

MAR 18 2011

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ILLINOIS

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March 14, 2011

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Dr. Barbara A. Beno
President
Western Association of Schools and Colleges
Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
10 Commercial Boulevard, Suite 204
Novato, CA 94949

Dear Dr. Beno:

I write to request information on current accreditation standards and quality reviews. Recent Congressional hearings and media reports have highlighted serious problems with for-profit institutions of higher education, and I would like to better understand the role that accrediting agencies play in holding all colleges to high standards of academic quality.

An institution of higher education is able to access federal Title IV funding only if it is accredited by a federally approved accreditation agency. Accreditation agencies such as yours serve as the gateway to federal funding, and students rely on the seal of approval you provide. Current law affords accrediting agencies wide latitude in determining standards of academic quality and approval processes. But that latitude leaves you with an important responsibility. The federal government, taxpayers, and students depend on your judgment and deserve assurances that your agency is weeding out low-performing institutions.

Looking at the current state of higher education, it is reasonable to question whether accreditation agencies have been living up to this responsibility. Information has come to light about for-profit colleges that raises serious concerns about the rigor of the accreditation process. A quarter of students who attend for-profit colleges will default on their federal student loans within three years. Recruiters have engaged in aggressive and deceptive practices to enroll students. And some for-profit colleges have even purchased non-profit schools in order to secure their accreditation.

Problems in higher education are not limited to for-profit colleges. Far too many traditional colleges and universities have persistently low completion and retention rates. This problem is most pronounced among low-income and minority students, and there is little sign of improvement at most colleges. I question whether a college where fewer than twenty percent of students graduate year after year deserves continued accreditation and the federal funding that follows.

I would appreciate learning from you more about the quality standards you use to review institutions of higher education for accreditation. Specifically, do you consider completion rates, retention rates, job placement rates, licensure exam scores, debt to income ratios, and 3-year student loan default rates as a part of the accreditation process? If so, what are the benchmarks that colleges are required to meet? Do you consider those statistics for particular demographic groups, such as Pell grant recipients or minority students? Please also provide me with information on the auditing and verification processes you utilize to ensure data reported by colleges is accurate.

As Congress works to reduce the federal deficit, we are taking a close look at federal spending. Federal student aid makes sense when we can ensure the maximum return on investment. Accrediting agencies are well positioned to provide assurance to taxpayers and students that federal financial aid is only going to institutions of quality and rigor that are likely to produce good outcomes for students. I look forward to working with accrediting agencies to guarantee a high-quality education for all our nation's students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dick Durbin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator