

FORUM

How Accreditation Helped the American Public Learn to Trust Higher Education

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The American higher education system's basic operation depends on trust. The trust of families and students that their investment in a degree will be worth the time and money. The trust of the wider public that their hard-earned tax dollars spent on research and financial aid will benefit everyone, including the majority of Americans who never go to college but support it all the same. The trust of elected officials, who have traditionally allotted higher education broad discretion to determine what is taught, to whom, and to what end, that the system will give every student, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances or skin color or political identity, a fair shot to earn a college degree. And the trust of academic administrators, faculty, and staff that the campuses they run will reflect the very highest ideals of the scholastic spirit. There is no more important animating value in higher education than trust. Trust makes the entire system go, which is why the Trump administration's proposal to reform the federal accreditation system is so worrisome.

The nation's accrediting system—essentially an elaborate form of peer-reviewed quality control and institutional self-regulation—took shape in fits and starts in the late nineteenth century. As the excellent work of Scott Gelber and Marc VanOverbeke has shown, accreditation was initially driven by college and university leaders who sought benchmarks to streamline their operations.¹ VanOverbeke's examination of the University of Michigan, which distinguished itself as a pacesetter in the 1870s, provides a leading example. His study outlines the institution's efforts to coordinate relationships between Ann Arbor and the state's secondary education system in order to identify

¹ Marc A. VanOverbeke, "Linking Secondary and Higher Education through the University of Michigan's Accreditation Program, 1870–1890," in *Perspectives on the History of Higher Education*, ed. Roger Geiger (London: Routledge, 2008), 31–61; Marc A. VanOverbeke, *The Standardization of American Schooling: Linking Secondary and Higher Education, 1870–1910* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Scott M. Gelber, *Grading the College: A History of Evaluating Teaching and Learning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 110–30. On the preparatory feeder school network, see Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admissions and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 13–76.

college-grade matriculants. Faculty pioneered the system by venturing out to inspect schools and the students they taught, in what amounted to the public university version of the Ivy League's cultivation of preparatory feeder schools in New England. This local approach gradually spread, and by the dawn of the twentieth century a nascent network of regional accrediting agencies had formed to help build trust between and among high schools, college admission offices, and the wider public.

Vigilant self-regulation and scrutiny, as annoying and time consuming as it often turned out to be (and, honestly, still is), was grudgingly accepted as the least invasive way for colleges and universities to ensure quality regardless of the institution's geographic location. That the United States never built a national university ranks among the great what-ifs in the history of higher education. The country's anti-statist political culture drove the haphazard growth of colleges and universities to ensure that nothing of the sort happened. But we did get a national system of colleges and universities that bore more than a family resemblance thanks to professionalization and self-policing that installed a standard set of operating procedures. Though usually overlooked as a bureaucratic bother, the accreditation system, composed of six regional organizations and some eighty-eight different bodies, has played a key role in shaping the basic contours of the public, private, and for-profit higher education system we have today.

A greater federal role in accreditation revealed itself gradually over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, starting with reporting requirements included in federal land-grant legislation. But the major shift in federal oversight occurred during World War II, when public investments for war research and student aid exploded on the scene, turning Washington, DC, into a chief patron of higher education. The federal-academic research matrix, which ushered in a new era of grants management and contract compliance, combined with the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill, served as the main catalysts. While research grants accumulated at a handful of elite universities until the 1960s, the advent of portable financial aid for veterans quickly penetrated every part of the higher education system, changing it forever.² The GI Bill's education provision, Title II, touched the lives of half of the country's 16 million returning soldiers, 2.2 million of whom attended a college or university, with the rest using their benefit to learn a trade or new skill at a junior college or for-profit vocational school, where a majority of veterans enrolled.

