

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARNE DUNCAN TO LAUNCH CRACKDOWN ON COLLEGE ACCREDITING

Education secretary takes aim at low graduation rates while student debt is rising fast

By Douglas Belkin and Andrea Fuller
October 20, 2015

Education Secretary Arne Duncan is preparing to unveil a package of proposals aimed at forcing colleges that receive federal money to improve graduation rates and to provide students with job skills.

The proposals will be aimed at accreditors, the not-for-profit agencies that must give their seal of approval so schools can take part in the federal student-loan system. The overhaul effort comes as student debt has climbed to \$1.2 trillion, but graduation rates remain not much better than a "coin toss," Mr. Duncan has said.

"We are working on a package of suggestions for accreditation that run a gamut from executive action, through essential regulatory changes, through legislative changes that we put forward," Undersecretary of Education Ted Mitchell said Monday in a roundtable discussion with reporters.

The move follows a Wall Street Journal investigation that found that last year alone, the U.S. government sent \$16 billion in aid to students at four-year colleges that graduated less than one-third of their students within six years. At 11 accredited colleges, the graduation rate was in the single digits; 20 schools had student-loan default rates of at least 20%.

In July, Mr. Duncan cited the Journal article when he telegraphed the administration's intention to crack down on accreditors. "Government, at both the federal and state level, along with accreditors and Congress, need to flip the current incentives in higher education," Mr. Duncan said. "In the current system, only students, their families and taxpayers lose when students don't succeed. That simply doesn't make sense."

The proposals Messrs. Duncan and Mitchell described on Monday sparked concern among accreditors who worry that by becoming too prescriptive, the administration runs the risk of killing the broad range of education offered by accredited schools. That diversity of mission is one of the great strengths of U.S. higher education, accreditors say.

"If we're going to talk about persistence and completion, I think it's critical to say what the goal is without prescribing how it should be defined," said Barbara Gellman-Danley, president of the Higher Learning Commission, which accredits colleges in 19 states. "If the standards are too heavy, it won't be good for our institutions," she said.

The Education Department doesn't have the authority to force accreditors to look at particular criteria, according to a senior Senate staffer. It can force accreditors to share more details about their criteria, but the department is not allowed to set specific standards. A 2008 law forbids the department from telling accreditors how to measure student learning without congressional approval.

"It's true that Congress has tied the department's hands on accreditation, and they should untie them," said DOE spokeswoman Denise Horn. "But there are also steps we can take through transparency and executive authority to urge accreditors to focus on outcomes," she said.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Education Committee, has stressed that the answers should come through Congress, not the executive branch. "We'd better find a way to make accreditation work better," he said in a hearing this summer. "There's really not another way to do this—to monitor quality. Because if accreditation doesn't do it, I can assure you that Congress can't. And the Department of Education certainly doesn't have the capacity or know-how."

Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an industry association that recognizes 60 accrediting organizations, said the department has been trying to nudge accreditors to focus more on whether colleges provide a return on investment for students.

"They want accreditation tied more closely to performance," Ms. Eaton said. "My guess is that the accreditors are going to be pressured to look more closely at things like graduation and completion and transfer [rates] when they make a decision to accredit."