The Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act of 2026

Modernizing the higher education quality assurance system to improve student outcomes, reduce student debt, and hold predatory colleges accountable

A basic building block of our economy is a highly educated workforce, and higher education is a critical pathway of opportunity for students seeking to gain a foothold into the American middle class. For over 50 years, the goal of the federal government's investment in higher education has been to expand access for all students. However, as student debt balloons to over $1.8 trillion, it is becoming clear that too many students are left with crushing debt and poor prospects in the job market.

College accreditation is the cornerstone of the nation's higher education quality assurance system—safeguarding the integrity of American higher education, guaranteeing quality for students and families, and serving as a critical gatekeeper to tens of billions of dollars a year in student aid investments from the federal government. But this system is broken. Lack of accountability and poor oversight have allowed poor performing and even fraudulent colleges to flourish at the expense of students and taxpayers, leading to the Wall Street Journal calling college accreditors "watchdogs [that] rarely bite." At the same time, the Trump administration has signaled that it seeks to weaponize the accreditation process to favor colleges that align with conservative ideology and undermine colleges that do not.

Congress must ensure that students are accessing a high-quality education that will improve their lives, not leave them jobless and bankrupt—especially at a time when unemployment for recent graduates is skyrocketing. The scale of this problem is enormous—between 2021 and 2024, the Department of Education made determinations that 1.7 million borrowers were defrauded by accredited schools. The failure of our quality assurance system hurts students and costs the government billions of dollars. It is time to bring our nation's higher education accreditation system into the 21st century to improve the quality of higher education, protect students, and hold low-quality or predatory colleges accountable.

The *Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act* (AREAA) recognizes the importance of accreditation in continuous, peer-directed institutional improvement—but modernizes college accreditation by refocusing accreditation on the most important question: how well are colleges serving their students? Currently, accreditors spend too much time looking at the wrong things; this legislation calls on accreditors to evaluate quality in the context of actual student outcomes, rather than just inputs.

The *Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act* would:

- **Require** the Department of Education to establish measures of student outcomes (e.g. measures of academic progression, loan repayment outcomes, post-college earnings, and debt relative to earnings) that accreditors must use when evaluating colleges and assess accreditors to determine whether they are setting appropriately high standards.
- **Strengthen** consumer protections by forcing accreditors to respond quickly to federal and state investigations and lawsuits regarding fraud or fiscal misconduct and by requiring accreditors to take action to protect students in the face of other warning signs of institutional instability.
- **Increase** transparency around accreditation decisions for students, families, and regulators.
- **Clean up** conflicts of interest in college accreditation between accreditors and the colleges they accredit.
- **Increase** accountability by making it easier for the Department of Education to terminate or fine accreditors that fail to do their job.
- **Prevent** accreditation oversight from being transferred outside of the Department of Education.