



# Regional Accreditation Standards

A New Framework for Comparison

Cameron Childress  
Elizabeth Davidson Pisacreta  
James Dean Ward  
Lisa Yamagishi-Levin

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# Introduction

Accreditation is an important aspect of higher education, yet its processes and impacts remain largely opaque to the public. As one of the main federal resources ensuring colleges meet basic standards of quality, accreditors act as gatekeepers, controlling whether an institution's students can access over \$120 billion in financial aid through federal grants and loans each year. Accreditors are private agencies, recognized by the Department of Education (ED), that review colleges every few years, often through self-studies and peer site visits. Although accreditors are not government entities, their decisions have ramifications for the public, influencing which colleges operate and who can afford to attend them.

This research project aims to systematically analyze accreditation standards from each of the major US accreditors as well as offer insights into how these criteria influence student success and post-graduation outcomes. We examine the handbooks of 11 accreditors—seven that were previously known as “regional” accreditors (before that distinction was made moot) and four national accreditors. We use these handbooks to identify how accreditation standards have evolved in recent years and assess the extent to which these standards address student outcomes and post-graduation success.

While most accreditor standards converge around common themes, they differ in how specific and actionable they are, with only a few clearly linking institutional practice to measurable student outcomes.

We find that while most accreditor standards converge around common themes, they differ in how specific and actionable they are, with only a few clearly linking institutional practice to measurable student outcomes. There is also significant variability in the volume of standards per accreditor, from a low 18 to a high of 182. While many accreditors' standards outline processes for continuous improvement and monitoring, few standards outline specific thresholds for student performance or tie meeting those thresholds to specific consequences. Similarly, few accreditors' standards have a rigorous focus on student loan repayment or

workforce outcomes, despite state and federal policy shifts in recent years to address challenges in those areas. In this paper, our findings focus on the substance of the standards, but we know that accreditors can use other mechanisms, such as self-study and site visits, for reviewing and monitoring institutional performance, even when a specific area of focus is not emphasized in the standards themselves.

Outside of select institutional staff, few people interact directly with accreditation standards. Increasing awareness among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can illuminate how these handbooks may influence institutional quality and prioritize student outcomes. This research brief offers a rare look at how accreditors are shaping institutional priorities behind the scenes. As student outcomes and institutional performance become more central to national debates about higher education, there is a growing interest in whether accrediting agencies are keeping pace and whether their standards are focused on the aspects of institutional practice that can drive performance improvements. By systematically analyzing these standards across accreditors, our work creates a shared reference point that can inform future policy decisions, research questions, and efforts to strengthen quality assurance.

This research brief offers a rare look at how accreditors are shaping institutional priorities behind the scenes.

In this report, we first summarize the history of accreditation and related literature, which builds on our prior work on this topic as well as companion reports on accreditors' use of data-driven practices and commission action letters. Next, we describe our methodology for creating a framework that categorizes accreditation standards and descriptively report on our analysis of those categories. Finally, we summarize our findings and discuss the implications of our analysis.

# Background on accreditation

Accreditation is one of the central mechanisms used by the federal government to ensure institutional quality in higher education. It forms part of the “regulatory triad,” alongside state authorization and federal recognition of accreditors, that governs whether colleges can access Title IV financial aid. Institutions must be accredited by a federally recognized accreditor in order to gain access to Title IV funds (institutions must also be authorized to operate in their states, making part three of the triad). Accreditors are funded by member institutions and operate independently, but their decisions determine the flow of billions in public funds and shape the higher education landscape. Most institutions remain with a single accreditor indefinitely while navigating cycles of self-study, site visits, and reaffirmation reviews. These reviews are carried out by teams of peer evaluators from other member institutions and are guided by the standards set by each agency.

While accrediting agencies have freedom in how they define and enforce quality, their recognition by the federal government depends on their compliance with a set of criteria outlined in federal law and regulation. Accreditors must show that their standards and policies meet the requirements of the Higher Education Act, its subsequent reauthorizations, and regulations that have been derived under these laws. The Department of Education (ED) reviews accreditors for compliance every five years through a process that involves agency self-assessments, public comment, and formal review by the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). If ED determines that an accreditor is not meeting its responsibilities, it can withdraw recognition, effectively cutting off Title IV access for all the institutions it oversees, although this happens rarely. Significant latitude is given to accreditors in terms of how they define quality, determine benchmarks, assess outcomes, and decide enforcement or follow-up, but 34 C.F.R. 602.16 defines broad areas in which an accreditor must set standards, including: “success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution’s mission,” curricula, faculty, facilities, fiscal and administrative capacity, recruiting and admissions practices, measures of program

length, record of student complaints, and “record of compliance with the institution’s program responsibilities under title IV of the Act.”<sup>1</sup>

Accreditation standards are the foundation of how accreditors evaluate quality in higher education and how they signal what they believe should be the minimum expectations to operate as a postsecondary institution. The standards provide guidance on everything from how institutions organize their programs to how they evaluate student outcomes, manage resources, and ensure institutional effectiveness. While reviews may include site visits, peer review, and ongoing reporting requirements, it is the standards themselves that define the expectations to which institutions are held. These standards are not just technical checklists. They set the tone for what matters to the accreditor, defining how institutions describe their missions, support their students, and assess whether they are delivering on their promises. For instance, the WASC Senior College and University Commission’s (WSCUC) 2023 Handbook explains that its Standards of Accreditation are “expectations and characteristics of excellence” that provide the basis for institutional self-review and Commission decisions.

Although all recognized institutional accreditors can grant access to federal funds, those (historically) labeled as “regional” or “national” oversee different types of institutions. As of 2024, there are 38 recognized institutional accreditors, seven of which (previously known as regional accreditors) oversee institutions enrolling more than 16 million degree-seeking students, accounting for over 95 percent of students in accredited colleges and universities. They include:

- the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)<sup>2</sup>
- the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)
- the Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

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<sup>1</sup> “Accreditation and Preaccreditation Standards,” US Department of Education, Code of Federal Regulations 34 C.F.R. § 602.16 (current through 2025), <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-VI/part-602/subpart-B/section-602.16>.

<sup>2</sup> The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) represents two accrediting organizations: the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission. “CHEA- and USDE-Recognized Accrediting Organizations,” Council for Higher Education Accreditation, <https://www.chea.org/chea-and-usde-recognized-accrediting-organizations>.

- the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)
- the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

The four largest national accreditors oversee institutions that serve about 529,000 students, or roughly 72 percent of the remaining degree-seeking students. These include:

- the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC),
- the National Accrediting Commission of Career Arts and Sciences (NACCAS),
- the Council on Occupational Education (COE)
- the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES).

These accreditors review institutions holistically, focusing on mission, governance, and broadly, institutional effectiveness.

There is little rigorous research tying specific accreditation practices or approaches to student performance, and accreditors typically sanction institutions for financial reasons, not academic ones.

National accreditors typically evaluate institutions that are more narrowly focused, such as career colleges, distance education providers, or religious schools. Their standards often emphasize compliance and student outcomes like job placement and licensure pass rates. These differences in scope and orientation between formerly regional and national accreditors informed our decision to analyze them separately in this project.

There is little rigorous research tying specific accreditation practices or approaches to student performance, and accreditors typically sanction institutions for financial reasons, not academic ones. One of the reasons the evidence base on accreditation practices is thin is because there is very little insight into how accreditation standards vary across agencies and over time. In the next section of our paper, we shed new light on this

variation by developing a framework for accreditation standards that allows for comparison across agencies.

## **Creating a new framework of accreditation standards**

As outlined earlier, accreditation plays a key role in higher education quality assurance, yet there is little research that explores the differences in standards (or lack thereof) between accreditors. This project builds upon our previous work to better understand accreditation oversight and practices and to make policy recommendations that would improve the accreditation process and benefit students. We aim to answer three research questions:

- What are the similarities and differences in standards across accreditors?
- Which standards most explicitly link institutional practices to measurable student outcomes?
- What do differences in the content and specificity of standards suggest about how accreditors articulate their priorities?

We focus on accreditation standards because they are the most prominent and most public expressions of priorities and values made by accreditation agencies. Other elements of the accreditation process, like site visit protocols, action letters, annual data submissions, monitoring reports, and substantive change applications are important, and help shape quality assurance. In some cases, accreditors publish guidance documents that help clarify and operationalize their standards, but these materials are less consistently available and vary in format across agencies. Because standards are publicly available and share a common purpose across accreditors, they provide a meaningful foundation for comparing how accreditors articulate their priorities and values.



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As we weighed our analysis approach, we opted to take a descriptive approach to evaluating variation across standards rather than an empirical one. Standards are often vaguely worded and overlapping, making it difficult to directly compare across accreditors; in addition, this imprecision also undermines any effort to link changes in standards language to measurable shifts in student outcomes. Despite this ambiguity we recognize that an accreditor's standards are foundational and apply to every institution under their purview. Standards represent a consistent source of information about what accreditors value. By organizing these standards thematically, our framework helps surface patterns that might otherwise be missed, such as how many accreditors emphasize specific student outcomes, which accreditors highlight disaggregated data, or which rely on broader, less operational language.

## Framework development process

To meet these needs, we created a framework of accreditation standards, the first large-scale effort to systematically compare and analyze standards across multiple accrediting agencies. The framework has 10 high-level themes and 41 sub-themes, which we describe in more detail below. We developed these themes and sub-themes through a systematic and iterative review of 14 accreditation handbooks issued between 2013 and 2025 from seven formerly regional accrediting agencies. Incorporating multiple handbooks for each regional accreditor allowed us to observe how standards have changed over time among the most high-impact accreditors. At a high level we describe the framework below, with a more detailed description of themes and sub-themes provided in Appendix A, including a version available for download.

After our initial set of reviews, we recognized that regional and national accreditors were sufficiently different to warrant focusing only on regional agencies in this paper. While the framework itself was designed to apply to

both, our analysis here is limited to those seven accreditors formerly considered “regional.” We reviewed handbooks from four national accreditors to help inform the development of themes and sub-themes, and we include select examples where they offer useful points of contrast. However, we did not complete a full, systematic coding of the national accreditor standards, and they are excluded from the formal matrix and core findings presented in this report.

The work unfolded in three phases. In Phase 1, we began by reading accreditation handbooks and noting themes that stood out across the standards. As we reviewed additional handbooks, we tested our emerging list of themes, added new ones when the existing set did not apply, and revised others to better capture what we were seeing. We paid particular attention to standards related to student outcomes, institutional use of data, and post-graduation metrics, since those tied most closely to our research questions and required additional nuance. Through this process we eventually reached a point where our list of themes reflected the range of issues that accreditors’ standards consistently addressed.

In Phase 2, we refined the list as a team of researchers, rewording vague language, tightening definitions, and testing whether each theme was specific enough to be consistently applied. We reapplied the revised themes across the same set of standards to confirm their fit, focusing first on the sub-themes to preserve detail and remain close to the language of the standards. From there, we grouped what would eventually become the sub-themes into 10 broader “major themes” to create a structured taxonomy. These major themes were not drawn from prior literature but instead reflected the groupings that naturally emerged from the bottom-up process of reading and categorizing the standards themselves.

Three team members conducted the review independently, each applying the framework to a different subset of accreditor handbooks. We documented cases where standards did not fit neatly into existing categories and flagged those for discussion. After completing our initial round of classification, we met to finalize the framework, consolidating similar themes, clarifying definitions, and locking in the full set of 10 themes and 41 sub-themes.