Indeed, in the near term no segment of the nation's mix of higher education institutions benefited more than the for-profit sector. It grew threefold in the five years following the bill's enactment—before attracting the attention of journalists and members of Congress. Scandalous news stories and Congress's investigative powers uncovered unscrupulous practices of the fly-by-night for-profit sector that was systematically preying on veterans, in some cases offering bogus training programs, with little to no labor market value, in exchange for the full \$500-per-year benefit. Congress, especially alarmed by reports of graft and inefficiency in agricultural training and on-the-job training, and by programs offering training below the college level, requested

²In 1965, President Johnson signed an executive order to distribute government research largess to a wider mix of universities; see "Statement by the President to the Cabinet and Memorandum on Strengthening Academic Capability for Science", *American Presidency Project*, September 14, 1965, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-the-cabinet-and-memorandum-strengthening-academic-capability-for.

the Veterans Administration to conduct a study of the GI Bill's operation. The final report, issued in 1950, as journalist David Whitman has recently reminded us, offered a damning indictment of the for-profit system: "Of the 1,237 schools identified by the VA under the GI Bill as being involved with some irregularity or questionable practices, 963 schools were for-profit institutions. Of the 329 schools that had lost their accreditation, 299 of the schools, more than 90 percent, were for-profit schools."³ Although this only amounted to a small percentage of GI Bill funding, and the vast majority of programs operated well and without incident, immediate action followed to prevent the continued bilking of taxpayer coffers. Tuition payments were no longer sent directly to schools; the VA refused to engage proprietary schools where 85 percent of students were veterans, a key predictor of below-board practices; and, starting in 1952, the commissioner of education began relying on regional accrediting bodies to ensure institutional integrity and to build the public's trust.

This brings us to the current moment and the Trump administration's plan to overhaul the federal role in accreditation. Like everything else coming out of Washington, DC, these days, the details of the Department of Education's reform agenda are spare. Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Greg Pillar and Laurie Shanderson recently distilled the administration's goals down to three: "work-force outcomes, eliminating the use of demographic data in reviews, and accelerating the approval process for new accrediting agencies."⁴ Translated, this means expunging every last bit of DEI-related information-gathering from the review process to make it "colorblind"; upending the accrediting monopoly by making it easier for new agencies to enter the game; and collecting and publicizing the ROI of colleges and universities and related student success outcomes, which accrediting bodies and the Department of Education's College Scorecard already do.

Because we know the history of accreditation, it's not difficult to imagine the perverse outcomes that will follow. To be clear: whether the plan to overhaul the accreditation system is formally implemented through hearings and rulemaking or simply adopted by agencies as is to avoid political reprisals, the results will benefit neither higher education nor the people's trust in it. Yes, it's true that nonprofit higher education has been its own worst enemy. The sector has worked hard to lose the public's trust by overpromising and underdelivering. It has promised upward mobility and boundless opportunities that don't always materialize—especially if you're poor, a minority, or a first-generation student seeking a degree. Spiraling loan debt and pitiful four-year graduation rates that hover below 50 percent aren't any way to instill belief in what the sector has to offer. But loosening up the federal accrediting system originally installed

³David Whitman, "Truman, Eisenhower, and the First GI Bill Scandal," The Century Foundation, Jan. 24, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/truman-eisenhower-first-gi-bill-scandal/>. The study was headed by the VA. For more on the administrative challenges and scandals of the GI Bill and subsequent reforms, see also Keith W. Olson, *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 57–78; Kathleen J. Frydl, *The GI Bill* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 186–221, and A. J. Angulo, *Diploma Mills: How For-Profit Colleges Stiffed Students, Taxpayers, and the American Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 58–85.

⁴Greg D. Pillar and Laurie Shanderson, "The Weaponization of Accreditation: Trump's Reforms Seek to Impose Political Conformity on Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-weaponization-of-accreditation>.

to ensure a modicum of quality control won't help either. It will create a race to the bottom, worse outcomes, and even lower public trust that, according to recent national polls, has been sliding precipitously downward for the last decade.⁵

Three US presidents have played a leading role in opening an institution of higher education. Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia in 1819 after leaving office.⁶ Millard Fillmore founded the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1846, even serving as the school's first chancellor, before taking office. Both are public institutions and are still open today. Then there's our current president. He opened the for-profit Trump University in 2005 before shuttering it five years later amid scandal. The administration's plan to "fix" the accrediting system seems poised to end up the same—returning the system to a time when there wasn't much of a system at all, when proprietary schools for this or that ran wild, and when making a decision to seek an advanced credential amounted to little more than an act of blind faith.

⁵Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided," Gallup, July 8, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx>.

⁶Jefferson also had hand in opening West Point, in 1802, while in office.