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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Accreditors Celebrate FIPSE Innovation Grants and Urge Collaborative Approach to Strengthening Accreditation

Today, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), and Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) together release the following statement on Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant awards and the future of accreditation. We celebrate investment in higher education innovation that serves students and strengthens institutional quality.

As leaders of accreditation agencies, we are also concerned by the rhetoric accompanying these awards. Department officials characterized these investments as "historic" and stated an intention to "break up the accreditation cartel and support institutions who want to change accreditors." This framing misrepresents both the nature of accreditation and the collaborative relationships that exist among accreditors, institutions, and government agencies in service of students.

The Regulatory Triad: Why Three Components Matter

The Higher Education Act (HEA) creates what is known as the "regulatory triad" (Triad): a three-part system for institutional oversight consisting of accreditors, state agencies, and the federal government. This is not bureaucratic redundancy; it is intentional design that recognizes no single entity should control all aspects of higher education quality assurance.

Why accreditors? Peer-based evaluation brings deep expertise in educational quality for institutional improvement through independent agencies. Accreditors, and their network of volunteers, understand curriculum, pedagogy, learning assessment, student services, and institutional innovation and improvement because we work directly with institutions on these issues. We can evaluate whether institutions are achieving their missions and serving students effectively in ways that go beyond regulatory compliance. Other members of the Triad work differently with institutions.

Why states? State authorization provides local accountability, consumer protection, and regulatory authority. State roles vary widely, but they license higher education institutions, monitor institutional operations within their borders against state regulations, and employ enforcement tools distinct from, yet complementary to, voluntary accreditation. States know their regional contexts, respond to local concerns, and work directly with accreditors.

Why federal oversight? The federal government distributes billions in Title IV financial aid funding and has a legitimate interest, along with accreditors, in ensuring those funds support quality education. Federal recognition of accreditors provides a national baseline for consistency across accreditors for quality assurance, while the Department enforces federal financial responsibility requirements and student protection regulations. Accreditors rely on the federal government in a number of critical ways.

Each component of the Triad brings different strengths, and each operates with different authority and constraints. Each serves as a meaningful check on the others—not through antagonism, but through independent judgment, shared information, and collaboration. The shared purpose of serving students is paramount.

When the system works well, all three components coordinate seamlessly: accreditors identify quality concerns and work with institutions on improvement; states exercise regulatory authority when consumer protection requires it; and the Department ensures federal funds support institutions that meet quality and financial standards. Information flows among all three, creating transparency and enabling rapid response when concerns emerge.

When the system breaks down, it is usually not because one component is too powerful, but because coordination fails, information has not been shared, authority or regulations do not align, or one member of the Triad acts without considering the others' distinct roles.

One thing is clear: The Triad does not need disruption. It needs strengthening. It needs clearer protocols for information sharing, better alignment of federal and state policies, more modern regulations, more consistent Department timelines, and continued evolution of accreditation standards to reflect changing educational models.

Most importantly, it needs all of us to approach our work as genuine partners, respecting the expertise and authority across the Triad in the roles legislatively granted to us, and all laser-focused on our shared goal: ensuring students have access to quality education that prepares them for success.

The "Cartel" Narrative: Rhetoric vs. Reality

If "cartel" implies collusion, price-fixing, and restrictions on competition, then applying this term to institutional accreditors is not only inaccurate, but it is contradicted by evidence. We would ask that the public consider our record.

> ***On Regional Boundaries*:** When the Department considered eliminating regional boundaries for institutional accreditors, our community proactively supported the change. Institutional accreditor representatives served on the 2019 negotiated rulemaking committee that recommended eliminating geographic restrictions. When the final rule took effect, accreditors moved to expand their geographic reach.
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> What slowed expansion was not the accreditors. The COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, immediately prior to the rule taking effect, and the resulting environment required a

different focus for institutions and accreditors during unprecedented disruption. External circumstances, not accreditor decisions to limit competition, slowed change.

***On Restricting New Entrants*:** It was the Department of Education, not existing accreditors, that placed a moratorium on recognizing new accreditors. Existing accreditors were neither consulted nor informed of the Department moratorium. Far from restricting competition, established accreditors have consistently reached out to other accreditors, offering guidance, sharing best practices, and supporting their development. We welcome new voices in accreditation and believe a strong, diverse accreditation community benefits students and institutions.

In fact, several of us applied for a FIPSE grant with an emerging accreditor. While ultimately not awarded, this alone serves as evidence that accreditors are not attempting to restrict new entrants. Established accreditors have always proactively offered support to other accreditors, both institutional and programmatic: sharing policy templates, providing insights on federal recognition requirements, offering guidance on best practices, and making staff available for consultation. We believe the higher education community is strengthened by qualified new entrants who bring fresh perspectives to quality assurance.