In Phase 3, we applied the finalized framework across all 14 handbooks. We made slight adjustments as needed, but the framework largely held up across accreditors and across time. At this stage we also systematically coded each standard into the 41 sub-themes using a consistent format

(for example, 1.D.2 for NWCCU's Standard 1, part D.2). This strategy allowed us to track how different accreditors approach similar issues and to see how requirements have evolved over time. The result was a matrix that captures the full set of standards for the seven formerly regional accrediting agencies, offering a detailed, structured view of how each agency defines institutional quality. The matrix became the foundation for both the descriptive analysis and the findings presented later in this report. For more on the classification process and example theme definitions, see Appendix B.

These standards reflect a career-oriented mission and a compliance-driven approach, rather than the broader institutional effectiveness and long-term student outcomes emphasized by formerly regional agencies.

The national accreditors we reviewed tended to have standards that were narrower in scope, more prescriptive in tone, and more focused on short-term workforce outcomes. ACCSC, for example, places strong emphasis on program-level thresholds for completion, job placement, and licensure pass rates, along with detailed operational requirements related to refund policies, faculty documentation, and job verification. These standards reflect a career-oriented mission and a compliance-driven approach, rather than the broader institutional effectiveness and long-term student outcomes emphasized by formerly regional agencies.

## Description of themes and subthemes

In Table 1 below, we describe the 10 high-level themes we generated from our iterative review of accreditor handbooks.

**Table 1**

1. Student Success and Accountability	Standards focusing on the systematic measurement, evaluation, and enhancement of student outcomes and success. This means the broader preparation of students for success beyond their academic careers. This theme also includes standards addressing institutions' effectiveness in holding themselves accountable for their students' outcomes.
2. Academic Quality and Faculty	Standards that delve into the quality, delivery, and assurance of educational content, faculty roles, academic resources, and the measurement of student achievement.
3. Data-Driven Success	Standards for collecting, analyzing, and publicly sharing data on student outcomes, and the use of data for institutional improvement.
4. Student Financial Health	Standards focused on how institutions track and ensure positive financial outcomes for students and address affordability, student debt, and post-graduation success. It also covers transparency in financial aid and the monitoring of labor market outcomes, helping students manage the financial challenges of higher education.
5. Access to Higher Education	Standards emphasizing the commitment to creating an environment where all students can thrive.
6. Student Experience and Support	Standards emphasizing the institution's commitment to enhancing the overall student experience and providing comprehensive support services beyond the classroom.
7. Institutional Integrity	Standards that underscore the core values, transparency, and ethical conduct of institutions.
8. Mission, Governance, and Improvement	Standards focusing on the governance, leadership structures, and the alignment of institutional actions with its mission.
9. Financial Sustainability	Standards related to the prudent management, allocation, and sustainability of both resources.
10. Educational Technology and Resources	Standards addressing the integration, challenges, and opportunities of digital platforms and technological advancements in education.

These 10 categories capture the broad areas of institutional quality that accreditors emphasize. At the same time, there is variation within each category across agencies and handbooks. The sub-themes capture this variation in more detail.

## Framework development challenges

In applying this framework to individual accreditors' standards, we found categorizing standards into mutually exclusive thematic buckets to be challenging. During our review, we often encountered standards that (a) could be interpreted in multiple ways or (b) simultaneously addressed several distinct aspects of institutional quality. Rather than force these standards into single categories, we adopted a flexible approach that acknowledges these overlapping relationships.

A clear example is NECHE 2021 Standard 8.6, which requires institutions to define and publish measures of student success, including retention, transfer, graduation, licensure, loan default or repayment, and employment. A single provision like this touches on multiple sub-themes at once: *Student Outcomes and Attainment, Action Plans for Underperforming Institutions, Collection of Student Outcomes Data, Public Transparency on Student Outcomes Data, and Monitoring of Student Debt*. Capturing its full meaning required coding across more than one category, since the standard links measurement, improvement, and public accountability within a single statement.

Linguistic ambiguity presented another challenge. Standards frequently use broad or vague terminology, requiring careful interpretation to maintain consistency in our coding. We also saw wide variation in the level of detail. Some standards provided specific, verifiable expectations. For instance, WSCUC 2013 CFR 1.2 requires institutions to define and publish learning expectations, assess outcomes, use results for improvement, and make findings publicly available. Others were more general, signaling intent without the same operational clarity or measurable thresholds, leaving greater room for interpretation during review. As an example, Standard 8.1 in SACSCOC's 2024 standards calls for institutions to identify goals and "use multiple measures to document student success," but it does not specify how these measures should be applied.

To address these challenges, we established definitions for key concepts through multiple rounds of independent coding. When team members disagreed about a classification, we reconciled those differences collectively. For example, we defined *Student Outcomes and Attainment* within the *Student Success and Accountability* major theme as “Standards related to measurements of student success beyond the classroom, focused on outcome-oriented goals such as retention, graduation, credit momentum, and transfer rates.” This is distinct from our *Academic Success* sub-theme within the *Academic Quality and Faculty* major theme, which is defined as “Standards related to the assessment of student performance in their immediate educational setting. This may include the achievement of course- and program-specific learning objectives, grades, and participation in honors programs or capstone projects.” These definitions serve as the anchors for our analysis, ensuring consistency even when comparing standards from different agencies using varying terminology or levels of specificity. A full set of thematic definitions is available in the appendix.

Our analysis examines the standards in place as of the 2024-2025 academic year, at the latest, so our framework and findings do not capture any changes made in light of more recent developments in federal and state policy. For instance, in response to a presidential executive order issued in April 2025 directing accreditors to end diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) requirements, several agencies began reviewing their standards.<sup>3</sup> On October 6, 2025, WSCUC officially adopted an updated version of its 2023 Standards that removed references to DEI in four areas, replacing earlier language about institutions’ “explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion” with broader phrasing focused on “success for all students” and “educational effectiveness.” According to *Inside Higher Ed*, these changes followed a public comment process launched in August 2025 and reflect an effort to align with updated federal directives.<sup>4</sup> While the Commission’s own announcement framed the updates as clarifying and reinforcing a focus on student outcomes, the revisions illustrate how rapidly accreditors’ approaches can evolve, and

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<sup>3</sup> “Reforming Accreditation to Strengthen Higher Education,” The White House, Presidential Actions, April 23, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/reforming-accreditation-to-strengthen-higher-education/>.

