

Remarks of the Undersecretary of Education, Nicholas Kent, at the meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI)

December 16, 2025

Washington, D.C.

From the George Washington University. He and his partner reside in Virginia. Please join me in welcoming the Undersecretary of Education, Nicholas Kent.

Morning everybody. Little excitement to start the morning, yes?

Thank you, Jeff, for that introduction and to the committee members. Thank you for being here today and for your service to the department and to our nation's post-secondary students.

Congratulations, Dr. Green on your election as chair. To the new and returning members of this committee to recognize an emerging accreditors joining us both in person and virtually until all other interested parties welcome to the meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity.

This December meeting, delayed by the government shutdown marks the start of a new era in higher education oversight and accountability. Like many of you who have been waiting, I also have been looking forward to delivering these remarks and sharing the Trump administration's perspective on one critical of the higher education regulatory triad: accrediting agencies. This is the full convening of the committee since Secretary McMahon and I were confirmed by the United States Senate.

We look forward to working alongside each of you during this time of transformative change, ensuring that our higher education system better serve today's students and leaves the next generation even better prepared. This committee has a statutory mandate that is narrow in scope but enormous in consequence.

Members advise the secretary on whether private nonprofit governmental entities we call accrediting agencies merit or continue to merit, recognition as reliable authorities as to the quality of education or training offered by the institution and programs that they oversee. That recognition is not ceremonial. It is an essential filtering mechanism that unlocks consumer confidence, more than 130 billion dollars a year in federal student aid, and for some professions, the very right to practice.

Beyond the financial implications, your recommendations influence how institutions set their priorities and those priorities shape the culture, value, and expectations experienced by millions of students during some of the most formative years of their lives. For decades, the federal government has wielded the gatekeeping power of accreditation with the wrong objectives.

Instead of focusing on student outcomes and accountability to taxpayers, accreditation has functioned as a shield for incumbent institutions or worse as a tool for political and ideological

weapon enforcement. We will end the practice of using accreditation as a political weapon. As we correct past abuses, we might be accused of weaponization, but those accusations will be false. They will not stop us from returning accreditation to its rightful purpose: assuring student success through high quality, high value programs. The quality assurance mechanism of accreditation has failed on both data transparency and institutional accessibility, turning it into a counterproductive bureaucratic exercise. It has become a box checking regime that burdens institutions and enriches private actors, frequently without improving student outcomes. Meanwhile, with a wink and a nod, some related trade associations contribute to harmful practices, including unnecessary inflation.

You know, universities spend millions of dollars complying with trivial or even counterproductive demands imposed by accreditors, while glaring deficiencies that undermine student success go unaddressed.

What is the most fundamental metric for any accrediting agency that claims to be ensuring institutional quality? The answer is straightforward. Student outcomes, graduation rates, skill development, and content mastery, honest grading and academic rigor, job placement, earnings, debt. These are the indicators that determine whether an institution is delivering real value.

If these metrics are so easy to identify, they should be central to accreditation standards. Yet, in far too many instances, they are not. Instead, accreditors have drifted towards prioritizing inputs over outcomes. As long as institutions follow prescribed processes, they are treated as if they occupy a safe harbor, regardless of results. That presumption is indefensible. And it betrays the students accreditation is supposed to protect.

Look at the results. In many cases, institutions have low graduation rates, rising tuition, programs misaligned with workforce needs, hostile campus environments and inflated degrees that promise far more than they deliver. Those are not isolated failures. They are systemic. And they raise a simple, unavoidable question. What exactly are our accreditors doing?

And why are Americans expected to trust them as the reliable authority on educational quality? For years, the answer has been clear. Accreditors have failed to act. Instead of addressing poor outcomes, they have intruded on governance responsibilities of duly appointed members, mandated 1,000 page compliance exercises and impose ideological checklists on member institutions, while neglecting whether students are actually graduating, gaining marketable skills and securing good-paying jobs.

That failure is precisely why Congress recently stepped in to impose clear accountability standards, including outcomes based metric, like earnings. When the accreditors failed to enforce standards that actually matter, policymakers have no other choice but to act. This failure has real consequences. It manifests in wasteful spending on administration and amenities without meaningful cost benefit analysis, driving up tuition higher and higher in

saddling students and families with crushing debt. We're still in the decades long shift from objective outcomes based standards to subjective.

Input heavy, increasingly ideological criteria have fueled discriminatory practices. Mandatory DEI requirements, racial preferences and hiring, compulsory sensitivity training and political litmus tests, undermine merit. They chill free speech, and they erode the academic environment colleges should foster. In some cases, the accreditation system finds itself far out of step even with established law and course precedent.

Even after the 2023 Students for Fair Admissions versus Harvard decision, some post-secondary institutions continue to maintain racial preferences and admissions, arguing that the preferences were required by their recognized accreditor. And after the events on October 7, the accreditors proffered an anemic response to the hostile environment, the anti-Semitic protests created for Jewish students.

For too long, accreditors have shirked their responsibility to ensure that institutions they oversee are treating every student the same, regardless of their racial or ethnic background. Accreditors are also widely reviled by innovators in the field of education who want to make room for alternative post-secondary models.

They're correct. The system as it currently exists is protectionist and anti-competitive.

