



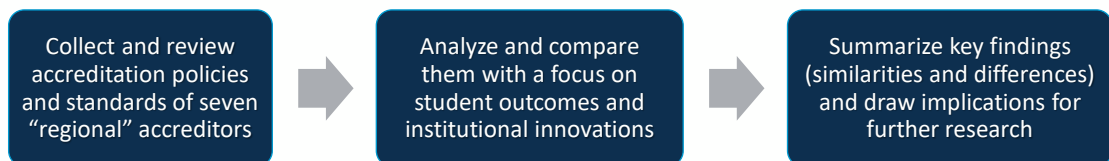
# Landscape Analysis of Regional Accreditors

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## Research Questions

1. How do different regional accreditors incorporate various *student outcome measures* in their accreditation standards?
2. How do different regional accreditors situate their accreditation standards to encourage *institutional innovations and improvements*?



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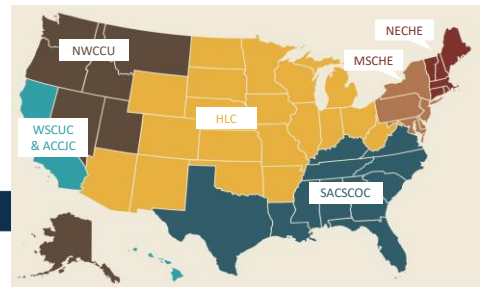
# Background

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## Seven Regional Accreditors: Historical Territories

Table 1. Overview of the Seven Regional Accreditors (2020-21)

Organization	Year Founded	Institutions Accredited	Students Enrolled in Institutions Accredited	Historic Accrediting Territory in the U.S.
<b>ACCJC</b> Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges	1962	136	1,405,550	Western (CA, HI)
<b>HLC</b> Higher Learning Commission	1895	963	4,977,819	Central and Midwestern (AZ, AK, CO, IL, ID, IA, KS, MI, MO, NE, NM, ND, OH, OK, SD, WV, WI, WY)
<b>MSCHE</b> Middle States Commission on Higher Education	1919	526	4,125,999	Middle states (DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, PA, PR, VI)
<b>NECHE</b> New England Commission of Higher Education	1885	215	863,276	New England (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT)
<b>NWCCU</b> Northwest Commission of Colleges and Universities	1917	154	3,324,978	Northwest (AK, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA)
<b>SACSCOC</b> Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges	1895	780	6,593,228	Southern (AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MI, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA)
<b>WSCUC</b> WASC Senior College and University Commission	1924	214	1,399,418	Western (CA, HI)



Source: <https://almanac.chea.org/regional-accrediting-organizations>


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## Recent Issues around Accreditation

- Accreditors as “Gatekeepers”
- Accreditors’ role in making institutions accountable for **student outcomes**
- Responsiveness to changing landscape

**The Watchdogs of College Education Rarely Bite**  
 Accreditors keep hundreds of schools with low graduation rates or high loan default rates alive


By Andrew Ficker and Douglas DeWitt  
 June 7, 2015 10:05pm ET



More colleges can't keep their doors open without an accreditor's seal of approval, which is needed to get students access to federal loans and grants. But accreditors hardly ever kick out the more performing colleges and lack uniform standards for assessing graduation rates and loan defaults.

*The Wall Street Journal* (2015)  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-watchdogs-of-college-education-rarely-bite-1434524602>

**A One-Year Review of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions' Graduation Rate Information Project**



February 2018

Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions

C-RAC Report (2018)  
[https://download.hicommission.org/C-RAC\\_Grad\\_Rate\\_Study\\_2018-02.pdf](https://download.hicommission.org/C-RAC_Grad_Rate_Study_2018-02.pdf)

**How Common Definitions for Student Achievement Can Strengthen College Accreditation**



The accreditation process is the gateway between colleges and federal financial aid — a link that is under fire as agencies approved by the Department of Education (Department) grapple to measure, define, grade and track progress. As part of their quality assurance role, accreditors are charged with looking for signs of that connection to ensure standards

Third Way (2023)  
<https://www.thirdway.org/memo/how-common-definitions-for-student-achievement-can-strengthen-college-accreditation>

U.S. Department of Education

Student Loans Grants Laws Data

**Biden-Harris Administration Takes Next Steps on Rulemaking to Strengthen Institutional Quality and Program Integrity**

Issue papers outline how the Administration is working towards ensuring high-quality educational opportunities for students

JANUARY 4, 2024

Contact: Press Office (202) 401-1170, [eed@ed.gov](mailto:eed@ed.gov)

The Biden-Harris Administration today moved forward in its efforts to help ensure students are well served by the institutions of higher education they attend and that Federal Student Aid programs work in their best interest. Today, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) released six issue papers across a range of categories to further these goals, which will be discussed during the first meeting of the Institutional Quality and Program Integrity Committee, meeting January 8-9.

The issue papers include proposals to ensure that accrediting agencies and state authorizing agencies — key pillars of program integrity, along with the federal government — are appropriately holding institutions accountable for providing high-quality educational opportunities. They also include proposals to create more conscience-friendly policies to ensure students have access to their aid to help cover college costs and receive fair treatment across all programs. Finally, the proposals include expanding eligibility for Title IV assistance to help serve disadvantaged student populations.

