ACCJC
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ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Policy Brief: The College Transparency Act - Strengthening Postsecondary Data Transparency and Accountability

Summary

Institutional accreditors like the Accrediting Commission for Community Colleges (ACCJC) support federal efforts to improve postsecondary data transparency, reduce duplicative reporting burden, and provide students, families, policymakers, employers, institutions, and accreditors with better information about student outcomes.

As partners in the country's accountability system, ACCJC has built a data system that makes student outcomes and return on investment more transparent; developed monitoring practices that use evidence to identify risk, support institutional transformation, and improve student success; made the most current and actionable student-outcome information in the sector publicly available to students, policymakers, and taxpayers; and with our partners in the Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) convened leaders across the sector and political spectrum to develop practical, durable solutions to the nation's accountability challenges.

The College Transparency Act recognizes that despite significant efforts by states and accreditors, the current federal data system remains incomplete, burdensome, and poorly aligned with the needs of today's students—particularly transfer students, part-time students, adult learners, returning students, and students enrolled in short-term, workforce, and program-level pathways. Accreditors support the work of over 100 sector colleagues and members of Congress working to pass the College Transparency Act.

From an accreditor's perspective, improved federal data infrastructure is not merely a consumer-information issue. It is central to public accountability, quality assurance, institutional improvement, and confidence in higher education.

The Problem

The nation asks colleges and universities to demonstrate value, workforce relevance, affordability, and the responsible stewardship of public funds. Yet the federal data infrastructure used to answer these questions is fragmented and incomplete. Current systems often fail to capture the full experience of students who transfer, attend part time, stop out and return, enroll in nontraditional pathways, or complete credentials below the degree level. These gaps leave students and families less able to make informed choices, policymakers and institutions less able to craft evidence-based strategies, and employers less able to understand talent pipelines.

For accreditors, these gaps also limit the ability to evaluate institutional effectiveness in ways that are fair, contextualized, and useful. Accreditation depends on evidence. When the available evidence is incomplete, institutions are too often judged by partial proxies rather than by a fuller picture of student access, progression, completion, transfer, employment, earnings, debt, and long-term success.

Why Accreditors Support Federal Data Transparency

Institutional accreditors have a public responsibility to ensure that colleges and universities meet standards of quality, integrity, and continuous improvement. A modernized federal data system would strengthen that work in several ways.

First, better data would improve student-centered accountability. Students should be able to understand the likely outcomes of different institutions and programs, including completion, transfer, debt, earnings, licensure, and employment where applicable. These data should be presented in a user-friendly way and should help students compare programs without reducing educational value to a single metric.

Second, better data would support institutional improvement rather than compliance alone. Accreditors do not simply identify poor performance; they work with institutions to understand trends, address gaps, and improve outcomes. Federal data should be fed back to states and institutions so they can implement targeted, data-informed strategies to support student success.

Third, better data would advance fairness and context in accountability. Institutions serve different missions, communities, and student populations. Community colleges, regional universities, minority-serving institutions, tribal colleges, faith-based institutions, adult-serving institutions, and workforce-focused providers should be evaluated with data that reflect who they serve and what their students are trying to accomplish. Disaggregated, privacy-protected data can help identify inequities while also avoiding misleading comparisons that ignore student goals, institutional mission, and local labor-market context.

Fourth, better data would reduce unnecessary reporting burden. Institutions currently report overlapping information to multiple federal, state, accreditation, and public-facing systems. The College Transparency Act's emphasis on leveraging existing federal and institutional data and streamlining burdensome reporting requirements is especially important. A well-designed federal data network should reduce duplication, not add another disconnected reporting layer.

Principles for Bipartisan Reform

Federal data reform can and should reflect values shared across the political spectrum: transparency, accountability, privacy, efficiency, student choice, taxpayer stewardship, and workforce relevance. Accreditors would support federal efforts that follow these principles:

> **Protect student privacy.** Any federal data system must include strong security standards, clear governance, limits on disclosure, prohibitions on the sale or misuse of data, penalties for illegal use, safeguards for vulnerable students, and regular audits.
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> **Report aggregate outcomes, not individual student records.** The purpose of data transparency should be to provide accurate, useful, aggregate information—not to expose individual students or create a federal surveillance system.
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> **Measure outcomes at the program level where appropriate.** Students increasingly choose programs, not just institutions. Program-level information about cost, debt, completion, transfer, licensure, employment, and earnings can help students make better decisions and help institutions strengthen programs.

The College Transparency Act also offers an important opportunity to illuminate the relative value of certificates, short-term credentials, and other nondegree pathways for which there is currently little meaningful insight at the federal level. Better information about participation, completion, cost, debt, transferability, employment, earnings, and subsequent educational progress would help students distinguish among rapidly expanding credential options, help employers better understand their value, and help institutions and policymakers identify which pathways deliver strong outcomes and warrant continued investment.

> **Include all students.** Accountability systems should not be built primarily around first-time, full-time students. Federal data should better reflect part-time students, transfer students, returning adults, short-term credential students, and students who attend multiple institutions.
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> **Support workforce and civic value.** Better data should help answer questions about employment and earnings, but accountability should not be reduced to wages alone. Higher education also supports transfer, lifelong learning, public service, licensure, military advancement, civic participation, and community development.
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> **Use data for improvement and accountability.** The strongest systems do both. Accreditors need reliable data to identify risk, monitor progress, and protect students. Institutions need the same data to improve. Policymakers need it to steward public investment. Students and families need it to make informed choices.
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> **Avoid one-size-fits-all federal ratings.** Federal data should illuminate performance, not flatten institutional mission. Transparency is most useful when it allows users to understand outcomes in context.

Accreditor Priorities

Institutional accreditors would especially value federal reforms that:

1. Create secure, privacy-protected student-level data infrastructure within the National Center for Education Statistics that produces aggregate public information.
2. Include enrollment, persistence, completion, transfer, debt, earnings, licensure, and post-college success measures.
3. Capture outcomes for all students, including part-time, transfer, adult, and nontraditional students.
4. Provide program-level data where meaningful and statistically reliable.
5. Reduce duplicative institutional reporting across federal systems.
6. Feed usable data back to institutions, states, and accreditors to support continuous improvement.
7. Preserve institutional mission and avoid simplistic rankings or punitive metrics disconnected from context.

Conclusion

ACCJC supports efforts to modernize postsecondary data because better data strengthens student choice, institutional improvement, public accountability, and confidence in higher education. The College Transparency Act reflects many of ACCJC's core principles: accurate aggregate outcomes, strong privacy protections, reduced reporting burden, program-level transparency, and usable information for students, families, policymakers, institutions, and employers.

A modern federal data system should not be designed to punish institutions or reduce education to a single economic return. It should help the country answer a more important question: Are students being well served, are public investments producing value, and are institutions using evidence to improve? On that question, accreditors, institutions, students, taxpayers, and policymakers should be able to agree.