

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 16, 2016

Dr. Susan D. Phillips, Chair  
Dr. Jennifer Hong, Executive Director  
National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue SW, Room 6W250  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Dr. Phillips and Dr. Hong:

In advance of next week's meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), during which the renewal of several accrediting agencies' recognition will be reviewed, we urge you to recommend withdrawing recognition of the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS). As clearly indicated in the recent staff recommendation<sup>1</sup> from the U.S. Department of Education ("the Department"), there is overwhelming evidence that ACICS represents a threat to the integrity of accreditation and higher education in America and that its inadequate review process has put students at risk.

As you know, accrediting agencies play a central role in the oversight of the American higher education system—serving as a "gatekeeper" to \$150 billion in federal funds and evaluators of the quality of education offered to students. Thus, accreditors are uniquely responsible for protecting students and taxpayers from institutions that offer little or no educational value and poor outcomes. Unfortunately, as the Department itself has acknowledged,<sup>2</sup> far too many schools have maintained their institutional accreditation, even while defrauding and misleading students. Thus, it is vitally important that the Department maintain the strictest scrutiny in its review of these supposed "watchdogs" of the higher education system to prevent further systematic abuse of students.

There is mounting evidence that ACICS does not have, and does not enforce, sufficiently rigorous standards with respect to student achievement and academic quality, and that their status as a recognized accreditor should therefore be revoked. Accrediting nearly 900 campuses enrolling more than 800,000 students, ACICS is one of the nation's largest higher education accreditors, but many of the institutions it has accredited have left students with little more than a pile of debt. According to a study by the Center for American Progress, one in five students at

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "Staff Report to the Senior Department Official on Recognition Compliance Issues", June 15, 2016, <https://opeweb.ed.gov/aslweb/finalStaffReports.cfm?aID=15&mid=68>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Ted Mitchell, "Strengthening Accreditation to Protect Students", March 29 2016, <http://blog.ed.gov/2016/03/strengthening-accreditation-to-protect-students/#more-22904>

ACICS-accredited schools default on their loans.<sup>3</sup> ACICS has been under investigation by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and twelve state attorneys general have already also called on the Department to deny ACICS's federal recognition. Furthermore, ACICS was the accrediting agency which granted access to federal student aid to the now-defunct Corinthian Colleges, Inc. While the company's fraudulent actions, including actively falsifying job placement rates, ultimately led to its collapse and bankruptcy, ACICS inexplicably maintained Corinthian's accreditation up until its doors were closed.

ACICS's apparent lack of scrutiny and weak monitoring of Corinthian is not an anomaly, but rather part of a pattern of woeful neglect by the agency. ACICS has failed to identify compliance problems, ensure rigorous practices, and enforce its own accreditation standards for other schools under its charge. Documents indicate that ACICS knew about the need to fix verification issues with placement rates beginning in 2011, and schools accredited by the agency were even subject to multiple investigations, lawsuits, and settlements for falsifying placement rates over the last five years. Still, ACICS chose not to take corrective action. As highlighted in a recent investigation<sup>4</sup>, an institution accredited by ACICS known as Northwestern Polytechnic University (NPU) was reported to have engaged in rampant fraudulent practices, including employing unqualified instructors, misleading evaluators, and operating as a "visa mill" by falsifying grades in order to maintain students' visa status and ability to pay tuition. Even in the wake of this investigation, ACICS has continued to allow NPU to maintain its full accreditation.

Recent actions by ACICS toward improvement in the wake of intense scrutiny for their failures are simply too little, too late. Today, two-thirds of ACICS commissioners continue to work as executives at for-profit schools—which make up the vast majority of the institutions ACICS accredits—and a third of these commissioners work at schools facing government scrutiny and consumer protection lawsuits. ACICS has taken insufficient steps to ensure these egregious conflicts of interest are avoided. There have been no significant changes to the agency's practices to correct noncompliance with their own standards, or changes to the process for ensuring that evaluation teams and volunteers are qualified and properly trained. Most importantly, ACICS has not adopted meaningful changes to strengthen its inadequate student achievement standards in the wake of numerous failures.

We know you share our concerns that the current higher education accreditation system does an insufficient job of ensuring quality and protections to students. Accordingly, we urge you to concur with the Department's staff recommendation that recognition of ACICS as an accreditor should be revoked. This action will help to ensure that accreditors can be trusted as a reliable authority regarding the quality of an institution's education and a responsible gatekeeper of federal taxpayer dollars. Thank you for your attention to this issue and we look forward to continuing to work with you.

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<sup>3</sup> Center for American Progress, Ben Miller, "Up to the Job? National Accreditation and College Outcomes", September 2015, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/31134358/Miller-Accreditation-brief-9.1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> BuzzFeed New, Molly Hensley-Clancy, "Making the Grades; How one California University faked student's score, skated by immigration authorities – and made a fortune in the process", May 26 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/mollyhensleyclancy/inside-the-school-that-abolished-the-f-and-raked-in-the-cash?utm\\_term=.wslBn1WyJ#.eyXIOQg8P](https://www.buzzfeed.com/mollyhensleyclancy/inside-the-school-that-abolished-the-f-and-raked-in-the-cash?utm_term=.wslBn1WyJ#.eyXIOQg8P)

Sincerely,



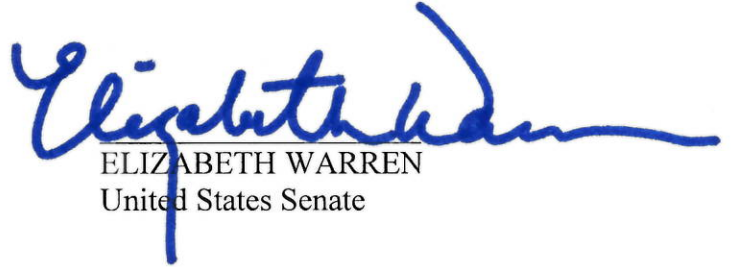
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