

Mr. Herman Bounds
Director, Accreditation Group
Office of Postsecondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 6C116
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Request for Comments on Review of Accrediting Agencies, **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS)**

March 12, 2017

Dear Members of the Accreditation Group and National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit public comments for the upcoming June, 2017 NACIQI meeting regarding the renewal of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS). This comment is submitted on behalf of the Center for American Progress' postsecondary education team. We would like to submit several concerns for the public record.

Introduction

Accreditation is an important quality control for the nation's students and taxpayers. That is particularly true for SACS, which is the second largest accrediting agency, serving almost 5 million students and receiving \$32 billion each year in federal student aid dollars.¹

While we commend SACS for recently taking action against a number of colleges that were not meeting standards,² we would also like to raise several concerns for the record. First, unlike other regional agencies, SACS does not appear to identify, collect, or analyze key data indicators on measures of student achievement as required under federal regulation 34 CFR 602.19.³ Second, several of the agency's public representatives are employed as presidents of the independent college trade organizations in their state, calling into question the "separate and independent" requirement under 34 CFR 602.14.⁴

As NACIQI and the Department of Education consider SACS' application for renewal, we hope that their review examines the agency's standards on student outcomes, how its institutions perform, and the members of its board to ensure that the agency follows its responsibility under federal regulation.

Analysis of Key Data on Student Achievement is Lacking

Under the criteria for federal recognition of an accrediting agency, 34 CFR 602.19(b) requires that an accrediting agency:

“demonstrate it has, and effectively applies, a set of monitoring and evaluation approaches that enables the agency to identify problems with an institution's or program's continued compliance with agency standards and that takes into account institutional or program strengths and stability. These approaches must include periodic reports, **and collection and analysis of key data and indicators, identified by the agency, including, but not limited to, fiscal information and measures of student achievement**, consistent with the provisions of §602.16(f).” (Emphasis added)⁵

Under SACS’ standards, it requires that agencies submit data on student outcomes but it leaves it up to the institutions to decide what they submit. Criteria for evaluating success can include enrollment data; retention graduation, course completion, and job placement rates; state licensing examinations; student portfolios; or other means.⁶ This suggests there is no consistency in how SACS evaluates colleges. It also means that institutions can choose to show one measure of success, such as exam pass rates, when it is not performing well in other areas, such as graduation rates.

This is in direct contrast to a majority of regional accrediting agencies. Most collect and analyze, or require institutions to collect and analyze, specific measures identified by the agency about student achievement at each of their institutions. For example, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) requires all institutions to measure retention, persistence, and completion rates.⁷ WASC Senior College and University Commission (WASC), requires all institutions to report graduation and retention rates annually, and also conducts its own analysis.⁸

Examples of key data indicators required by regional accreditors are included below:

Accrediting Agency	Specific Measures of Student Achievement
Higher Learning Commission (HLC) ⁹	4.C. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable · The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion · The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements
The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) ¹⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The institution’s goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and

	<p>the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The institution defines measures of student success. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment.
<p>WASC Senior College and University Commission¹¹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The institution demonstrates that students make timely progress toward the completion of their degrees and that an acceptable proportion of students complete · WSCUC's Graduation Rate Dashboard (GRD) uses six data points to estimate the institution's absolute graduation rate over time and accounts for all graduates · Collects retention and graduation rate data annually
<p>Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges¹²</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · All instructional programs culminate in student attainment of identified student learning outcomes, and achievement of degrees, certificates, employment, or transfer to other higher education programs. · The institution uses assessment data and organizes its institutional processes to support student learning and student achievement. · The institution disaggregates and analyzes learning outcomes and achievement for subpopulations of students.

A review of SACS compliance reports shows that institutions in fact do cherry pick favorable indicators at the expense of other, more revealing, measures. For example, in its self-study, Kentucky State University chose to provide exam pass rates and job placement data, but did not mention that only 19 percent of its students graduate, only 22 percent are paying down their debt, or that many have low salaries after attending.¹³ Furthermore, the job placement figures are raw numbers of students employed, not actual rates, so they are not particularly illuminating. It is not clear if SACS requested further information, but the institution was reaffirmed shortly after.

