
The Gatekeepers Are Failing: Why We Must Reform Higher Education Accreditation.

By **Allen Mendenhall**

March 30, 2026

Each year, roughly two million Americans borrow sums they may never repay to attend programs that a federal accrediting system has solemnly declared “high quality.” But while some will earn degrees that open doors, many will earn nothing but debt.

The student who borrowed \$60,000 for a master’s degree in a field that rarely pays more than \$35,000 was not necessarily misled by a rogue college. She was, rather, betrayed by a quality-assurance system that measures office square footage and administrator credentials—but not whether graduates can pay back their loans.

For decades, American higher education has operated under a peculiar fiction: “quality” is “guaranteed” by a club of private accrediting agencies that have government approval. In fact, the current bureaucratic system drives up costs, shields mediocre institutions from accountability, enforces ideological conformity, and systematically resists giving any true market signals about the wisdom of pursuing a degree in a particular field.

But that may be about to change. Washington has finally found the right tool to encourage competition and increase quality: the Trump administration’s Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization committee (AIM), will convene for the first time in April.

AIM is a federally chartered negotiated rulemaking panel charged with rewriting the regulations that govern accreditation itself. Because accreditor approval is the prerequisite for colleges to access federal student aid, whoever controls the accreditation rules effectively controls key elements of American higher education policy. AIM is the administration’s bid to wrest some control from the accreditation guild and limit its abuses of power.

AIM should enact four reforms: further break the accreditor cartel, make student outcomes the performance metric, curb trade association rent-seeking, and constrain concentrated ideological capture.

First, AIM should make it easier for new accreditors to get recognized and compete. As Under Secretary Nicholas Kent correctly **stated**, the existing accreditation system “shields existing players.” Department of Education staff and overly burdensome regulations have created substantial barriers to entry for new

Education staff and overly burdensome regulations have created substantial barriers to entry for new accreditors. AIM should aggressively deregulate accretor entry by streamlining the onerous barriers in 34 CFR Part 602. This should include streamlining the review timeline and enabling institutions to change accreditors smoothly and without penalty.

Second, AIM should address the current system's deepest failure: confusing process with quality. Accreditors have traditionally evaluated institutions based on inputs (i.e., faculty credentials, library holdings, and financial resources) rather than outputs. The question, "What do graduates actually know, earn, and accomplish?" has been sidelined in favor of, "Does this institution have the right number of PhD-holding faculty per student?"

This bureaucratic credentialism has allowed genuinely low-value programs to persist for decades while collecting federal tuition dollars. AIM regulations, to the extent allowed by law, should require accreditors to incorporate program-level earnings and debt outcomes data as a core component of quality assessment that is a genuine pass/fail criterion.

The infrastructure already exists in the Department's [College Scorecard](#), which collects program-level earnings data using IRS records. Accreditors should be required to use this data to identify programs where graduates systematically cannot service their debt, and to require demonstrated remediation or withdraw accreditation of the specific program. To the extent that such requirements are unavailable under current law, Congress should narrowly revise the law to permit them.

Third, AIM should sever the capture of accreditation by trade associations. American higher education is represented in D.C. by a dense network of lobbying organizations whose primary function is to advance the interests of existing institutions and accreditors against the interests of students, taxpayers, and potential competitors. Programmatic accrediting agencies too often share staff, offices, funding, and leadership pipelines with the same trade associations that benefit from accredited programs.

AIM should promulgate integrity reforms that would separate accrediting agencies from related trade associations. Reforms should prohibit shared executive leadership, require independent governance boards, and mandate disclosure of financial relationships.

Relatedly, the committee should solve the transfer credit problem. Current campus policies often force students to repeat coursework when changing institutions, generating additional tuition revenue at the student's expense. AIM should establish transfer credit portability by encouraging programmatic accreditors to require articulation agreements among institutions offering essentially the same courses.

Fourth, AIM should meet the mandate to eliminate accreditation standards that "discriminate on the basis of immutable characteristics" and to encourage "intellectual diversity amongst faculty." The DEI apparatus is embedded in many accreditors' standards, and faculty ideological homogeneity entrenches these standards. Accreditors should be banned from forcing institutions to have any policy or practice that would make the institutions ineligible for federal programs. In other words, DEI at the level of civil rights violations must be prohibited.

Where DEI means unlawful discrimination—as it so often does—AIM should prohibit accreditors from requiring institutions to adopt DEI offices, DEI training programs, DEI statements in faculty hiring, or any other practices whose function is discriminatory. The committee also should narrow accretor authority across the board, at least for the purpose of participation in federal aid programs, so as to thwart any future administration's temptation to use accreditation as a vehicle for imposing its own preferences.

Accreditation reform has been promised before. What makes this moment rare is the mechanism: the

negotiated rulemaking process binds the administration to publish what the committee reaches consensus on, and regulations finalized through this process carry the full force of federal law. The accrediting agencies know this, which is why their trade associations are already mobilizing against AIM before it has held its first session.

AIM's window is narrow. Negotiations conclude this spring, the rule must survive public comment and finalization, and political conditions are never permanent. If AIM produces timid half-measures such as mere disclosure requirements dressed up as accountability or aspirational language substituting for enforceable guardrails, then the guild will outlast the reform, as the D.C. establishment usually does.

The first-generation student who borrowed \$60,000 for a credential the system certified but never validated deserves better than a debt that cannot be repaid and a diploma that means little in the labor market. AIM has the mandate to change that.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation.

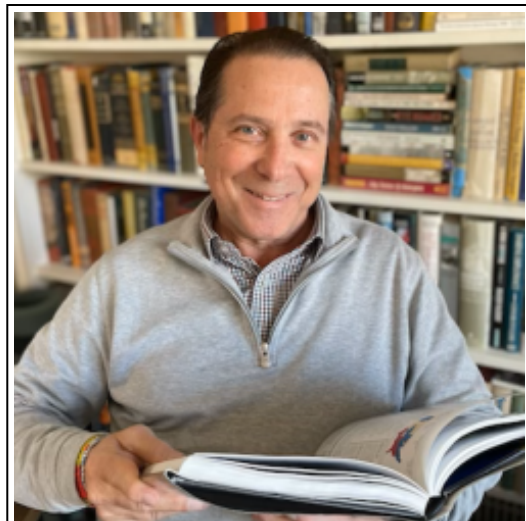
Support RealClear, Independent Journalism

RealClear Media Fund

“Information wants to be free!” was a rallying cry at the dawn of the Internet Age. The paradox is that information also “wants to be expensive.”

At RealClearPolitics, we provide news and information spanning the ideological spectrum—without a paywall. That's the “free” part.

But producing quality journalism means paying reporters, editors, aggregators, tech team, and the analysts who curate RCP's renowned polling averages. That's the expensive part.



Carl Cannon, RCP Executive Editor

If you value independent news and seeing a diversity of viewpoints, **please consider making a tax-deductible donation to RealClear Media Fund**. Every dollar you donate is an investment in an informed public discourse and holding government and other key institutions accountable. Your support helps us put First Amendment theory into real-world practice.

Donate Now

Sincerely,

Carl Cannon
Executive Editor
RealClearPolitics

Recommended Newsletters



Carl M. Cannon's Morning Note

headlines against the historic
events



Education Today

Featuring the latest education
news