<sup>4</sup> Susan H. Greenberg, “Western Accrator Officially Drops DEI Standards,” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 8, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2025/10/08/western-accreditor-officially-drops-dei-standards>.

how difficult it is to link standards to specific changes in student outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

## Findings

Accreditors vary greatly in how many different standards they include. In the most recent set of regional standards, NECHE led the way with 182 different standards, compared to HLC which only has 18. We do not claim that including more or fewer standards is ideal, but rather that this reflects differences in accreditors' approach. Some accreditors consolidate their expectations into fewer, but broader standards, while others distribute them across many, more discrete standards. A more compact framework like that of HLC tends to group related topics within a single standard, whereas NECHE has more standards, but each is more discrete.

### **Key Finding #1: There is meaningful variation in accreditors standards across themes and sub-themes, which reveal differences in the priorities and emphasis conveyed through their standards**

Comparing the number of accreditor standards that fall within each theme is useful to understand accreditors' priorities and emphases, as articulated through their standards. To more accurately compare the priorities of each accreditor, regardless of the total number of standards they have published, we also analyzed the number of sub-themes in each major thematic bucket that are represented by at least one standard. The number of sub-themes that are represented in a given set of standards indicates the overall breadth of themes the standards address. Analyzed together, they show us not only what accreditors say in their standards, but how widely, and in what areas, they focus their attention.

In Charts 1 and 2 below we show the total number of standards and the number of sub-themes represented, by major theme, for each regional

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<sup>5</sup> "Updated 2023 Standards Adopted — Thank You for Your Input," WASC Senior College and University Commission, October 6, 2025, <https://www.wscuc.org/post/updated-2023-standards-adopted/>.

accreditor's current set of standards. Charts 3 and 4 in Appendix B display this information for each regional's previous set of standards. A full version of the framework, with specific accreditor standards categorized into themes, is available for download at: [https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Accreditation\\_Standards\\_Framework\\_Dataset.xlsx](https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Accreditation_Standards_Framework_Dataset.xlsx). As shown in Chart 1, across almost all of the handbooks examined, *Academic Quality and Faculty* had the largest number of standards attributed to it (156), and within that theme, NECHE had the most standards, at 56. NECHE has the most standards of any accreditor overall, with 35 standards in the *Mission, Governance, and Improvement* theme, and 19 and 18 standards in *Institutional Integrity* and *Financial Sustainability* themes, respectively. The *Mission, Governance, and Improvement* theme also has large numbers of standards, with 60 in MSCHE's 2015 standards, 49 in ACCJC's 2014 standards, and over 30 in NECHE's 2021 and 2026 standards. Across most accreditors, there were fewer standards in the *Student Financial Health* theme, with some (including HLC's 2025 standards) having almost none. *Access to Higher Education* shows the greatest variation: NWCCU included just one standard in 2019 but expanded to eight in its 2020 revision, while SACSCOC's 2018 and 2024 standards contained none.



**Figure 1: Number of standards per major theme, by accreditor (most recent standards)**

Theme	WSCUC 2023	NWCCU 2020	HLC 2025	ACCJC 2024	MSCHE 2023	SACSCOC 2024	NECHE 2021	Total
Academic Quality and Faculty	14	16	8	15	17	30	56	156
Data Driven Success	7	6	4	7	6	11	7	48
Access to Higher Education	5	8	1	8	7	0	7	36
Educational Technology and Resources	3	6	2	5	6	11	9	42
Financial Sustainability	3	4	1	7	6	8	18	47
Institutional Integrity	5	10	3	6	6	10	19	59
Mission, Governance, and Improvement	11	15	7	19	18	31	35	136
Student Experience and Support	8	10	2	6	8	10	15	59
Student Financial Health	2	6	0	2	6	3	10	29
Student Outcomes and Success	11	8	6	11	10	14	13	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>685</b>

Created with Datawrapper

Chart 2 displays the number of sub-themes within each theme that have at least one applicable standard by accreditor. For instance, each accreditor has at least one standard that falls into each of the four sub-themes under *Student Outcomes and Success*. When we look at the representation of standards across sub-themes, we see less variation than when we are looking at themes. Each set of accreditor standards in the most recent year has at least one standard that covers each sub-theme under *Student Outcomes and Success* and *Institutional Integrity*. We see a similar breadth of coverage, with some variation, under *Academic Quality and faculty*, *Data Driven Success*, *Mission*, *Governance*, and *Improvement*, and *Financial Sustainability*, where each set of the most recent standards has at least one standard that is classified in either all, or almost all of the nested sub-themes. We see the most variation in *Student Financial Health*: NWCCU's 2020 standards and NECHE's 2021 standards are represented in all five sub-themes; WSCUC's 2023 standards and ACCJC's 2024 standards are only represented in two of the sub themes; and HLC's 2025 standards cover none of the sub-themes. This variation demonstrates why our sub-theme analysis really matters: While all accreditors have standards that articulate expectations related to student outcomes, only some of the accreditors have standards that explicitly mention sub-themes like affordability, student debt, and post-graduation labor market outcomes.

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**Figure 2: Number of sub-themes covered by at least one standard, by accreditor (most recent standards)**

Theme	WSCUC 2023	NWCCU 2020	HLC 2025	ACCJC 2024	MSCHE 2023	SACSCOC 2024	NECHE 2021	TOTAL
Academic Quality and Faculty	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	33
Data Driven Success	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	20
Access to Higher Education	3	3	1	3	3	0	3	16
Educational Technology and Resources	3	5	2	4	5	4	5	28
Financial Sustainability	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	12
Institutional Integrity	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21
Mission, Governance, and Improvement	5	6	5	5	6	5	6	38
Student Experience and Support	4	5	2	4	5	4	5	29
Student Financial Health	2	5	0	2	4	3	5	21
Student Outcomes and Success	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>246</b>

Created with Datawrapper

Notably, all accreditors operate under the same federal framework and expectations that guide accreditors' recognition processes, so some degree of consistency across standards is expected. Under 34 C.F.R. Part 602, all recognized accreditors must maintain standards addressing student achievement, curriculum, fiscal capacity, and related areas. These requirements create a shared baseline that shapes how standards are organized, even as accreditors exercise broad discretion in their wording

and enforcement. As such, variation in the level of emphasis and prioritization of some themes and sub-themes across accreditors is noteworthy, as is how that emphasis and prioritization evolves over time.

