

# Inside Accreditation

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## FLORIDA MUST BE CONCERNED ABOUT ITS INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Recent Florida legislation ([SPB 7044](#)) should be viewed with much concern and with skepticism as to the intent of the bill and its unintended consequences. The bill requires state colleges and universities to seek reaffirmation from different accrediting organizations at the end of each review cycle. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the U.S. Department of Education have expressed concerns to the Florida legislature and identified major problems that could result from this type of action (see CHEA's letter to the Florida Senate [here](#).)

Some members of the Florida legislature who support this bill cite “transparency” as a reason to change agencies. The CHEA standards used to recognize accreditors are based on the principle of transparency, which requires actions and decisions about institutions to be posted on the agency’s and the institution’s websites. Transparency has always been accorded as one of the highest acknowledgements of quality work by accreditors. Institutional accreditors are responsive to this standard and provide evidence that they act impartially and with transparency of activities and with mindfulness to ensure public trust.

Accreditation is a voluntary, scholarly process that institutions engage in because it is their

decision to provide evidence to students, family and the public that the institution and its academic programs have quality integrity and are of public good. The self-study review allows the institution to engage in examination of such indicators as mission and purpose, student outcomes, curriculums, faculty, library resources, financial stability, operational management and most aspects of the institution that affect quality. To undertake this voluntary self-study is time- and resource-intensive because it involves just about every sector of the institution. Administrators, faculty, staff and students – all are engaged in the continuous improvement

model which includes reviewing data points of every sector that impacts quality assurance. The commitment of the institution to this process speaks volumes to academic integrity and commitment to students and their families. The self-study is recursive in practice and literally begins a new cycle when the accreditation organization declares its findings. The accreditation process is integrative and is a scholarly activity that provides evidence of institutional quality.

During this process, institutions and accrediting organizations become supportive and collaborative. Accreditors learn about the institutional culture, mission, challenges, demographics, economic impacts, community, students and campus educational

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environment. There is an investment by the accrediting organization in the well-being of the institution. The collaborative rapport is created and enhanced between review cycles, which creates an environment that better serves students. The requirement to change accrediting organizations every cycle suggests that institutions establish new networks with accrediting organizations at the same time that they are in review with the current organization. This paradigm is not in the best interest of Florida students or institutions. The voluntary time and effort of a self-study and continuous improvement model will be greatly diminished and will significantly increase accreditation costs. This does not support the morale of the many individuals who view accreditation processes as a demonstration of institutional excellence.

CHEA and the U.S. Department of Education have high levels of accountability for the accrediting organizations they recognize through appropriate standards. All recognized accrediting organizations adhere to recognition standards and protocols and implement similar and aligned standards when reviewing institutions. Requiring institutions to change accreditors every cycle will not yield a different type of scrutiny because there is a consistency and similarity in standards and in application among all accrediting organizations. What will be different is that institutions will be extremely taxed in the preparation required to change accrediting organizations.

Across the nation, there is a decline in student enrollment, which usually affects financial resources of an institution; not to mention the negative impact that COVID has had on the economy of the country and individual states. The accreditation process does incur financial costs and those costs vary by institution and accrediting organizations.

Changing organizations every cycle is not sound business management because of the variance in need according to the accrediting organization. Decline in student enrollment and state budget allocations are uncertainties that will affect the institution's long-range planning for reviews.

Switching accrediting organizations in a time of uncertainty can be deleterious to institutions that may not have an abundance of resources.

The U.S. Department of Education also warns Florida of its concern regarding changing accrediting organizations and the burden of costs on the accreditation process. Now is the time for Florida to be mindful of the challenges of its institutions both small and large, private and public, two-year and four-year. If there is an expectation that higher education is to be financially and fiscally prudent, that expectation should also acknowledge that good fiscal management should work to eliminate undue expenditures.

The SPB 7044 bill has unintended consequences for Florida higher education and undermines the purpose of accreditation and the guarantee that Florida students, parents and families are receiving quality academic experiences provided by quality Florida institutions.

*A national advocate and institutional voice for academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is a U.S. association of degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. CHEA is the only national organization focused exclusively on higher education accreditation and quality assurance.*