



FACT SHEET

How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes

By Antoinette Flores November 27, 2018

Critics often point out that college accreditors are overly focused on bureaucratic process and do not pay enough attention to students' measurable educational outcomes. That's a serious concern, as accrediting agencies are the gatekeepers tasked with determining whether colleges offer the level of quality necessary to receive nearly \$120 billion in federal grants and loans each year.

However, accreditors do much more on student outcomes than most people realize. A CAP analysis shows that accreditors already have many of the tools needed to adopt a more results-based approach, although ensuring that all accreditors adopt such an approach demands a sizeable mentality shift to make better use of the tools currently at their disposal.

Most accreditors collect numerous outcomes measures every year, including enrollment and graduation rate data. Processes and results differ between regional agencies, which mostly oversee public and nonprofit colleges, and national agencies, which mostly oversee career-focused for-profit colleges. Among regional agencies, however, the expectations that accreditors lay out in their standards vary widely. Moreover, the data these agencies collect are not well connected to standards. Accreditors can only take action against an institution if it violates one or more of their standards. Therefore, if they have concerning data about a college, but nothing in their standards connects to the measure in question, they aren't taking the data into account when considering whether the college should be accredited.



See also: "[How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes](#)" by Antoinette Flores

TABLE 1
Student outcome standards vary across accrediting agencies

Common characteristics of student outcome standards, by accrediting agency

Common characteristics	HLC	MSCHE	WSCUC	ACCJC	NEASC	SACSCOC	NWCCU
Requires focus on specific outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Requires demographic disaggregation			✓	✓			
Includes success after graduation	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Requires goal setting	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Requires using quantitative outcomes data to make improvements	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Benchmarks against peers			✓		✓		
Requires using student outcomes to evaluate admissions process					✓		

Notes: The New England Association of Schools and Colleges makes demographic disaggregation optional in its Standard 8.1. MSCHE benchmarks against an institution's peers at the mid-point review, a process that was not evaluated for this report. For an interactive comparison of student outcome standards across accrediting agencies, see the website version of Antoinette Flores, "How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=449937>.

Source: See Appendix and Table 1 in Antoinette Flores, "How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes" (Washington, Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2018/04/25/449937/college-accreditors-miss-mark-student-outcomes/>.

TABLE 2
Many regional accreditors collect annual student outcome data

Student outcome indicators collected in annual report forms, by regional accrediting agency

Student outcome indicators	HLC	SACSCOC	MSCHE	NEASC	WSCUC	NWCCU	ACCJC
Enrollment rate	✓	✓	✓*	✓	✓*	✓	✓
Number of degrees awarded	✓			✓			✓
Completion rate	✓	✓	✓*	✓	✓*	✓	✓
Cohort default rate	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Disclosure of student achievement	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Retention rate			✓			✓	
Licensure pass rate							✓
Transfer rate			✓				✓
Loan repayment rate			✓	✓			
Job placement rate for career and technical education programs							✓

Notes: * Indicates student outcome indicators that were disaggregated by demographic groups. For the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the indicators used in this table are newly proposed and will be fully implemented in 2018. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges and University Commission loan repayment is newly added in 2018.

Source: See Appendix and Table 1 in Antoinette Flores, "How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes" (Washington, Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2018/04/25/449937/college-accreditors-miss-mark-student-outcomes/>.

National agencies collect data down to the program level and at least ostensibly require colleges to meet minimum benchmarks to remain accredited. Performance benchmarks set a clear line of what outcomes are acceptable, but the actions an agency takes when a college underperforms can undermine accountability. For example, when a college underperforms, some agencies take a hard line, while others allow institutions flexibility in explaining their performance. As a result, some institutions may be given considerable leeway and can remain accredited—even if they don’t meet minimum performance benchmarks.

TABLE 3
Some colleges must meet certain program performance benchmarks

Performance benchmarks, by national accrediting agency

Accrediting agency	Graduation rate	Job placement rate	Licensure pass rate
ACCSC	40–84%	70%	70%
ACCET	67%	70%	National and state average
COE	60%	70%	70%
NACCAS	50%	60%	70%

Sources: Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, “ACCSC Standards of Accreditation,” p. 128, available at <http://www.accsc.org/UploadedDocuments/1971/ACCSC%20Standards%20of%20Accreditation%20and%20Bylaws%20-%20070117%20final.pdf> (last accessed March 2018); Council on Occupational Education, “Policies and Rules of the Commission, 2017 Edition,” p. 25, available at <http://council.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-PR-Manual-AMENDED-4-25-2017-FINAL.pdf> (last accessed March 2018); Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training, “Completion and Job Placement Policy,” p. 2, available at <http://s3.amazonaws.com/docs.accet.org/downloads/docs/doc28.pdf> (last accessed March 2018); National Accrediting Commission of Career Arts and Sciences, “2017 Data Annual Report Instructions,” available at https://naccasgo.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/NACCASWeb/EV-vVsApwn9BoqT_DY6XbHMBHSMYRw37dtkCt8gUhaTeA (last accessed March 2018).

For the accreditor agencies’ complete titles, see Table 1 in Antoinette Flores, “How College Accreditors Miss the Mark on Student Outcomes” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=449937>.

Recommendations for accrediting agencies

- Require collection and analysis of common student outcome data across accreditors.**
 Variation in what data are collected makes evaluating overall performance and drawing comparisons across institutions difficult. Accreditors should agree upon what student outcome data to collect as a standard measure of quality across all agencies. These data may vary by institution type or mission but should include multiple indicators that capture how students fare while they are enrolled and after they’ve left.
- Include equity in data collection.** Measuring institutions’ overall performance is not enough to ensure it meets quality standards. Accreditors should require institutions to disaggregate performance data by demographic groups—including at least race, income, and gender—and ideally attendance status and whether students require developmental education.

- **Better connect standards and annual data collection through clear performance expectations.** Agencies should revise their standards to articulate clear performance expectations. This does not necessarily mean accreditors should have bright-line standards that automatically lead to a loss of federal financial aid when a school falls short. Rather accreditors should create a standard that automatically triggers an in-depth review or a shortened accreditation cycle if institutions fail to meet it. Benchmarks should be established for measures beyond completion rates such as loan default and repayment. Accreditors should ensure that colleges will be judged on the annually collected data.
- **Establish processes for data collection and accountability for low-performing colleges.** Accreditors must agree on what happens to colleges that fall below established benchmarks and define a consistent timeline for colleges to show improvement.

Recommendations for Congress

- **Require accreditors to have benchmark standards on defined student outcomes.** Legislation should define the student outcomes on which accreditors should have standards, such as graduation rates and student loan repayment and default rates. These standards should clearly define the adequate level of performance as well as the agency's process when performance is not up to par.
- **Create loan repayment rate and default minimums.** Policymakers should further bolster accreditors' efforts by creating performance benchmarks on outcomes specifically related to federal aid, such as student loan repayment rates. The existing cohort default rate measure should be strengthened; using repayment rates may help solve some of the problems with the measure.
- **Create a federal student-level data system (SLDS).** Creating a federal SLDS would make it much easier for accreditors to collect and use disaggregated student outcome data. A federal SLDS would capture more accurate and complete student outcome data and decrease both the burden on colleges reporting data and the need for low-resourced accreditors to actively collect data.

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