



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

## Accreditation

The Trump campaign's weaponization of accreditation of higher education institutions is one of the few higher education issues that has received significant press coverage. Trump's [campaign website](#) states he will "fire the radical Left accreditors that have allowed our colleges to become dominated by Marxist Maniacs and lunatics." There is substantial concern, as a result, that accreditation will become a mechanism for Trump to defund higher education institutions with which he is not politically and ideologically aligned.

To receive federal money, including student aid and research funding, a college or university must be accredited by a federally recognized accreditor. Accreditation not only has massive fiscal implications for colleges; the intensive accreditation system higher education has traditionally relied on is also the most rigorous check we have on educational quality, comprising standards related to faculty control of curriculum, academic freedom, governance structures and more. Faculty, staff, their unions and shared governance bodies partner with accreditors to enforce these standards, even in difficult fiscal and political environments.

## State Attacks Coming to DC

In 2022 Florida passed a law requiring its public colleges and universities to switch accreditors for each accreditation cycle. This was perceived by many as retaliation against its traditional regional accreditor, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, which had raised concerns about the University of Florida's plan to [bar three professors](#) from testifying on state voting rights restrictions and Florida State University's presidential search candidates. This has created a dynamic of "accreditation shopping" that incentivizes institutions to comply with the easiest standards, versus the most rigorous.

In 2020 federal regulations eliminated the traditional regional boundaries of institutional accreditation, but institutions must still get federal Department of Education approval to make that switch. In response to the Florida law, the [Biden administration issued guidance](#) describing how they would make such approvals, saying, "The goal is to prevent a race to the bottom in quality standards among accrediting agencies and ensure that institutions cannot switch to an accrediting agency with less rigorous standards simply to evade accountability from an accrediting agency that investigates practices or takes

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The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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corrective action against an institution.” The Trump administration is likely to rescind this guidance and use very different criteria when evaluating accreditors.

## **Looking Ahead**

Guardrails do remain in place. While guidance can be more easily changed, actions of a greater magnitude require negotiated rulemaking. As [PEN America noted](#), “The higher ed sector is not helpless. College and university leaders have the capacity to defend themselves, their students, and their faculty against many of these threats. However, doing so will require enormous effort, political savvy, and a willingness to put internal differences aside.”

Accreditation is not a perfect system, and the AFT has not always agreed with accreditors’ decisions, but we must organize together to stop the weaponization of the accreditation system to gag professors and stifle student learning. Accreditors have also been reasonably responsive to feedback from unions, disciplinary associations and other stakeholders. We can hold accreditors accountable while defending them from partisan attacks.

[As Bob Shireman of The Century Foundation notes](#), “Academic freedom emerged organically in the United States, and it remains an ideal that is critically important to protect. In current campus disputes, government actors have been too quick to view themselves as the arbiters of when academic freedom has been violated, or how to protect it. Government involvement invites ongoing politicization, undermining the very freedom that politicians are claiming to protect. Rather than let this politicization of America’s higher education system push it down a road that ends with colleges being tools of the state—thus undermining perhaps their most valued characteristic around the world—accreditors would best assert their own role in protecting academic freedom.”

**Our first step in defending the integrity of accreditation is mapping. If your institution is “in cycle” for institutional accreditation or a critical programmatic accreditation, please let an AFT Higher Education staff member know at [highered@aft.org](mailto:highered@aft.org).**