
Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions

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Regional accreditors announce expanded review of institutions with low graduation rates

WASHINGTON, D.C.—September 21, 2016—The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), an umbrella group comprised of the seven regional higher education accreditors, announced today that it will launch a nationwide effort to increase its focus on graduation rates as part of accreditors' on-going review of colleges and universities. The regional accreditors, which oversee the quality of more than 2,800 institutions nationwide, also will pay increased attention to loan default and loan repayment rates that have been the focus of growing interest by the U.S. Department of Education.

In this common effort, C-RAC members will pay special attention to four-year institutions that have graduation rates that are, at a minimum, at or below 25 percent, and two-year institutions that have rates that are, at a minimum, at or below 15 percent (reflecting half the national average for first-time, full-time students at each type of institution).

Recognizing that one or two data points are insufficient to make a qualified judgment as to the educational quality of an institution, accreditors will also review additional information. This will include the number and percentage of students counted and transfer rates, in order to provide valuable and thorough context to the Federal data used for graduation rates, which sometimes reflect a very small fraction of students at an institution, the accreditors say.

Accreditors will follow up with institutions that they identify to request information about the conditions that may have led to low graduation rates and how the institution is working to improve. Information on graduation rates will be supplemented with a review of other data, such as the transfer rate as well as others the institution may provide. The review of the information and any ensuing action will be conducted using the normal process of each Commission.

Accreditors recognize that a high proportion of the colleges to be reviewed are community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and other minority-serving institutions, and that these open-access institutions serve higher proportions of economically disadvantaged and academically underprepared students than do most other institutions.

"The intent here is to ensure that each institution—including those serving higher education's most vulnerable students—is doing its best to promote student success," said Barbara Brittingham, chair of C-RAC and President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

"Various commissions have used graduation and loan metrics in their processes for years in a variety of ways, such as explicitly requesting institutions to report this data for review at key moments in the accreditation cycle," said Brittingham. "While different methodologies allow for experimentation and new perspectives, the coordinated effort announced today will provide a common platform to supplement and expand those efforts."

Need for Better Data

Accreditors are concerned that there are significant discrepancies in definitions of key outcomes reported by the U.S. Department of Education. For example, in certain cases, the graduation data reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDs) Data Center on its main webpage, and IPEDS data used by the College Navigator and separately for the College Scorecard can report three different rates for the same institution, which may differ by as much as 25 percent, resulting in confusion for institutions and students alike.

“Getting data from the Department that accurately measure institutional performance has been an ongoing challenge. This is why we need to look for additional data sources and supplementary metrics, as well as institutional mission and context, in this review,” said Brittingham, who noted that regional accreditors have also begun efforts to use data provided by institutions that are collected by the National Student Clearinghouse.

About C-RAC

C-RAC is a collective of seven regional organizations responsible for the accreditation of the nation’s colleges and universities. They are: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, WASC; Higher Learning Commission; Middle States Commission on Higher Education; New England Association of Schools and Colleges—Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges; and WASC Senior College and University Commission.