### **Key Finding #2: Overall, there is significant variation across accreditors in the specificity and clarity of their standards**

In addition to the variation in standards across sub-themes, the level of specificity in how the standards are written and the extent to which they mandate concrete actions or refer to specific metrics differs.

Accountability depends on observable expectations, and when standards clearly specify required actions or specific metrics, it becomes easier for institutions, reviewers, and the public to understand what is expected and to evaluate whether those expectations are being met. Broadly worded standards may make accountability more difficult, regardless if the underlying intent across sets of standards is similar. Future research could explore whether differences in standards' specificity correspond to differences in implementation or outcomes, but such questions fall beyond the scope of this analysis.

Some standards simply state that institutions must support student success, with little detail about what that support should look like or how effectiveness should be evaluated. Others outline specific metrics, disaggregation requirements, or continuous improvement plans. Some standards describe student outcomes as institutional responsibilities, while others describe them more aspirationally, as goals tied to an institution's specific mission. As explained in the finding above, we recognize that some accreditors may invoke accountability via other mechanisms, like guidelines for self-study or site visits, but as long as some accreditors specify these actions via their standards, the variation is notable.

While most accreditors require institutions to define and assess student outcomes, the extent to which these expectations function within the written standards differs. For example, CFR 1.2 and 2.10 in WSCUC's 2013 set of standards outline a full accountability cycle (goal setting, measurement, use of results, and public reporting) within the standards themselves. The standards in section 8 of SACSCOC's 2024 handbook convey similar expectations, but more broadly. These standards direct institutions to identify goals and use multiple measures of student success, but don't specify which measures or how results should be reported. Both sets of standards emphasize continuous improvement, but

the language in WSCUC's standards makes the accountability process more visible within the standards text, while SACSCOC's standards rely more on interpretation and accompanying materials.

Other sets of accreditation standards illustrate the different ways that accreditors communicate expectations related to student outcomes and institutional accountability. NWCCU's 2020 standards were among the most detailed. These standards specify requirements for data transparency, data disaggregation, and use of outcomes data for continuous improvement. ACCJC's 2024 standards balance broad institutional goals with more actionable mandates such as course scheduling, with a clear through-line connecting access, communication, and accountability. NECHE's 2021 standards, meanwhile, emphasize aligning outcome measures with institutional mission and student population characteristics, showing another approach to defining quality.

### **Key Finding #3: Accreditors agree on the importance of student learning and achievement data, but differ in how explicitly their standards describe its use**

Details vary, but almost every set of standards we analyzed included references to student outcomes. NWCCU's 2020 Standard 1.D.3 states that student achievement data should be published, disaggregated, benchmarked against peer institutions, and used to inform planning and decision making. Similarly, ACCJC's 2024 Standard 2.9 connects learning outcomes assessment to program review and planning, creating a clear bridge between achievement measures and institutional practice. Particularly in regards to disaggregated data, or understanding how student outcomes differ by demographic standards, accreditors take different approaches in their level of specificity. HLC's 2020 Criterion 1.C also focuses on diversity as a core value but gives institutions flexibility in how to define and measure such commitments. MSCHE's 14th edition standards also include references to helping diverse learners in student support and governance but lack any explicit requirement to analyze outcome disparities by race, income, or other demographic characteristics.

These differences show the variation in how directly accreditor standards connect measurement with accountability. While nearly all accreditors expect institutions to analyze and act on outcomes data, only some make these expectations explicit within their written standards. Note that while accreditors may collect and define outcomes data in other contexts, or

may publish guidance documents and data-use expectations in companion to their published standards, our analysis does not score those materials, and this analysis only reflects the published standards language. This paper does not contemplate whether the differences in accreditor standards regarding student outcomes translate into meaningful differences in institutional practices, but answering that question would be necessary to understand the relationship between the standards and student performance.

#### **Key Finding #4: Few sets of standards clearly define what institutions must do when student outcomes fall short**

Few accreditor standards clearly define what institutions must do when student outcomes fall short. Most mention continuous improvement but provide flexibility in how institutions identify and respond to areas of weak performance. Although accreditors do monitor outcomes and require follow-up actions through other components of the review process, they differ in how their standards address these accountability actions. Improvement is often framed as a matter of institutional responsibility and self-evaluation without specifying measurable goals or explicit triggers for additional action when outcomes remain low.

Criterion 3.G in HLC's 2025 standards mentions benchmarking of student outcomes, but does not specify which outcomes should be tracked, what level of improvement would constitute continuous improvement, or what level of underperformance would trigger corrective action. Standard 8.1 in SACSCOC's 2024 standards similarly directs institutions to identify and publish goals for student achievement and to use multiple measures to document success. Yet it does not define what constitutes satisfactory performance or outline consequences when goals are not met. Both examples reflect a broader pattern among accreditors that shows an emphasis on documentation and process rather than required corrective measures.

By comparison, COE's 2023 Standard 2-B-1 illustrates a more prescriptive approach. While COE is a national accreditor and thus outside the scope of this analysis, its Standard 2-B-1 explicitly requires institutions to meet minimum thresholds for completion, placement, and licensure-exam pass rates and mandates formal action plans if those benchmarks are not achieved. The specificity underscores how national accreditors are sometimes able to apply more prescriptive, outcome-based expectations

than regional accreditors because they tend to serve a more homogenous set of institutions.

