

# OP-ED

## Accreditation's Next Big Moment is Coming to Campus

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As the World Cup unfolds across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, millions of people are watching great athletes, dramatic goals, and national pride on full display. Close followers of the sport are also noticing something else: the games feel faster, with less wasted time and more attention to keeping the play moving. That is not an accident. New rules about restarts, goalkeeper delays, substitutions, and player conduct are shaping the rhythm and flow of the matches.

The same is true in higher education. The rules that govern accreditation may not draw stadium crowds, but they are central to how colleges and universities are evaluated, how quality is understood, how well students are served, and how public trust is earned.

That is why the U.S. Department of Education's forthcoming Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) from the Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization negotiated rulemaking process, known as AIM, deserves the attention of campus leaders. The consensus language coming out of the rulemaking would dramatically reshape the accreditation landscape and have significant implications for institutions. This is not just an accreditation issue. It is a campus issue.

Once the NPRM is released, the higher education community is expected to have only a short window to review the proposed regulations and respond.

For many institutional leaders, this may sound like a Washington process—another acronym, another rulemaking. But accreditation is not distant from campus life. It is deeply connected to how institutions do

their work and how they explain that work to students, families, employers, policymakers, and the public.

When the rules for accreditation change, expectations for institutions often change as well. What begins as federal language can become evidence requests, reporting obligations, policy revisions, review criteria, campus processes, and new pressure points for institutional leaders.

Accreditation touches student learning, student success, transfer credit, academic programs, institutional mission, governance, data, financial sustainability, innovation, and public accountability. At its best, accreditation insists that quality must be judged with evidence, expertise, context, and mission in mind.

That last part matters. A community college serving working adults, a regional public university anchoring its community, a research university advancing discovery, a minority-serving institution expanding opportunity, a faith-based college guided by a distinct mission, and a professional school preparing students for licensed practice should all be held to high standards, but they should not be treated as if they are the same institution.

American higher education is strong because it is diverse. Accreditation works best when it honors that diversity while still asking hard questions about quality, integrity, and outcomes.

The question before us is not whether higher education should be accountable. Of course it should. Students deserve protection. Families deserve transparency. Taxpayers deserve confidence. Employers deserve trust in credentials. Institutions also deserve a system that recognizes mission, context, academic judgment, and the complexity of teaching and learning.

The real question is whether accountability will be smart enough to strengthen quality without flattening it.

As the NPRM is released and reviewed, institutional leaders should ask a few practical questions: Will the proposed rules strengthen quality? Will they reduce costs for students or increase them by adding more compliance burden? Will they enhance student outcomes and value, or limit educational opportunities? Will they support transfer and student mobility while preserving legitimate academic judgment? And will they recognize the diversity of American higher education, or push

institutions toward a narrower definition of value? These questions affect real campuses and real students.

When the NPRM is released, CHEA will review it carefully and provide analysis for our members. We will identify key implications, raise important questions, and support thoughtful engagement during the public comment period. But policymakers also need to hear from institutions themselves. They need concrete examples, not slogans. They need to understand what would help, what would confuse, what could create unintended consequences, and what would genuinely strengthen public trust. Strong comments can change the direction of policy.

Higher education is living through a moment of intense scrutiny. Confidence in institutions cannot be assumed. It has to be earned, explained, and renewed. Accreditation has an important role in that work, not as a shield against accountability, but as a serious, structured, peer-driven way to examine quality and improve it.

The coming AIM NPRM will give higher education a chance to speak clearly about the kind of quality assurance system students and the public deserve: one that is rigorous, transparent, trustworthy, mission-sensitive, evidence-based, and open to responsible innovation.

The comment window will be short, but its consequences will last far longer. Campus leaders should not assume others will speak for them. This is the moment to engage, explain, and help shape an accreditation system that continues to serve students and the public.

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