I have met with many college and university leaders who often express frustration that accreditation is a barrier to innovation, slowing down new programs and limiting opportunities to better serve students. Accreditation is also slow to adapt to emerging fields and alternative credentialing models, leaving institutions struggling to respond to the evolving needs of students in the workforce. They're also wildly out of step with current regulations and guidance, continuing to use and perpetuate the use of the terms regional and national, even though the department's 2019 regulations ended the failed system of regional monopolies.

The dominant institutional and programmatic accreditors face little competition. Their approval processes are slow, cumbersome, and overwhelmingly deferential to incumbents. Renewal is often presumed even in the face of poor outcomes. Some have described accreditation as a cartel in the structure supports that. Accrediting agencies are governed by the very institutions that they oversee. Those institutions elect board members in shape policy. It is therefore unsurprising that accreditors are reluctant to revoke accreditation based on poor performance.

The system protects itself. And who pays the price? Students. As of today, outstanding federal student loan debt stands at 1.7 trillion dollars held by 42 million Americans. That wouldn't be a problem if graduates were genuinely empowered by their academic programs to repay their loans quickly. In far too many cases, however, the degrees on offer do not pay off. Median time to repayment for a bachelor's degree recipient now exceeds 20 years at institutions with the weakest outcomes. Cohort default rates based on the previous 3 years approach 50%.

Hundreds of programs and even institutions produce negative median earnings premiums a decade after enrollment. Yet few face any real risk of losing accreditation or federal aid eligibility. These are clear indicators that our quality gatekeepers are not doing their job. Clearly, there are holes in our quality screen, holes large enough to drive an entire generation of students through, even those who fair better than the high school education counterparts are often not actually the degrees that they earn.

The Burning Glass Institutes 2024 report on post-secondary graduates employment noted that 45% of college graduates are working a job that does not require their degree 10 years after graduation. If borrowing to pay for a degree is an investment in your career and future, what does it say about the value of the education you received at the degree a student has earned does not actually align with the career path. And how valuable is a degree that is not used? It is no surprise that the public trust has collapsed. Gallup now finds that only 36% of Americans have high confidence in higher education compared to 57% just 10 years ago.

Parents and students are losing trust in the quality stamp thanks to their own experience, either as graduates or employers along with the documented and impactful increases in tuition, unpaid debt, underscored graduates, and under employment. Accreditors can no longer ignore this crisis. Nor can this committee any longer accept the status quo. It is time for accreditors to change or risk being left behind by a higher education system that is demanding accountability outcomes and the real value for students and taxpayers. We envision nothing less than a revolution in the accreditation system, one that fundamentally rethinks how quality is assessed, how innovation is rewarded, and how students are protected.

The president was elected with a mandate to fix what is broken in higher education and accreditation reform sits at the very center of that mandate. The President's April 2025 executive order on reforming accreditation to strengthen higher education was explicit in his assessment of accreditors ideological capture, protectionism, and the focus on inputs over outcomes. The order affirmed that institutions ongoing failure to comply with students, via Harvard, is in large part an accreditation issue. It has directed the department to take the lead on reforms in higher education, finance, accountability, civil rights compliance, and competitiveness.

The Trump administration is actively engaged in accreditation reform. Earlier this year, the department lifted the moratorium on accepting applications for potential new recognized accreditors and has made it less burdensome for institutions to switch accreditors. In addition, the department recently published a request for information to solicit feedback on how we can re-envision the accreditation handbook, a tool that accreditors use to demonstrate compliance with the secretary's recognition criteria. Next year, we will be launching a negotiated rulemaking to revise the department's accreditation regulations, which will include removing, put in some requirements that are direct barriers to entry for new accrediting agencies.

All the while, the department is taking a hard look at accreditor practices such as whether creditors are following their standards for holding their members accountable when they break federal law. Alongside states and the federal government, this committee's work to recognize accredited agencies is the final leg of the stool in the in higher education reform.

Your statutory charge is to assess whether accrediting agencies meet the criteria for recognition under federal law in regulation. Those criteria are minimum conditions for existing accreditors to continue exercising their gatekeeping authority over 130 billion in taxpayer funds every year. But it's also about paving the way for new accreditors to enter the higher education ecosystem. New entrants will drive innovation, increase competition among accreditors, lower costs, and help disrupt a status quo that has too often failed students and families. The American people have shown they are no longer willing to write blank checks to a system that has failed them. The students who were herded into useless degrees know that this trend was driven by bad policy choices. The parents watching tuition rise exponentially between their college days and their children's will not accept the excuse that nothing can be done.

This administration is committed to restoring accreditation as a genuine quality guarantee, rather than a compliance exercise or a protection racket.

Today, we welcome 6 new NACIQI members whose appointment represents a renewed commitment to reforming the broken accreditation system.

I'd like to thank Robert Itel, Joshua Fergera, Dr. Jay Green, Dr. Stephen Taylor, Adam Kissell, and the student representative, Emily Reynolds, for contributing their time and their expertise to this effort.

My goal today has been to acknowledge past failures not to dwell on them, but to delay the clear path forward. This committee is the vanguard of higher education reform, empowered to safeguard students, enforce the law, and restore accountability.

You have the authority, the responsibility, and the full support of an administration laser focused on results and outcomes. The task before you is not to preserve the status quo, but to embrace the change that Americans expect and students deserve. Thank you for your service and I look forward to our continued work together.