U.S. Department of Education (2024)  
<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-takes-next-steps-rulemaking-strengthen-institutional-quality-and-program-integrity>

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## Accreditation in Texas

1. Institutions must be accredited to offer degrees and courses leading to degrees to Texas residents.
2. **All public degree-granting institutions of higher education in Texas are currently accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).**
3. Private degree-granting institutions should be accredited by one of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board-recognized accrediting agencies.
4. Out-of-state institutions offering distance education to Texas residents must have accreditation from one of the accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

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# Accreditation Standards for Student Outcomes

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## Key Findings (9)

**1. All seven agencies have one or more sections that explicitly mention student outcomes, although each agency has its unique structure.**

- Institutions that participate in Title IV of the Higher Education Act must present clear expectations for the institutions or programs in student achievement outcomes in relation to the institution’s mission, according to the federal regulations for accreditors.

**2. Student outcome-related standards address two types of outcomes:**

Learning Outcomes	Other Student Outcome Measures
Qualitative descriptions of specified skills and competencies	Quantitative indicators of student success (e.g., completion rates, job placement rates)

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## Key Findings (9)

3. All seven agencies require institutions to define and assess student learning outcomes, but specific areas where they explicitly require defining the student learning outcomes vary by agency.

HLC / NECHE	ACCJC / NWCCU / SACSCOC	MSCHE / WSCUC
Both curricular & co-curricular programs	General education & academic programs	No specific programs mentioned

4. Several agencies mention additional expectations about the development and assessment of student learning outcomes. For example:

- ACCJC - Reflect relevant discipline/industry standards by having feedback from industry partners
- NECHE - Systematic involvement of faculty and staff; Use various measures
- MSCHE - Reflect post-completion lives (e.g., careers, civic engagement, further education); Disaggregated by student population; Periodical review with third-party providers

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## Key Findings (9)

5. All seven agencies require institutions to define and assess other outcome measures such as retention and completion rates.

Measures	Progression	Retention/Persistence	Transfer	Course completion	Completion/Graduation	License exam passage	Job placement	Graduates' success	Loan default
NECHE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	*
ACCJC		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
MSCHE		Y	Y		Y	*	Y		
HLC		Y			Y	*	*	*	
NWCCU		Y			Y			Y	*
WSCUC		Y			Y		**	Y	**
SACSCOC		**		**	Y		**		

\*Requirements for public disclosure. \*\* Suggested (not required).

6. Some agencies have additional expectations about how to measure the outcome measures (e.g., MSCHE), while others give more flexibility to institutions in defining the measures and using their methodologies to assess them (e.g., WSCUC).

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## Key Findings (9)

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7. **Most agencies, except for SACSCOC, require institutions to include post-graduation outcomes.**
8. **Some agencies have additional requirements for institutional assessments of student outcomes such as the use of disaggregated data (e.g., ACCJC, NWCCU, SACSCOC, MSCHE, and WSCUC) and/or multiple outcome measures (e.g., NECHE and SACSCOC).**
9. **All seven agencies expect institutions to conduct ongoing student outcome assessments and develop a plan to improve student outcomes.**

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# Accreditation Standards for Institutional Innovations

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## Key Findings (5)

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**1. All seven regional accreditors include some evaluation of institutional innovation and/or improvement in their standards.**

- While there are no areas listed in federal regulations that explicitly require accreditors to include institutional innovations or improvement in their standards for accreditation.

**2. Many agencies describe how they are seeking ways to be more responsive to the rapidly changing higher education landscape.**

- through their stated mission, vision, strategic goals (e.g., SACSCOC), guiding principles (e.g., MSCHE), and/or accreditation standards.

**3. Most agencies frame improvement as a continuous process, reflecting adaptation to the changing landscape of higher education, as well as evolving student needs and advancement of the institution.**

- NECHE, MSCHE, and WSCUC highlight the use of disaggregated data in continuous improvement measurement and evidence-based decision-making.

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## Key Findings (5)

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**4. Some agencies have standards that reflect their efforts to help their member institutions better respond to the trends and challenges in higher education while harnessing the creativity of faculty, staff, and administrators.**

- ACCJC and NWCCU - New rules evaluations for alternative credential programs
- NECHE - Standards related to distance education
- Since most accreditors conduct a comprehensive review of standards every five to 10 years, such processes might delay additions of new standards, which could inhibit institutional innovation. Agencies could consider shorter periods for a comprehensive review to advance the responsiveness to the changing needs of higher education.

**5. Several agencies include standards that document the role of resources to support the advancement of institutional mission, vision, strategic goals, and innovation and a culture of continuous improvement and future planning.**

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# Implications

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## Implications

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1. **Some agencies may be able to provide more effective and efficient accreditation processes depending on the institution's context.**
2. **The process of deciding which accreditation agency will be most appropriate for each institution should consider many other factors as well (e.g., the costs and benefits of changing the accreditation agency).**
3. **Need to explore institutional perspectives on the costs and benefits of having flexibility in changing to a different accreditation agency, considering multiple scenarios:**
  - 1) Institutions with an immediate need to change their accreditors
  - 2) Institutions that want to consider changing their accreditors in the longer term
  - 3) Institutions that want to change their accreditor but do not have capacities or resources
  - 4) Institutions with no need to change their accreditors

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