

## Education Secretary Calls for “New Focus” on Outcomes

By Don Sutherland

In an [address](#) at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC) last Monday, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called for moving beyond access to a “new focus” on Higher Education outcomes. He stated that even as the issue of student debt and larger issue of access are important, “the degree students truly can’t afford is or the one they don’t complete, or that employers don’t value.” He explained that students who drop out are “three times as likely to default” on student loans as those who earn their college degree. He added that colleges are not succeeding in be “an equalizer of opportunity,” as the wealthiest 25% of students are four times more likely than the bottom 25% to earn their bachelor’s degree. Given that context, he declared, “We must shift incentives at every level to focus on student success, not just on access.”

In his remarks, the Education Secretary was particularly critical of accreditors. He stated that Congress has “asked for little accountability for accreditors” and that “accreditors have provided little. He described accrediting agencies as “watchdogs that don’t bark” while citing the small number of institutions that have had their accreditation terminated. He added that accreditation is input-oriented and that many accreditors place student outcomes low on their list of priorities. On account of the accreditation-related shortcomings he described, the Education Secretary said that the Department of Education “must do a better job at holding accreditors responsible for their work” and urged Congress to “take action and not tie our hands.”

The Secretary’s comments regarding accreditors warrant a closer look. There are differences among accrediting agencies, particularly national accreditors and regional ones e.g., the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). A recent [GAO report](#) found:

*Consistent with our overall analysis of reasons across all types of accreditors, national accreditors more frequently issued sanctions to schools that did not meet accreditors’ financial capability standards, compared to other reasons... In contrast, regional accreditors most frequently issues sanctions to schools that did not meet accreditors’ academic quality capability standards, followed by financial and administrative capability.*

The GAO report also noted that from October 2009 through March 2014, accreditors issued sanctions to approximately 8 percent of member schools. During that same timeframe, MSCHE reviewed 235 self-study reports and issued sanctions in 9.8% of those cases. However, during the last three years (2013-2015), MSCHE reviewed 143 self-study reports and issued sanctions to 16.1% of cases. In short, the figures demonstrate that MSCHE is a “watchdog” that has been barking more often.

Furthermore, MSCHE has replaced its 14 standards with 7 standards. Three of those standards (43%) directly concern student learning experience (Standard III), support of the student experience (Standard IV), and educational effectiveness assessment (Standard V). In sum, one finds a complex and dynamic accreditation landscape in which at least some accrediting agencies are performing more effectively and evaluating institutions more rigorously than others.

Overall, the Secretary's emphasis on looking beyond access, critical as improved access is, deals with important issues and provides some insight into the current direction of public policy. With respect to accreditation, Secretary Duncan did not call for decoupling accreditation from federal aid, as some in Congress have advocated. Instead, he stated, "We will work with states, colleges, and accreditors in a shared partnership, with clear responsibilities, to increase accountability for student success in higher education."

Nevertheless, at this point in time, some large differences exist between the Education Secretary's vision and the vision expressed by some senior leaders in the Congress and Senate. As a result, there remains a large degree of uncertainty as to accreditation-related details, among others, in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. It is plausible that these differences could limit the magnitude of reforms sought by the parties and push any large-scale reform initiatives beyond the upcoming 2016 Presidential election.