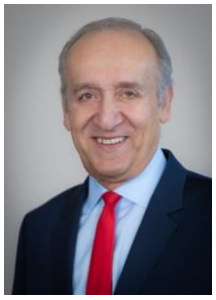
Opinion/Editorial

OP-ED

CHEA Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CHEA International Quality Group CIQG

Last Night I Had a Strange Dream About Accreditation

March 31, 2026



Last night I had a strange dream.

I was watching a national discussion about higher education oversight on Zoom. My camera was off. I was not speaking—just observing–as what began as a routine conversation about accreditation and educational quality slowly took an unexpected turn.

Instead of focusing on how colleges help students persist, learn, and graduate, participants began debating whether institutions should even examine differences in student outcomes. Some questioned the value of collecting disaggregated data. Others suggested that designing strategies to strengthen student success could invite legal or political challenges.

At one point, there was even discomfort with the long-standing idea that institutions might seek to reflect the communities they serve. What had long been understood as part of mission and public responsibility was suddenly treated as something that might require caution.

The tone shifted. The conversation narrowed. What started as a discussion about improving educational quality became a discussion about what might be safer not to see.

Then I woke up.

But the unease stayed with me. Because the dream did not feel entirely imaginary. It felt like a glimpse of a direction higher education could be heading.

For decades, accreditation has been one of the quiet foundations of American higher education. It is how institutions demonstrate academic quality, institutional integrity, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Accreditation does not determine who is admitted or how colleges shape their entering classes. Its concern is what happens after students arrive. Are they able to stay on track? Do they complete their programs? Are institutions learning from patterns in student success and using evidence to improve?

These are not ideological questions. They are quality questions.

Much of the national conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion now unfolds in broad political terms. In accreditation practice, attention to equity has often meant helping institutions strengthen policies, academic structures, and support systems so that more students can persist, complete their programs, and succeed.

Years ago, when I was serving as a university chancellor, a student told me she believed she could succeed academically. What troubled her was whether the institution fully understood what navigating that experience felt like.

She was the first in her family to attend college. She worked long hours. She was learning not only her subjects but also the expectations and culture of higher education.

She was not asking for special treatment. She was asking whether the university was paying attention.

That conversation stayed with me because it captured something essential about educational quality. Universities do not improve simply by offering programs or awarding degrees. They improve by understanding the realities their students face and responding thoughtfully.

At its best, accreditation reinforces that responsibility. It connects mission to evidence. It encourages institutions to observe honestly, test solutions, and demonstrate progress.

But imagine a future, perhaps not very distant, in which colleges grow more hesitant to do exactly that. More cautious about examining differences in student outcomes. More reluctant to design strategies

that strengthen persistence and completion. More inclined to avoid difficult questions because the boundaries of acceptable inquiry feel uncertain.

Improvement becomes harder when colleges begin looking over their shoulders instead of looking closely at their students.

The stakes extend far beyond campus debates. Postsecondary education is increasingly essential to economic mobility and national competitiveness, yet gaps in persistence and completion remain real challenges.

If institutions become less willing to analyze barriers or experiment with ways to test ways to strengthen student success, the consequences will ripple outward. Workforce readiness may suffer. Public confidence may weaken. The broader promise of higher education may become harder to fulfill.

There is also a quieter risk: a system that prioritizes compliance over learning can become performative. Institutions may meet formal expectations while losing the capacity for meaningful improvement.

My strange dream may never fully come true. I hope it does not.

But the student who spoke with me years ago did not need a slogan or a political argument. She needed a university willing to notice her challenges and act on what it learned.

Educational quality begins with attention.

If colleges become afraid to look too closely, students will ultimately pay the price.

Nasser H. Paydar is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).