



**BRIEF**

# Accreditors sharpen focus on equity in student outcomes

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## Dive Brief:

- The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), a regional accreditor, is newly requiring institutions within its purview to separate out data on graduation rates for students by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, among other measures.
- SACSCOC-accredited colleges will use this information to analyze whether at-risk student groups are falling behind. Institutions must do this to meet the agency's expectations in the area of "student achievement," which is a part of maintaining accreditation.
- Advocacy groups and researchers have pressed accreditors to consider equity issues more when formulating their standards for student outcomes.

## Dive Insight:

In April 2018, the Center for American Progress (CAP) released a report detailing the deficiencies it perceived in how accreditors use the information they collect on students' performance.

Regional accreditors might review high-level metrics such as graduation rates, but none had developed a clear definition of what counts as poor performance for a college and what the consequences would be for institutions if their students were not successful. Colleges sometimes keep their accreditation despite

having poor outcomes, Antoinette Flores, now CAP's director for Postsecondary Education, wrote in the report.

National accreditors, which typically oversee career-focused programs, had developed clearer benchmarks for student success than their regional counterparts, Flores wrote.

CAP urged accreditors to adopt student outcome standards that focused on equity. At the time, only two of the seven regional accreditors — the WASC Senior College and University Commission and the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges — required institutions to disaggregate academic data by student demographics.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy and EducationCounsel also put out recommendations last year, one of which was the disaggregation of such student data. And a recent Lumina Foundation report on equity in higher ed similarly called on accreditors to do so as a way to help vulnerable students.

Since CAP published its report, two accreditors, SACSCOC and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), have revised their policies to include new elements related to student equity, Flores told Education Dive.

Flores called NWCCU's standards "the strongest yet to address equity in outcomes and gaps."

NWCCU directed its institutions to make disaggregated data publicly available on their websites. That information should be "used for continuous improvement to inform planning, decision making, and allocation of resources," the standards read.

Flores said SACSCOC's new standards, which the agency's Executive Council approved in December, are a positive step. But she points out that it never clearly articulated that it wants to address equity gaps.

That "makes it harder to actually hold institutions accountable if there is a big problem," Flores said.

SACSCOC's president did not respond to Education Dive's email requesting comment Tuesday.

Accreditors have come under fire for not holding their institutions accountable, particularly in the case of for-profit colleges that have abruptly collapsed despite clear signs of financial distress.

Lawmakers have noticed. U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Fla., introduced the Quality Higher Education Act last year intending to enhance the country's accreditation system.

The legislation would force accreditors "to set rigorous standards and performance benchmarks" based on how many students graduated college and if they were able to find work, according to a press release. Accreditors would also need to disaggregate institutional data, including for minority and low-income students.