

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-59](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

To access federal student aid—which totaled more than \$136 billion in fiscal year 2013—schools must be accredited to ensure they offer a quality education. In light of accreditors' important role in overseeing schools, this report examines (1) accreditor sanctions of schools for non-compliance with accreditor standards, (2) how likely accreditors are to sanction schools with weaker student outcome or financial characteristics, and (3) how Education uses accreditor sanction information for oversight. GAO analyzed sanction data from October 2009 through March 2014—the most recent data available—and conducted statistical modeling using data Education collects on schools to test whether schools with weaker characteristics are more likely to be sanctioned by accreditors. GAO also reviewed Education documents, relevant federal laws and regulations, prior research on student outcomes, and interviewed representatives of accreditors, higher education associations, schools, and Education.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education consider ways to better assess whether accreditor standards effectively address academic quality; and systematically use available accreditor sanction information to better oversee schools and accreditors. Education generally agreed with the report's recommendations, and noted plans to address them.

View [GAO-15-59](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov

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HIGHER EDUCATION

Education Should Strengthen Oversight of Schools and Accreditors

What GAO Found

Over a 4-1/2-year period, accreditors—-independent agencies recognized by the Department of Education (Education)—sanctioned about 8 percent of schools for not meeting accreditor standards. They terminated accreditation for about 1 percent of accredited schools, thereby ending the schools' access to federal student aid funds. Accreditors must be officially recognized by Education as reliable authorities on assessing academic quality, and schools must be certified by these accreditors as meeting both academic and financial standards to qualify for federal student aid funds. From October 2009, when data were first consistently collected, through March 2014, when the latest data were released, GAO found that accreditors issued at least 984 sanctions to 621 schools, terminating the accreditation of 66 schools. Of sanctions issued in 2012, the most recent full year on reasons for sanctions at the time the study began, GAO found that accreditors most commonly cited financial rather than academic problems.

A GAO analysis found that from October 2009 through March 2014, schools with weaker student outcomes were, on average, no more likely to have been sanctioned by accreditors than schools with stronger student outcomes. Researchers have reported that assessing multiple student outcomes could shed light on the quality of education provided by schools. Such outcomes are characteristics that Education and researchers consider important indicators of educational quality, but which accreditors are not necessarily required to use. On the other hand, accreditors were more likely to have sanctioned schools with weaker financial characteristics than those with stronger ones. With regard to academic quality, accreditors GAO interviewed reported that this area is difficult to oversee, saying that few quantifiable indicators exist. However, academic quality is a key accreditor responsibility under the Higher Education Act, and student aid funds may be at risk when schools that do not provide a quality education have access to these funds. The act prohibits Education from specifying the specific content of accreditor standards. However, Education must determine that these accreditor standards are effective in ensuring educational quality. GAO's analysis raises questions about whether the standards accreditors use ensure that schools provide a quality education, and whether Education is effectively determining if these standards ensure educational quality.

Education does not consistently use accreditor sanction information for oversight. For instance, Education does not systematically use sanction information to prioritize schools for in-depth review, as required by law. In addition, although Education's 2014 strategic plan calls for better use of data in decision making, the department does not make consistent use of the accreditor sanction information it collects when it decides whether to re-recognize accreditors. While accreditor standards may be limited in enabling accreditors to effectively ensure academic quality, consistent use of accreditor sanction information could help Education determine whether schools are complying with federal financial aid requirements and oversee accreditors effectively. Moreover, federal internal control standards require agencies to assess risk and establish procedures to safeguard federal funds.