



ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Outcomes | Innovation | Improvement

Dear ACCJC Members,

This week brings two important federal developments that warrant the attention of every ACCJC member institution.

First, the U.S. Department of Education has released its [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\) on Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization \(AIM\)](#), proposing significant changes to the federal regulations governing accreditation and institutional eligibility. The NPRM is scheduled for publication in the Federal Register today, August 20, 2026, which opens an important period for public review and comment. These proposed regulations touch virtually every institution we serve and, if finalized on the anticipated federal timetable, would generally become effective July 1, 2027. You can review the NPRM and submit formal comments via links in the [U.S. Department of Education's August 19 Press Release](#).

Second, the Department conducted a webinar related to Secretary Linda McMahon's [National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards](#). The Secretary has asked every postsecondary institution to consider publishing, by the end of 2026, a public statement addressing a series of questions concerning academic excellence, public trust, free speech and open inquiry, intellectual pluralism, affordability and student outcomes, academic rigor, research integrity, and the role of higher education in advancing workforce and national priorities. More information about the Secretary's Call to Action is available through the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

The Proposed AIM Regulations

The AIM regulations represent a significant proposed revision to the federal framework governing accreditation. They include provisions intended to create greater flexibility, reduce some regulatory requirements, place additional emphasis on student outcomes and institutional value, and reconsider aspects of the relationship among institutions, accreditors, states, and the federal government. At the same time, the proposal introduces new expectations for both accrediting organizations and institutions, including requirements that would affect how accreditors evaluate institutional policies and practices in areas that historically have largely remained within institutional governance and academic decision-making. As we review the proposal, ACCJC will continue to consider both opportunities for thoughtful modernization and the importance of preserving a system of quality assurance that is peer-based, appropriately independent, attentive to student success, and responsive to the diversity of institutional missions we serve. At this stage, these are proposed regulations, and the public comment process provides institutions and other stakeholders an

important opportunity to identify areas that may require clarification, modification, or further consideration.

Intellectual Diversity, Academic Freedom, and Viewpoint Neutrality

One area of the proposed regulations that has already generated significant questions from institutions involves **intellectual diversity, academic freedom, and viewpoint neutrality**. The proposed regulations would require accreditors, as part of their evaluation of institutions, to examine whether institutions maintain specified protections and policies in these areas. Among other provisions, institutions would be expected to have clearly articulated academic-freedom protections that are applied consistently to faculty regardless of appointment classification, viewpoint, ideology, or other specified characteristics. Public institutions would also be evaluated on consistently applied policies protecting First Amendment rights. The proposal further addresses protections for faculty teaching and research within their courses and academic disciplines and the ability to examine a range of academic perspectives without adverse action based on lawful viewpoints unrelated to professional or academic competence. Certain provisions contain different exceptions or modified requirements for institutions or programs with a religious mission.

Perhaps the most consequential new institutional expectation is a proposed requirement concerning intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas among faculty. Under the proposed language, accreditors would evaluate whether an institution maintains a policy designed to support, promote, and appropriately prioritize intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas, including elements addressing intellectual inquiry and student learning. The proposal would also call for institutions to **measure student and faculty perceptions of the range of viewpoints and perspectives offered by the institution or program**. The proposed regulation does not currently prescribe a particular survey instrument, methodology, frequency, response threshold, or standard for determining an acceptable range of viewpoints, leaving important implementation questions unresolved. As our analysis notes, this represents a substantively new area of federal accreditation regulation rather than simply a modification of an existing institutional requirement.

ACCJC will continue to carefully analyze the NPRM, engage with our members and national partners, and provide additional information as the rulemaking process advances. We also strongly encourage institutions to review the proposed regulations themselves and consider providing formal comments where the language raises operational concerns, unintended consequences, questions of interpretation, or opportunities for improvement.

Again, institutions may review the NPRM and submit comments at via links in the [U.S. Department of Education's August 19 Press Release](#).

Federal policy affecting higher education and accreditation is moving quickly, and we will continue to keep you informed about what is changing and what those changes may mean for your institution and the students we collectively serve.

With appreciation,

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Mac Powell', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Mac Powell, MBA, PhD

President

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

Office: 415-506-0234

Direct: 425-892-0214

Email: mac@accjc.org

Website: www.accjc.org

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