, but to ensure clarity, transparency, and quality assurance that helps institutions tell their story effectively.

Accreditation should help institutions connect learners to opportunity. Especially adult learners and returning students seeking high-skill, high-wage, high-demand careers.

This project supports four major areas: state-level workforce data analysis; cross-state program mapping; development of practical guidance for institutions; and the creation of a sustainable network to support workforce alignment.

Ultimately, this effort builds on our commitment to be an organization that is responsive, forward-leaning, and aligned to the needs of students and states.

From Page 1**Substantive Change & Career Pathways: Celebrating Institutional Progress**

As we move toward the implementation of Workforce Pell, we are getting questions asking how we will support institutions. While currently there are not clear requirements for accreditors in that initiative, we feel it's important to build on our role. Our focus is on pathways that progress to careers. As such, and under our purview of accreditation, we approve certificate training programs that will lead to careers.

This month we also continued to see strong activity in our Substantive Change process, particularly around career-aligned certificates and pathways that lead directly to employment. These programs reflect the responsiveness of our institutions to state workforce needs and the growing demand for credentials that provide immediate value.

Congratulations to the following institutions whose programs were approved this week:

Navarro College

- Level 1 Certificate in Entry Level Manufacturing Technician
- Level 2 Certificate in Advanced Manufacturing Technician

Northeast Texas Community College

- Level I Certificate in Industrial Technology – Air Conditioning Technician

Richard Bland College

- Certificate in Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS)

South Texas College

- Certificate in Artificial Intelligence Specialist
- Associate of Applied Science in Artificial Intelligence Specialist

These programs exemplify what it means to build clear, stackable, career-aligned pathways and demonstrate how institutions across sectors are serving students while strengthening regional and state economies.

Looking Ahead

Our 100-Day Plan continues to guide cross-team alignment and strengthen the way we communicate expectations with our membership. The revision of the *Principles of Accreditation* is underway, and we remain on track for new standards to be considered by the Board in December 2026. Be on the lookout for a first public draft in the spring. With this work ongoing, we will continue suspending new training on the current standards until the full retraining of peer evaluators in 2027. We are also excited about the new dashboard we will be launching in the spring. More to come on that, but I will tease that it is not your typical dashboard. I believe it will provide a wealth of data useful to institutions and the public alike.

Thank you for your partnership, your candor, and your steadfast commitment to the students and communities you serve. It is an honor to walk this road with you. Together we will continue to **Be Bold; Stay Gold.**

Save the Dates | SACSCOC Meetings

Summer Institute | July 19–22, 2026
Hilton Atlanta | Atlanta, Georgia

Annual Meeting | December 5–8, 2026
George R. Brown Convention Center | Houston, Texas

Additional information, including registration details, will be shared in the months ahead.

Interested in volunteering at a SACSCOC event or meeting? Complete the Volunteer Interest Pool Survey [Here!](#)

Pruitt's Law or Lore:*February Preview and What's Next*

Dr. Stephen Pruitt's **Law or Lore** weekly blog series continues to address some persistent misunderstandings in accreditation.

In February, the blog series featured installments on "It Depends," Don't Tell SACSCOC...We Might Get in Trouble, and Grades as Assessment.

In the coming weeks, topics will include Peer Evaluation vs. SACSCOC Decision Making, Counting Library Books, and more.

Read Pruitt's Law or Lore here:

<https://sacscoc.org/law-or-lore-2/>

SACSCOC In the News:

- **Dr. Stephen Pruitt** appearance on the **Changing Higher Ed** podcast was released **March 3**. Listen [here](#).
- **Dr. Pruitt** was a guest panelist at the virtual Future of Accreditation event hosted by **The Chronicle of Higher Education**. Other panelists included CPHE board chair Mark Becker and WASC president Maria Toyoda. Undersecretary Nicholas Kent also took part in the event. Watch [here](#).

Torch Award Spotlight: University of the Cumberland

When affordability is a strategy and not just a talking point, it changes what's possible for students.

The commitment to put students first, always, was on full display at the University of the Cumberland, one of SACSCOC's inaugural recipients of the Torch Award for affordability.

"At Cumberland, we've always believed that access to a life-changing education shouldn't come with an overwhelming financial burden," said Dr. Quentin Young, president of University of the Cumberland. "The Torch Award is a reflection of our mission, our values, and the hard work of so many who remain committed to putting students first."

In recent years, Cumberland has implemented a number of affordability initiatives:

- **2019:** Launched the Cumberland Commitment, reducing tuition for on-campus undergraduate students by 57%.
- **2020:** Provided free textbooks to all on-campus undergraduate students.
- **2023:** Introduced the One Price Promise, ensuring all students receive free textbooks and pay no hidden fees.
- **2024:** Began offering new scholarships and forgivable, zero-interest loans to on-campus undergraduates, aiming to reduce out-of-pocket costs to no more than \$2,000 per semester for full-time students.



"I chose to attend Cumberland because it was affordable and aligned with my values," said Shelby Wilson, a senior from Williamsburg, Ky.

The Torch Awards elevate the work of institutions that demonstrate exceptional commitment to access, quality, accountability, and measurable improvement, reflecting SACSCOC's mission to highlight and support student-centered excellence across the region.

Read more about the Torch Awards [here](#).

Read the University of the Cumberland story [here](#).

SACSCOC Staff Update

Chandler C. Vidrine, MPA, recently joined SACSCOC as Board Relations Coordinator in the Office of Legal and Governmental Affairs and Commission Support. He previously served as Executive to the Chancellor and Chief Protocol Officer at Southern University at New Orleans, where he strengthened executive operations and governance systems.



Chandler C. Vidrine

In Louisiana, Vidrine held dual Executive Director roles in the Office of Governor Jeff Landry and under Governor John Bel Edwards, leading initiatives through the Governor's Office of Indian Affairs and the Governor's Office of Strategic Community Initiatives.

MEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

Chattanooga State Community College recently opened the Rhea County Higher Education Center, a new facility that will offer hands-on training in welding, robotics, electrical technology, EMT, and computer support, connecting students directly to careers close to home. This investment strengthens educational access and regional workforce development while helping students build skills that meet employer needs. Read more [here](#).

We want to hear from you! If your campus has recent news you'd like to share, please send a brief description, along with relevant links or photos, to communications@sacscoc.org.