### **Key Finding #5: Few standards directly address students' post-college financial and career outcomes**

Students increasingly report that their primary goal in pursuing higher education is to secure a good job.<sup>6</sup> Yet only a few regional accreditors have adopted standards that directly require institutions to monitor students' post-graduation outcomes. NWCCU's 2020 standards again provide some of the clearest examples. Standard 1.D.2 explicitly references post-graduation success, and Standard 2.G.5 requires institutions to monitor student loan repayment rates and publish this information on their websites. These provisions recognize that accountability extends beyond completion and into financial and workforce outcomes.

By contrast, SACSCOC's 2024 Standard 12.6 requires only that institutions provide guidance to students on managing their debt. It does not require tracking repayment, default rates, or labor market outcomes. MSCHE's 14th Edition standards also omit direct references to student debt or employment. Although MSCHE and other accreditors may mandate collection of labor market information in companion materials, these variables may warrant greater focus and inclusion in the published standards, especially as public debate around return on investment intensifies.

This gap between how often accreditors mention financial and workforce outcomes, compared to educational or academic outcomes, suggests that most accreditors continue to treat financial and workforce outcomes as separate from educational quality. The standards themselves rarely require institutions to examine whether graduates succeed financially, even though that question remains central to public confidence in higher education.

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<sup>6</sup> "The State of Higher Education 2025: Demand for Higher Education Remains Strong Despite Barriers," *Gallup and Lumina Foundation*, 2025, 15, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>.

# Illustrative examples: Clear and actionable standards

Overall, these findings show that while most accreditor standards cover similar themes, the level of clarity and specificity that is used to describe institutional expectations is variable. The section below highlights a subset of standards that demonstrate clear, actionable connections to student success.

Clear and actionable standards set a clear expectation for institutional action, define how that action will be evaluated, and link it to student outcomes. In some cases, that connection is direct, such as the use of language that specifically refers to graduation, transfer, or post-college success. In other cases, the link to student outcomes may be less direct, but accountability mechanisms create more actionable standards. Even if a standard does not reference specific student outcomes, the fact that it requires the public disclosure of student data, or mandates practices that remove barriers to timely completion provides operational clarity that is equally significant.

We used three defining features to identify examples:

- **Clarity:** They use plain, specific language to describe what the institution is expected to do.
- **Actionability:** They require steps that can be observed, measured, or evaluated by accreditors.
- **Connection to student success:** They promote or protect student progress, access, or outcomes.

The primary examples we highlight below combine most or all three of these features, describing the what, the how, and the why in a way that leaves little room for ambiguity.

## NWCCU 2020 Standard 1.D.2 and 1.D.3

*“The institution establishes and shares widely a set of indicators for student achievement... disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, first generation college student, and any other*



*institutionally meaningful categories... used for continuous improvement to inform planning, decision making, and allocation of resources.”*

By requiring institutions to establish a set of comprehensive student achievement indicators, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and “any other institutionally meaningful categories that may help promote student achievement and close barriers to academic excellence and success” the standards are clear, explicit, and actionable. The standards’ emphasis on outcomes such as completion, retention, and postgraduation success, along with their requirement for benchmarking and comparison with peer institutions, ensures accountability and signals that institutions are expected to take action in response to poor outcomes, rather than merely track them.

### **ACCJC 2024 Standard 2.5**

*“The institution holds itself accountable for students’ success by scheduling courses in a manner that ensures degree and certificate programs can be completed in the expected period of time.”*

This short and specific standard serves as an example of an actionable standard. It cites effective course scheduling as a way that institutions hold themselves accountable for timely student completion. The standard moves away from broad student success language by referencing a specific action that institutions should take, recognizing that course availability and scheduling are critical factors in students' ability to make timely progress toward their credentials. By including this expectation directly in the standards, the accreditor signals a clear and measurable way to evaluate an institution's commitment to student success.

### **WSCUC 2013 Standard 2.10**

*“The institution demonstrates that students make timely progress toward the completion of their degrees... collects and analyzes student data, disaggregated by appropriate demographic categories... [and] benchmarks its retention and graduation rates against its own aspirations as well as the rates of peer institutions.”*

This standard highlights the importance of acknowledging an institution’s mission and the population it serves while still providing clear metrics and accountability measures. In requiring institutions to collect, analyze, and disaggregate student data (specifically mentioning benchmarking of

graduation and retention rates against peer institutions), and identifying and tracking the characteristics, preparation, needs, and experiences of their students, the standard calls for assessment of campus climate and culture alongside individual student data, offering institutional-level context for understanding and promoting equitable outcomes.

### **NECHE 2021 Standard 8.6**

*“The institution defines measures of student success... including rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment. The institution ensures that information about student success is easily accessible on its website.”*

This standard explicitly lists outcomes related to educational and financial success, requiring institutions to identify and publish specific metrics such as retention and graduation rates, to loan repayment and default rates. By specifically naming and requiring public reporting of these outcomes, the standard turns accountability away from an internal process to a visible commitment to students and the public. By referencing post-graduation success, the standard emphasizes the institution’s role in creating a financially sustainable pathway for its students.

## **Conclusion**

Accreditation is a highly influential, but largely obscure process that shapes higher education in the US. Accreditor standards offer some insight into their priorities and expectations about institutional quality and accountability; historically, standards for accreditors have not been organized or available in a way that they can be compared and evaluated. This report creates a structured and consistent view of how the seven regional accreditors define and communicate these priorities and expectations.

Almost all standards emphasize student success, academic quality, and institutional outcomes to varying degrees; though they differ in how clearly or specifically these priorities are expressed. Some standards clearly articulate measurable actions, such as disaggregating data, benchmarking outcomes, or publishing outcomes data to the public, while

others use broad language that may allow institutions more discretion in how outcomes are defined. Few standards directly address financial or workforce outcomes, and even fewer specify what institutions must do when outcomes fall short.

