



# Watching the Watchdogs

A Look at What Happens When Accreditors Sanction Colleges

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# Introduction and summary

Mountain State University and Infotech Career College both faced serious sanctions in June 2011. Infotech, a small for-profit institution based in Southern California, was placed on probation by its accreditor, an agency that evaluates institutions' quality and therefore their eligibility to receive federal financial aid.<sup>1</sup> Mountain State University, a private nonprofit institution in West Virginia, faced a similar challenge.<sup>2</sup> It had to prove to its accrediting agency that it still deserved access to federal financial aid programs. Access to federal aid is critical to a school's survival both as a source of revenue and for students' ability to pay the cost of attendance.

While both colleges potentially faced the same ramifications from the sanctions—losing access to federal aid—their punishments were substantially different. Infotech was placed on “probation,” while Mountain State was issued “show cause.” What happened after the sanctions also varied significantly. Infotech's probation ended after three months, leaving it in the clear.<sup>3</sup> Mountain State lost access to the federal financial aid programs a year later and closed shortly thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the disparate treatment might be due to problems specific to each school. The general inconsistencies, however, speak to a larger problem in the accreditation process. This process tasks private, nonprofit agencies with reviewing institutions of higher education and determining if they are qualified to participate in federal financial aid programs.

Mountain State and Infotech had different accreditation agencies. As a result, the schools faced different names for severe sanctions, as well as different punishments, even though both were punished for serious noncompliance with performance standards. The schools also faced scrutiny for different lengths of time.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that one school got an inherently unfair review. It simply means that the way they were judged and sanctioned varied significantly, raising concerns about the accreditation system's consistency, transparency, and effectiveness.

As a new analysis from the Center for American Progress shows, these concerns are an issue across the entire postsecondary accreditation system. To investigate accreditor consistency and transparency, CAP conducted a detailed review from 2010 through 2015 of key actions taken by 10 of the 12 major institutional accrediting agencies. The analysis included accreditors that only approve schools in a limited geographic region, as well as those who operate across the country.

In particular, we analyzed sanctions imposed by accreditors when they found problems at a school: We tracked the number of times each accreditor placed an institution in a serious sanction status, how long each school remained in that status, and what happened to the institution over time.

Our findings show a highly uneven system of sanctions. The actions taken by these 10 accreditors during our review, how frequently they applied negative statuses, and how long a college stayed in a given status varied significantly by accreditor. Of the 10 in our study, the national accreditors were more likely to place schools on negative sanction and withdraw accreditation than the regional accreditors. But regional accreditors were more likely to keep schools on a negative status for a much longer period of time.

This unevenness is exacerbated by basic inconsistencies, including the nomenclature for sanctions. Each accreditor has its own list of sanctions, and the terms and definitions vary. For example, when accreditors have a serious concern about a school's noncompliance with agency standards, some place a school on show cause while others put them on probation, and some do both.

Even how accreditors view the use of sanctions varies. Some treat a negative action as a short-term opportunity for the institution to prove it is in compliance and should remain accredited. Others see it as the beginning of a longer-term process meant to improve performance.

These systemic inconsistencies allow accreditors to treat schools differently, leaving students either protected or exposed. But variations in each accreditor's approach make it difficult to tell the difference. Such unpredictability also weakens the effectiveness of oversight, as well as public confidence in the system. Finally, these inconsistencies prevent clear guidance for colleges about expectations and what each must do to improve.

CAP recently submitted a public comment to the department on our findings and recommendations.<sup>6</sup> To improve the effectiveness of the accreditation process, we recommend that the U.S. Department of Education and accrediting agencies work together to introduce greater consistency and transparency into the system. Accreditors must use standard language and apply consistent enforcement practices. The department and accreditors must find a way to increase transparency to ensure public confidence that actions against poor-performing institutions are taken when warranted. Together, these changes would increase overall confidence and trust in the accreditation system and its ability to ensure a high-quality education for students.

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