***On Supporting Institutional Choice*:** Institutional accreditors have taken concrete steps to support institutional choice:

- Published accessible information about standards, processes, and timelines;
- Provided preliminary consultation to institutions considering accreditation changes;
- Coordinated with other accreditors during transitions to ensure continuity;
- Communicated with the Department to better understand its approval process and timeframes;
- Maintained accreditation during transitions even when Department approval processes extended beyond expected timeframes; and
- Implemented clear protocols for adherence to antitrust principles.

Debunking the Cost Myth

Changing accreditors does not cost institutions $1 million dollars or more. This is simply inaccurate. While transitions involve legitimate costs, including application fees, self-study preparation, evaluation visits, and staff time, the actual financial outlay is far more modest than has been suggested. Accrediting agencies are committed to transparency about our processes and costs, and we encourage institutions considering a change in accreditor to reach out to us for accurate information.

More telling relating to costs is how accreditors have responded when Department procedures created barriers for institutions. For example, when the Department did not approve several changes in accreditor for well over a year, two institutional accreditors voluntarily waived annual dues for affected institutions while continuing to dedicate significant resources to supporting their accreditation. This practice of absorbing costs to protect institutions from being harmed by federal delays hardly reflects cartel behavior.

A Collaborative Community

The institutional accreditation community maintains active communication on shared challenges across the Triad: regular leadership meetings, working groups on emerging and complex issues, state and system collaboration, and coordination on federal policy matters. This collaboration enhances quality across all of our agencies. Institutions benefit when accreditors learn from each other's innovations and work together to address challenges affecting higher education broadly. Our shared commitments across the Triad can only serve to strengthen our work.

Moving Forward

Institutional accreditors support healthy competition that improves quality assurance. We support institutional choice based on mission fit and service quality. We welcome new accreditors who are held to the same rigorous federal standards that we face. We work to ensure institutions changing accreditors have accurate information, reasonable costs, and smooth transitions. This is not rhetoric. It is our consistent practice demonstrated through our actions.

Student-Centered Innovation Is Our Current Work, Not Our Future Aspiration

Institutional accreditors actively partner with institutions to advance innovation despite the restrictive nature of outdated regulations. Our member institutions are developing competency-based programs that recognize learning however it occurs, expanding workforce development partnerships that connect education to regional economic needs, implementing prior learning assessment to serve adult learners, creating flexible delivery models that expand access, and pioneering approaches that serve historically underrepresented student populations.

Institutional accreditors also embrace workforce-focused programs and understand their critical role in meeting regional economic needs, expanding educational opportunity, and connecting students to meaningful careers. Workforce programs are central to our institutions' missions and to our work as accreditors, and we have many existing examples that can be relied upon for those new to workforce programming.

A Path Forward: Constructive Dialogue Over Divisive Rhetoric

We recognize that no system is perfect, and we genuinely welcome opportunities to improve institutional accreditation. However, meaningful improvement requires moving beyond inflammatory rhetoric toward substantive, evidence-based dialogue about what students and institutions actually need.

Every accrediting agency, whether established for decades, newly recognized, or emerging, must demonstrate that it meets the rigorous requirements of federal regulations and must appear before the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) for review. This process is and should be demanding. We are proud of how we have consistently excelled in demonstrating compliance with federal expectations. Even more importantly, we have leveraged the recognition process as an opportunity to examine our own practices critically and to implement improvements that strengthen the quality of our work.

Institutional accreditors have also actively engaged to provide feedback to NACIQI and the Department regarding the recognition process and federal regulations. We have served on negotiated rulemaking committees, responded to requests for information or public comment, participated in Department initiatives, met with NACIQI subcommittees, and offered constructive recommendations drawn from our extensive experience.

With the Department's recent call for input on revisions to the accreditor recognition handbook, the time has arrived for us to engage once again in this critical work. We recognize that the handbook has added levels of bureaucracy and red tape that come with inefficiencies and a cost to institutions, and therefore students, slowing institutional innovation and growth. We support the need for changes. We will step into these discussions as we always have, including during the last revision under the Trump administration: with respectful dialogue, with insights drawn from decades of accreditation experience and direct work with hundreds of institutions, and with constructive recommendations for how the Triad can function more effectively together.

The goal should not be to "break up" any component of the Triad or to pit stakeholders against one another. The goal should be to strengthen all three components—accreditors, states, and the federal government—in genuine and renewed partnership. That partnership, grounded in mutual respect and our shared commitment to students, is what will drive meaningful change in higher education for all dedicated to this work.

We look forward to that partnership and to the work ahead.

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