By organizing standards into common themes and sub-themes, this framework helps reveal both the shared foundations of accreditation and the areas where expectations diverge. As policymakers and accreditors consider how to strengthen quality assurance, this report finds that greater clarity, transparency, and alignment around student outcomes could make the accreditation process more consistent and meaningful for institutions and the students they serve. Future research could build on this standards framework by exploring how differences in standards translate into differences in institutional practice and student outcomes.

Accreditation should not just be a compliance exercise but an exercise in public trust.

Accreditation should not just be a compliance exercise but an exercise in public trust. As accreditors' standards evolve, they should continue to focus on clarity, evidence, and measurable improvement. By illuminating the content and variation of standards, this report takes an initial step to providing a clearer picture of how quality is defined today, and how it might be strengthened moving forward.

## Acknowledgements

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# Appendix A: General themes from our review of the standard of the national accreditors

## Full list of Themes

- **Student Success and Accountability:**
  - Description: Standards focusing on the systematic measurement, evaluation, and enhancement of student outcomes and success. This means the broader preparation of students for success beyond their academic careers. This theme also includes standards addressing institutions' effectiveness in holding themselves accountable for their students' outcomes.
  - **Why it's important:**
    - Understanding how accreditors emphasize student success, especially through outcome measurement and enhancement, is central to our research project.
  - Sub-Themes:
    - **Student Outcomes and Attainment:** Standards related to measurements of student success beyond the classroom, focused on outcome-oriented goals such as retention, graduation, credit momentum, and transfer rates.
    - **Transferable Skills:** Includes education in transferable skills (e.g., writing, presenting, critical reasoning) as well as students' preparation for responsible civic engagement.
    - **Institutional Accountability for Student Success:** Standards related to institutional accountability in assessing student learning outcomes.
    - **Action Plans for Underperforming Institutions:** Standards outlining how accreditors require and oversee improvement efforts at institutions with

subpar student outcomes metrics, such as graduation and retention rates, through well-defined strategies or corrective action. This may include establishing improvement targets or implementing peer comparison (benchmarking) of student outcomes to contextualize performance and set appropriate goals.

- **Academic Quality and Faculty:**

- Description: Standards that delve into the quality, delivery, and assurance of educational content, faculty roles, academic resources, and the measurement of student achievement.
- **Why it's important**
  - As the only mechanism for assessing the process of educating students, it is important to recognize the importance placed on faculty work and pedagogy
- Sub-Themes:
  - **Faculty and Staff:** Standards related to faculty qualifications, roles, and professional development.
  - **Educational Programs and Instruction:** Standards related to the design, content, and delivery of educational programs, including curriculum, assessment, and program improvement. Also includes standards related to General Education.
  - **Academic Success:** Standards related to the assessment of student performance in their immediate educational setting. This may include the achievement of course- and program-specific learning objectives, grades, and participation in honors programs or capstone projects.
  - **Degree Programs:** Standards related to degree program definitions, and policies regarding evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits.
  - **Research and Scholarship:** Standards related to the institution's support for research, scholarship, and creative activities. This includes ensuring regulatory compliance, ethical behavior, and fiscal responsibility in research.

- **Data-Driven Success:**
  - Description: Standards for collecting, analyzing, and publicly sharing data on student outcomes, and the use of data for institutional improvement.
  - **Why it's important:**
    - Data-driven decision-making is crucial for effective institutional management, continuous improvement, and accountability in higher education. By emphasizing data-driven approaches, accreditors encourage institutions to objectively assess performance, identify areas for improvement, and increase transparency, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes.
  - Sub-themes:
    - **Collection of Student Outcomes Data:** Standards related to the collection of student outcomes data by institutions.
    - **Public Transparency on Student Outcomes Data:** Standards related to the presentation and dissemination of student outcomes data at institutions accredited by the agency.
    - **Use of Data for institutional improvement:** Standards for quality assurance measures and the use of data for institutional improvement.
  
- **Student Financial Health:**
  - Description: Standards focused on how institutions track and ensure positive financial outcomes for students and address affordability, student debt, and post-graduation success. It also covers transparency in financial aid and the monitoring of labor market outcomes, helping students manage the financial challenges of higher education.
  - **Why it's important:**
    - Student financial health is a critical indicator of higher education's effectiveness and accessibility, directly impacting student success, institutional sustainability, and broader economic outcomes.
    - High student loan balances and low post-graduation earnings are two of the biggest perceived issues in higher education and are a principal reason that

accreditation and quality assurance in higher ed has come under greater scrutiny.

- Sub-Themes:

- **Affordability:** Standards related to keeping education costs manageable and providing financial support mechanisms
- **Financial Aid Transparency:** Standards related to the availability of financial aid information to students.
- **Monitoring of Student Debt:** Standards for monitoring and managing student debt in terms of debt levels, default, and repayment rates.
- **Career Support and Alumni Success:** Standards related to institutional support in career development and success in securing employment or further education.
- **Post-Graduation Labor Market Outcomes:** Standards related to institutional accountability for tracking student economic success in the workforce, including employment rates and earnings.

- **Access to Higher Education:**

- Description: Standards emphasizing the commitment to creating an environment where all students can thrive.
- **Why it's important**
  - Training students from all backgrounds is important for using public funds, for states to meet attainment goals, and improve state economies and finances. To help students succeed, institutions need to ensure that all are welcomed and supported.
- Sub-Themes:
  - **Institutional Inclusion:** Standards related to the institution's policies and practices for promoting an inclusive environment for students, faculty, and staff.
  - **Outcome Focused:** Standards focused on identifying achievement gaps and providing resources to support degree attainment across demographic groups. This includes measuring student outcomes across demographics.
  - **Access to Higher Education:** Standards related to ensuring that all students have equal opportunities

to access higher education, including outreach programs, admission policies, and targeted support.