In another example, in its compliance report, the University of South Carolina Upstate describes the types of data it collects, including examination pass rates, IPEDS data, course completion, and transfer student success, among others.¹⁴ Reviewers can access the data if they choose, but the institution merely shows

that it collects data and does not openly discuss where it stands on performance. SACS's final review of the institution's report merely repeats what kind of data the institution collects and marks it compliant with no further evaluation.¹⁵ SACS reviewers did not appear to probe further to ask about the institution's below average completion rate of 40 percent or other outcomes.¹⁶

That the agency does not evaluate colleges on key student outcomes and appears to take the institution's word without question is concerning for two reasons. First, it means that the agency does not appear to have consistent success standards. Rather, the standard is defined by the institution. It is not clear if this kind of review can be considered a rigorous application of standards. Second, it means that the agency cannot help institutions improve, its main objective, if it does not establish a baseline of performance on key indicators that allows it to compare performance across institutions. Instead, the agency just reviews whether or not a college has a process in place that allows it to collect and analyze data in some form.

The Department and NACIQI should consider whether the agency's standards are rigorous and if it can be successful in measuring and assessing quality if it does not probe beyond what an institution chooses to present without further examination.

“Separate and Independent”

34 CFR 602.14 (b)(2) requires that

“At least one member of the agency's decision making body is a representative of the public, and at least one seventh of that body consists of representatives of the public”¹⁷

Public representatives serve an important role in accreditation. They bring to decision making outside voices that are neutral and uninhibited by conflicts of interest. However, we are concerned that at least two of SACS' eleven public members are employed as paid representatives of private colleges in their state. For example, Ray Martinez, the public representative for the SACS Board of Trustees, is also the President of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas, Austin.¹⁸ Similarly, Claude Pressnell Jr., a public representative on the SACS Board of Trustees, is also the President of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association.¹⁹ These members are not really public if their jobs entail representing the schools SACS oversees -- and they are paid to do so. This raises questions about whether or not the agency meets the “separate and independent” requirements specified under federal regulation. The Department and NACIQI should further evaluate whether a paid representative for private colleges overseen by an agency should count as a public representative.

Conclusion

As NACIQI and the Department review SACs application for renewal, we hope this information is taken into consideration. At a minimum, SACS should answer how it defines success. It cannot ensure that students are well served or help institutions improve if it does not measure institutions in a way that is rigorous, consistent, and fair.

Antoinette Flores
Senior Policy Analyst
Center for American Progress

¹ U.S. Department of Education, “Program Outcomes by Accreditor,” available at www.ed.gov/accreditation

² Doug Lederman, “A Watchdog Bites,” Inside Higher Ed, December 7, 2016, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/12/07/southern-accreditor-places-10-probation-including-louisville-and-new-ut-campus>

³ 34 CFR 602.19(b) (2011), available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2011-title34-vol3/xml/CFR-2011-title34-vol3-sec602-16.xml>

⁴ 34 CFR 602.14 (2011), available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2011-title34-vol3/xml/CFR-2011-title34-vol3-sec602-16.xml>

⁵ 34 CFR 602.19(b).

⁶ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, “Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement,” available at <http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp>

⁷ The Higher Learning Commission, “The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components,” available at <https://www.hlcommission.org/Criteria-Eligibility-and-Candidacy/criteria-and-core-components.html>

⁸ WASC Senior College and University Commission, “About the Graduation Rate Dashboard,” available at <https://www.wscuc.org/search/site/Graduation%20rate%20dashboard>

⁹ The Higher Learning Commission, “The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components.”

¹⁰ New England Association of Schools and Colleges, “Standards,” available at https://cihe.neasc.org/standards-policies/standards-accreditation/standards-effective-july-1-2016#standard_five

¹¹ WASC Senior College and University Commission, “Handbook of Accreditation 2013 Revised,” available at <https://www.wscuc.org/content/2013-handbook-accreditation>

¹² Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, “Accreditation Standards,” available at http://www.accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Accreditation_Standards_Adopted_June_2014.pdf

¹³ Kentucky State University, “SACS COC Accreditation Compliance Report,” available at http://apps.kysu.edu/SACS/Reaffirmation_WebSite/REQUIREMENTA3FA.HTM?id=4.1; College Scorecard, Kentucky State University, available at <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/school/?157058-Kentucky-State-University>.

¹⁴ University of South Carolina Upstate, “Federal Requirement 4.1,” available at <http://www.uscupstate.edu/sacs/table.aspx?id=36921>

¹⁵ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, “Report of the Reaffirmation Committee, University of South Carolina Upstate,” available at http://www.uscupstate.edu/uploadedFiles/About_upstate/SACS/Final%20Off-Site%20Report%20-%20for%20webpage.pdf

¹⁶ College Scorecard, “University of South Carolina Upstate,” available at <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/school/?218742-University-of-South-Carolina-Upstate>

¹⁷ 34 CFR 602.14(b)(2) available at https://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg13.html

¹⁸ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, “Texas Delegation,” available at http://www.sacscoc.org/tx_members.asp

¹⁹ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, “Tennessee Delegation,” available at http://www.sacscoc.org/tn_members.asp