

FEDERALIZING TRANSFER OF ACADEMIC CREDIT

Proposed mandate would hurt students and dilute standards

Tucked inside the latest bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act is a provision to federalize the way colleges and universities award academic credit to transferring students. On its face, the proposal seeks to eliminate the distinction between two competing methods of institutional accreditation. It appears to be a well-meaning plan to increase student mobility and save time and money for everyone.

In fact, the legislation would create costly new bureaucratic headaches for students and institutions, open the door to fraud and abuse, upend the traditional balance between federal regulation and academic autonomy, and dilute the high standards that have made American higher education the envy of the world.

Accreditation: Ensuring Value by Demanding Standards

Standards of quality in higher education are ensured by a process of peer review called accreditation. The vast majority of public and private non-profit colleges and universities – which serve more than 90 percent of all students – are accredited by six respected regional organizations that evaluate institutions' academic programs, faculty qualifications, educational resources, and other criteria that contribute to the excellence of American education.

A number of additional national accrediting bodies, also approved by the Secretary of Education, have for some time certified trade schools and other similar institutions using standards that are less academically rigorous, but well-suited for a more vocational mission.

In recent years, however, these *looser academic standards* have been embraced by the growing ranks of for-profit colleges that offer degrees in a much wider range of academic fields than their trade-school predecessors but *don't meet the traditional standards of quality* enforced by the regional accrediting organizations.

The root of the current debate is the desire of some of these for-profits to obscure the difference between their lax academic criteria for accreditation and the higher standards of established colleges and universities.

A Bad Fix for a Trumped up Problem

Only about six percent of American students attend for-profit colleges and only four percent of transfers are from a for-profit school to a non-profit. Yet despite these marginal numbers, the **well-funded lobbyists** of the for-profit academic industry have succeeded in creating great concern in Congress about the perceived problems faced by those few transfer students. They have relied on little more than anecdotes and over-heated rhetoric.

A 2005 report by **the GAO found no hard data to back up the for-profit lobby's complaints**. What is clear, however, is that the proposed solution – requiring all colleges and

universities to consider factors other than accreditation in evaluating transfer credit – will place a serious burden on both students and institutions.

Problems with the Proposed Solution

Trade and technical schools and other for-profit career training centers serve a valuable purpose, but they should not be confused with established collegiate institutions. To be sure, accreditation only enforces a minimum standard of quality and some exceptional for-profits far exceed the generally lower requirements of their accrediting bodies. In contrast, the vast majority of traditional colleges far exceed the more demanding requirements of their accreditation agencies.

But the *standards gap* can have real consequences for the quality of the education students receive. For instance, the regional collegiate accrediting bodies require large percentages of faculty to hold postgraduate degrees in their fields. The teachers at many for-profits, however, are part-timers without advanced degrees.

Fraud and corruption are also serious problems in the for-profit sector, which serves a small percentage of the nation's students but receives a large percentage of the government's financial aid dollars. Nearly three-quarters of all the U.S. Department of Education's institutional investigations in recent years have focused on for-profits. Concerns about lax standards and oversight at these schools prompted the New York State Board of Regents to place a moratorium on new for-profit colleges in early February.

Despite these concerns, the proposed legislation is designed to put coursework completed under the minimum standard of accreditation enjoyed by these schools on a par with work done under the high standards of established colleges and universities. This would **diminish the value of a college degree**, open the door to fraud and abuse, and encourage education at the lowest common denominator.

Adding Complications and Costs

To comply with the new mandate, *colleges and universities would be required to laboriously evaluate the syllabus of each course* a transferring student completed at his or her earlier school, and perhaps the qualifications of the faculty and the text books used as well. In short, a receiving school might have to become a *de facto* accreditor of the sending institution, a task universities are simply not currently equipped to handle. This process would be lengthy, expensive, and often inconclusive. The outcome would be difficult to predict and introduce increased uncertainty into an already difficult process.

Students Penalized

The high costs of this evaluation process would surely be passed on to the students, but that would not be the end of their burden. They would be forced to navigate an increasingly capricious system, and many would end up taking classes for which they are unprepared to succeed. By substituting the opinion of federal bureaucrats for the wisdom of professional educators, the proposed legislation would make it more difficult for students to chart an appropriate course of study.

Institutions Burdened

By denying colleges and universities the right to judge the sending institution's accrediting body, the legislation intentionally commingles patently dissimilar courses together and piles them on receiving institutions for expensive case-by-case evaluation. In addition, the legislation effectively eliminates specialized accreditation by requiring institutions that rely on non-federal, voluntary accreditation standards – such as *medical schools* – to substitute the Secretary of Education's unrelated judgments for their own autonomous systems of peer recognition.

Undermining Academic Autonomy

The Federal Government has long respected the tradition of academic autonomy, well aware that the public's investment in higher education and the excellence of our institutions depend on the specialized judgment of qualified academics and a diverse educational marketplace.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter famously enumerated the “four essential freedoms” of the university in 1957: “to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” A **one-size-fits-all** edict from Washington on how universities decide what credit to count towards a degree would be a misguided invasion of fundamental academic prerogatives.