- **Student Experience and Support:**

- Description: Standards emphasizing the institution's commitment to enhancing the overall student experience and providing comprehensive support services beyond the classroom.
- **Why it's important**
  - Colleges and universities often fill many roles outside of the classroom for students. It is important for accreditors to ensure these other areas of the university that are focused on serving students are being conducted and managed well.
- Sub-Themes:
  - **Student Rights and Responsibilities:** Standards for institutional policies and procedures related to student conduct, student appeals, grievances, academic honesty and accommodations.
  - **Campus Safety:** Standards related to providing a healthy, safe, and secure environment
  - **Student Support Services:** Standards for the availability and quality of services such as academic advising, counseling, and extracurricular activities.
  - **Support for At-Risk Students:** Standards for supporting students who are first-generation, low-income, or academically underprepared.
  - **Student Satisfaction and Engagement:** Standards related to the institution's efforts to enhance student satisfaction and engagement, including the use of surveys and other feedback mechanisms.

- **Institutional Integrity:**

- Description: Standards that underscore the core values, transparency, and ethical conduct of institutions.
- **Why it's important:** Most accreditors have entire sections dedicated to integrity and ethics. While they are abstract, it's important for us to capture the extent of accreditors' focus on these themes in their published standards. Additionally, accreditation may be the best mechanism for



evaluating ethical processes and the only current way these are evaluated.

- Sub-Themes:
  - **Ethical Conduct and Integrity:** Standards related to the institution's adherence to ethical principles and integrity. Standards related to ethical research practices are categorized in the "Research and Scholarship" sub-theme.
  - **Transparency:** Standards for clear and accurate communication with the public and with students.
  - **Academic Freedom:** Standards related to academic freedom
- **Mission, Governance, and Improvement:**
  - Description: Standards focusing on the governance, leadership structures, and the alignment of institutional actions with its mission.
    - Also includes standards related to the institution's processes for self-assessment, continuous improvement, compliance with all applicable government laws and accreditor policies, and assurance of overall institutional quality.
  - **Why it's important:**
    - Accreditation is part of the accountability process that safeguards public funds filtered to institutions via Title IV programs. As such, ensuring colleges and universities are well-run organizations that are fulfilling the goals of federally-defined educational institutions is an important role of accreditors.
  - Sub-Themes:
    - **Mission and Vision Alignment:** Standards related to the alignment of the institution's mission, vision, and goals with the needs of students and the broader community.
    - **Governance and Leadership:** Standards related to the governance structure, roles and responsibilities of governing boards, the qualifications and effectiveness of institutional leaders, and shared governance.
    - **Stakeholder Engagement and Communication:** Standards related to an institution's effectiveness in

engaging with internal stakeholders (students, faculty, staff) and external groups (alumni, community partners, donors) through effective communication and participatory decision-making.

- **Conflict of Interest** : Standards related to conflicts of interest on governing boards
- **Planning and Continuous Improvement**: Standards related to the institution's structured processes for assessing performance and implementing improvement across key areas.
- **Compliance**: Standards on compliance with government regulations and accreditor policies.

- **Financial Sustainability:**

- Description: Standards related to the prudent management, allocation, and sustainability of both resources.
- **Why it's important:**
  - Financial health is one of, if not the most salient factor when accreditors are considering sanctioning institutions or removing their accreditation altogether. Financial sustainability is imperative for institutions to fulfill their missions and ensure stability for students.
- Sub-Themes:
  - **Risk Management**: Standards related to risk management, or emergency response. Includes response plans for financial emergencies
  - **Financial Responsibility and Management**: Standards related to an institution's financial stability, sustainability, and responsibility. Standards also address budgeting and resource management.

- **Educational Technology and Resources:**

- Description: Standards addressing the integration, challenges, and opportunities of digital platforms and technological advancements in education.
- **Why it's important**
  - Online education has grown substantially over the past several decades and will continue to play an important role in broadening access to higher

education. Additionally, equipping students with the technological skills needed in today's workplace is essential for their career readiness.

- Sub-Themes:

- **Distance Education and Online Learning:** Standards for the quality and effectiveness of online education programs.
- **Technology Infrastructure and Support:** Standards for maintaining and supporting technological infrastructure.
- **Libraries and Information Resources:** Standards for the management of library resources and digital collections.
- **Educational Technology Integration:** Standards for integrating technology into teaching and learning.
- **Cybersecurity and Data Privacy:** Standards for protecting sensitive data and ensuring compliance with privacy regulations.

# Appendix B: Figures from accreditors' previous set of standards

Figure 3. Number of standards per major theme, by accreditor (previous standards)

Theme	WSCUC 2013	NWCCU 2019	HLC 2020	ACCJC 2014	MSCHE Standards 2015	SACSCOC 2018	NECHE 2016	Total
Academic Quality and Faculty	21	39	22	33	29	29	50	223
Data Driven Success	12	8	5	8	7	10	13	63
Access to Higher Education	5	1	4	7	2	0	4	23
Educational Technology and Resources	4	16	3	14	3	9	11	60
Financial Sustainability	3	18	4	15	6	8	19	73
Institutional Integrity	10	7	8	14	17	11	20	87
Mission, Governance, and Improvement	17	22	25	49	60	28	31	232
Student Experience and Support	11	20	6	15	12	11	13	88
Student Financial Health	6	4	3	7	7	2	7	36
Student Outcomes and Success	12	16	11	9	15	14	22	99
Total	101	151	91	171	158	122	190	984

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4. Number of sub-themes covered by at least one standard, by accreditor (previous standards)

Theme	WSCUC 2013	NWCCU 2019	HLC 2020	ACCJC 2014	MSCHE 2015	SACSCOC 2018	NECHE 2016	Total
Academic Quality and Faculty	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	34
Data Driven Success	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	20
Access to Higher Education	3	1	2	3	2	0	2	13
Educational Technology and Resources	3	5	3	5	3	4	5	28
Financial Sustainability	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	11
Institutional Integrity	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21
Mission, Governance, and Improvement	6	6	5	6	6	5	6	40
Student Experience and Support	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	32
Student Financial Health	4	3	3	5	5	2	5	27
Student Outcomes and Success	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28
Total	38	37	32	41	36	30	40	254

Created with Datawrapper

# Appendix C: Citations of accreditor handbooks

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