

The College Accreditation Crisis

Accreditors, like those of Corinthian Colleges, threaten higher ed by keeping their reviews private.

By [Ben Miller](#) | Contributor May 5, 2016, at 9:51 a.m.

Accreditation agencies are responsible for assessing the quality of education offered at every college across the country that participates in federal financial aid programs. Approval from these agencies – which must be recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to perform this role – is required for colleges to receive federal financial aid.

But in August 2014, one accreditation agency gave a [clean bill of health](#) to several campuses owned by Corinthian Colleges, a for-profit company that a month earlier [agreed to wind down operations](#) following government allegations of fraud. Corinthian was out of business within a year, and in March 2016, a [judge awarded a \\$1.1 billion](#) judgment against the school because of its widespread misdeeds. Absent federal action, the accreditation agency's review would have kept the federal funding spigot on at these campuses until 2020.

The declaration that everything is OK at a place that is falling apart amid allegations of wrongdoing should have started a frank conversation about improving America's process for college quality assurance. But instead of openness or an acknowledgement of problems, all but one of the four agencies responsible for reviewing Corinthian have hidden behind a veil of secrecy.



RELATED CONTENT

[The Red Tape Ruse](#)

Don't buy the argument that colleges are being buried under a wave of unreasonable regulations.

Secrecy has severe consequences. It allows cabals of private individuals within these agencies to make choices that affect the flow of billions of taxpayer dollars with no accountability or insight

into how those decisions are made. It assists the worst educational providers in continuing to indebt students with government money. Left unchanged, it could harm the reputation and credibility of the entire higher education sector, including the large number of high-quality colleges that are doing nothing wrong.

Restoring this lost credibility must start, but not end with, increased transparency.

Accreditors' work is mostly contained in two key documents: a self study produced by the college that evaluates how it is doing and a team report written by outside evaluators. Both cover learning assessment policies, financial health and everything in between. It's a more detailed look at the actual business of a college than the federal government could ever conduct.

Accreditation documents for most public colleges are publicly available – in fact, many colleges post these documents on their website. Those that aren't published can typically be obtained through an open records request. These documents provide important transparency into the accreditation process and allow the public to see who evaluated the college, what problems accreditors might have found and how a school plans to tackle those issues.



RELATED CONTENT

[A Duty to Teach, And Also Protect](#)

Colleges should adopt a fiduciary standard to protect students and loan dollars from financial exploitation.

Private colleges, on the other hand, often treat their accreditation documents as if they were the nuclear launch codes. Neither the college nor the accreditation agency is obligated to release them. Only the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which reviews colleges on the West Coast, has [set robust pro-transparency standards](#).

Accreditors often claim that privacy is necessary to allow for reviewer candidness. But in context, this makes little sense. Why should private colleges get more protections for their use of federal dollars than public ones? The federal government has to provide a justification for the decisions it makes with respect to taxpayer dollars, so why shouldn't accreditors?

But even if this questionable need for privacy were true, such protection has no reason to exist once a college closes. Corinthian is bankrupt and shuttered. Hiding the documents now protects no one's reputation except that of the accreditors themselves.

Despite this, 3 of the 4 agencies that accredited Corinthian have failed to disclose the documents from the reviews of its campuses. Two have refused to provide the documents following a direct request from the Center for American Progress.



RELATED CONTENT

[Education Research Needs Data](#)

Concerns about student privacy must be balanced with the benefits of more research.

The most egregious instance of Corinthian's privacy protection comes from the same agency that looked at the company midcollapse and claimed everything was fine: the Accrediting Council for Independent Schools and Colleges. When pushed to actually release these documents, the council has not exactly been above board about what it would take to furnish them. In November, the current head of the council said he would release the documents after receiving authorization to do so from the proper official related to Corinthian Colleges. After getting the letter requested in March, he refused to release anything.

Sadly, the lack of reliability from the council about making its documents transparent is part of a larger pattern with the agency. After all, [13 state attorneys general](#) and [23 consumer groups](#) have called on the U.S. Department of Education to stop allowing the council to grant access to federal aid because of its poor decision-making history. [Twenty-four U.S. Senators](#) raised concerns about the council's role in evaluating Corinthian Colleges.

The opaqueness of the Accrediting Council for Independent Schools and Colleges and most other accreditors jeopardizes the entire system. Accreditation works largely on trust. It requires faith from the public that agencies will be rigorous and ethical judges of quality. Protecting colleges through secrecy can no longer be the priority, and earning back that trust must start with verifying what these bodies actually do.

Sunshine, however, can only be the beginning. Serious questions must be asked about whether accreditors are [properly fulfilling their legislative function](#). Legislative changes are needed to make the system more flexible and accountable. A new, modern alternative of assuring quality may be needed.

Accreditation is not in a healthy place right now. Unlike the Accrediting Council for Independent Schools and Colleges with Corinthian, it is impossible to look at it and say everything is just fine.

Tags: [education](#), [education policy](#), [Department of Education](#), [colleges](#)