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College accreditors host National Data Summit, release environmental scan to explore opportunities to build trust and strengthen ROI through better data

First-of-its-kind Summit convened leaders in postsecondary education, business, and philanthropy to discuss core challenges facing the nation's higher education system

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), a collaborative of the nation's six largest federally recognized institutional accreditors, recently convened a National Data Summit to explore opportunities to improve existing data frameworks to better promote transparency and outcomes-oriented accountability in higher education.

Following the summit, C-RAC released a new environmental scan of the higher education data landscape, "Accountability with Integrity: A National Framework for Data-Informed Education Accountability." The scan engaged more than 30 higher education data experts spanning diverse ideological viewpoints to present an unbiased review of the current landscape and identify potential recommendations for future action.

"Accreditors, state authorizing agencies, institutions, employers, and the federal government each play a vital role in advancing accountability and continuous improvement in higher education," said **Dr. Mac Powell, Chair of C-RAC and President of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges**. "But outdated systems are no longer capable of meeting the moment; students and families deserve better evidence of value and return on investment, and employers demand confidence that educational pathways align with evolving workforce needs. We must urgently forge new partnerships and take bold action to modernize the postsecondary accountability framework."

Summit attendees included **American Council of Education President Ted Mitchell**, who said, "I am grateful for the leadership that the Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions has shown in efforts to strengthen our nation's higher education data systems. Better data on educational outcomes at our colleges and universities will help further a culture of accountability for results. And it will help us show the public the many ways that higher education builds America."

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation Senior Vice President Jason Tyszko, who attended the summit and contributed to the environmental scan, said, "Employers, students, families, and taxpayers all benefit when postsecondary education is supported by clearer, more connected, and more actionable data. By partnering with accreditors and other higher education stakeholders, we have an opportunity to better align education, workforce needs, and measures of value in ways that strengthen economic mobility and public trust."

"If we want better accountability in higher education, we need better data. The quality of oversight depends upon the quality of the information behind it. Without reliable, meaningful, and actionable data, even the best intentions can lead to the wrong outcomes," said **Jonathan Helwink, former attorney at the U.S. Department of Education during the first Trump Administration** and principal at Helwink Legal Group, PLLC. Helwink also participated in the summit to offer a federal perspective on the data landscape.

The Summit engaged a variety of thought leaders and policy experts with interests and influence in higher education. Participants included representatives from the following organizations:

- American Council on Education
- American Association of Community Colleges
- American Enterprise Institute
- America First Policy Institute
- American Institutes for Research
- Association of American Universities

- Association of Community College Trustees
- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
- Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
- Data Quality Campaign
- Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
- Helwink Legal Group
- Institute for Higher Education Policy
- Lumina Foundation
- Midwestern Higher Education Compact
- National Association of College and University Business Officers
- National Student Clearinghouse
- State Higher Education Executive Officers Association
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- U.S. Department of Education
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

Insights from Summit attendees helped C-RAC identify three broad areas of potential opportunity for future action with prospective partner organizations:

1. Advance federal data reform to strengthen transparency, accountability, and public trust.

Advocate across the higher education sector for modernization of federal data systems so students, families, taxpayers, policymakers, institutions, and accreditors have access to clearer, more actionable information about educational outcomes. Improved federal data infrastructure will strengthen accreditors' ability to support institutional improvement, evaluate outcomes, and advance accountability with integrity.

2. Support state-level data interoperability initiatives.

Support state-led efforts already underway to improve data system alignment across K–12, higher education, workforce, and employer systems. These initiatives can provide practical models for improving transparency, reducing reporting burden, and connecting educational outcomes more meaningfully to workforce and community needs.

3. Partner with workforce leaders to better measure the full value of postsecondary education.

Support efforts by employer-related partners to explore how labor-market data, workforce models, and employer insights can more fully capture the value and impact of postsecondary education, including economic mobility, career advancement, skills development, and regional workforce vitality.

C-RAC members plan to continue conversations with higher education stakeholders to assess initiatives that could bring solutions to the challenges within the country's higher education data infrastructure.

For more information about C-RAC and the work of college accreditors, please visit www.c-rac.org.

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About the Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC):

C-RAC's six federally recognized institutional accrediting commissions are responsible for accrediting almost 2,600 postsecondary, degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States. These include over 1,400 public institutions, 1,000 private non-profits, and nearly 100 private for-profit institutions. Accrediting commissions are private, nonprofit organizations and provide oversight and accountability of diverse institutions, including faith-based institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, other minority-serving institutions (MSI), community colleges, research universities, and tribal colleges, among others. The commissions and peer evaluation teams at the heart of the accrediting enterprise are made up of volunteers, and at least one of every seven commissioners is a representative of the public.