

Why GAO Did This Study

Education provided more than \$125 billion in federal student aid funds in fiscal year 2016 to help students pay for higher education. To participate in federal student aid programs, postsecondary schools must be accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by Education. Accreditors work with Education to oversee participating schools and play a critical role in assessing academic quality. GAO was asked to review the U.S. accreditation system's oversight of academic quality.

This report examines (1) the strengths and challenges of the current U.S. accreditation system in overseeing the academic quality of schools, and (2) potential approaches for improving the U.S. accreditation system's oversight of academic quality. GAO convened a roundtable of 18 experts with the help of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, a nonprofit agency whose mission includes informing public policy decisions, and surveyed the experts before and after the roundtable meeting. GAO also conducted a literature review, reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations and Education documents, and interviewed Education officials and higher education stakeholders, including academic researchers.

In its comments, Education stated that it is reviewing the report carefully as it works to improve postsecondary education opportunities for students and its role in the accreditation process.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Expert Views of U.S. Accreditation

What GAO Found

The U.S. accreditation system—which helps to ensure that schools provide students with a quality education—has some key strengths, according to many of the experts GAO convened in a roundtable on the issue, as well as what was reported in literature GAO reviewed and interviews it conducted. Specifically, experts said the structure of the accreditation system, which includes nongovernmental accrediting agencies recognized by the Department of Education (Education), allows for accreditor reviews that are tailored to various school types, from medical to cosmetology schools. Experts also said the use of peer review by academic faculty and administrators offers the relevant expertise to assess academic quality and provide schools with feedback for improvement.

However, some experts, literature GAO reviewed, and interviews identified challenges with the accreditation system's oversight of academic quality. For example, some experts and literature stated that accreditors may be hesitant to terminate schools' accreditation when they identify issues because such action would adversely affect schools' eligibility for federal student aid programs, potentially leading to school closure. Many experts also said the accreditation system may not provide useful information to students about academic quality. Further, most experts and literature identified challenges with how to effectively define and measure academic quality. For example, experts said it can be difficult for accreditors to measure academic quality in fields without quantifiable outcomes, such as pass rates for professional licensing exams.

Potential approaches to improve the U.S. accreditation system's oversight of academic quality range from modifying accreditors' and Education's current roles to restructuring the current system, based on experts and GAO's literature review. While experts cautioned that there could be potential disadvantages to these approaches, the proposals for addressing oversight challenges included:

- **Modifying oversight roles and responsibilities:** Some experts suggested clarifying or redefining responsibilities, including those of accreditors and Education; providing protections for accreditors from legal action by schools; and allowing Education to set and enforce accreditation standards for student achievement.
- **Strengthening communication and transparency:** Some experts proposed sharing more accreditor information to help students, policymakers, and the public make informed decisions on investments in higher education.
- **Using academic quality measures and expanding accreditation options:** Some experts proposed increasing accreditors' focus on student outcomes in assessments of academic quality. A few experts proposed adding an accreditation category that would allow a school to maintain its federal student aid eligibility at a reduced level while making improvements.
- **Changing the structure of the accreditation system:** GAO identified four approaches in the literature—three of which were developed by roundtable experts—to establish new entities to set standards for assessing schools' academic quality. These approaches differ in how they assign oversight responsibilities, such as assessments and monitoring.