

Date of Hearing: April 22, 2014

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
Das Williams, Chair
AB 2247 (Williams) – As Introduced: February 21, 2014

SUBJECT: Postsecondary education: accreditation documents.

SUMMARY: Would require all campuses serving California students of public and private postsecondary educational institutions that receive state or federal financial aid funding to post specified accreditation documents (self-study report, visiting team report, and accrediting agency final action letter) on the institution's website.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires, as a condition of participation in state financial aid programs administered by the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), an institution to be accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the United States Department of Education (USDE).
- 2) Requires the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE) to issue an approval to operate to private institutions that are accredited by a USDE-recognized accrediting agency.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: Background on accreditation. Accreditation is a voluntary, non-governmental peer review process used to determine academic quality. Accrediting agencies are private organizations that establish operating standards for educational or professional institutions and programs, determine the extent to which the standards are met, and publicly announce their findings. Under federal law, USDE establishes the general standards for accreditation agencies and is required to publish a list of recognized accrediting agencies that are deemed reliable authorities on the quality of education provided by their accredited institutions.

Both accredited and unaccredited education and training programs are allowed to operate in California. However, only accredited institutions are authorized to participate in federal and state financial aid programs and private accredited institutions are provided a streamlined pathway to approval by the BPPE. There are three basic types of accreditation:

- 1) **Regional Accreditation**: There are six USDE-recognized regional accrediting agencies. Each regional accreditor encompasses public, the vast majority of non-profit private (independent), and some for-profit postsecondary educational institutions in the region it serves. California's regional accrediting agency is separated into two commissions under the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC): the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (WASC-ACCJC) and the Senior College and University Commission (WASC-Sr.).
- 2) **National Accreditation**: National accreditation is not based on geography, but more focused to evaluate specific types of schools and programs. National accreditation is designed to allow nontraditional colleges (trade schools, religious schools, certain online schools) to be

compared against similarly designed institutions. Different standards and categories are measured, depending on the type of institution.

- 3) **Specialized/Programmatic Accreditation:** Offered by accrediting agencies that represent specific fields of study, these agencies do not accredit entire colleges but instead accredit the programs within colleges that prepare students for the specific field or industry. In most cases, specialized accreditation alone does not enable participation in state and federal financial aid programs.

While accreditation remains the primary method for evaluating and assuring educational quality, concerns regarding the disparate quality and reliability of USDE-approved accrediting agencies have led the USDE advisory committee on accreditation to look at changes to the role of accreditation. Further, while accreditation can be used as a measure of program quality, consumer protections fall outside of the scope of accreditation. States are responsible for enacting laws that protect students against fraud and abuse.

Purpose of this bill. According to the author, California relies heavily on accrediting agencies to ensure that colleges and universities are providing quality educational programs for students. By obtaining accreditation, private (including for-profit) institutions are guaranteed the ability to operate in California, and both public and private institutions are provided access to billions of dollars in state and federal financial aid funding. The state's ability to monitor the work of accrediting agencies themselves, however, is virtually nonexistent. This bill is aimed at ensuring a basic level of transparency in the accreditation process by providing public access to the substance of accreditation reviews.

Documents required for public disclosure. This bill would require both public and private institutions that receive public funding through state and federal financial aid programs to post the following documents on their institutional websites:

- 1) **Institutional Self-Study Report.** Performed at the outset of the initial and renewal accreditation process, the self-study requires an institution's faculty, staff, administrators, and students to review the entire university and document its strengths and weaknesses in a written report. The report is submitted to the accrediting agency visiting team for review prior to the accrediting visiting team site visit.
- 2) **Visiting Team Report.** Visiting teams are generally composed of faculty and administrators from the accrediting agency's member schools and are chosen based upon skills and knowledge, interests, and abilities, depending on the needs of the individual visiting team. Service is voluntary and done with the understanding that by helping another school in the accreditation process, such service will be reciprocated when the individual's own school is in the accreditation process. At the conclusion of a visiting team's institutional review and site visit, a visiting team report is generated and provided to the accrediting commissioners to assist in the commission's decision to provide, continue, sanction or discontinue an institution's accreditation.
- 3) **Accrediting Agency Final Action Letter.** Action letters are provided to an institution from the accrediting agency memorializing the agency's decision/action regarding the institution's accreditation status.

Accrediting agency practices. A non-exhaustive search by committee staff revealed only one accrediting agency currently requiring all three documents to be made available to the public (WASC-ACCJC) and one additional accrediting agency (WASC-Sr.) currently posts the visiting committee report and final action letter to their website. For other accrediting agencies, committee staff was able to find very little information regarding the substance of institutional accreditation reviews, including for institutions currently facing sanctions from their accreditor. Despite the differing requirements of accrediting agencies, most public institutions and several private institutions (including USC, USF, St. Mary's and Loma Linda University) have made these documents available to the public through a website managed by California Competes.

Suggested amendments. To ensure ease in accessibility of documents, committee staff recommends an amendment to specify that the institution is required to provide accreditation documents in a prominent location on the website, with a link to these documents on the institution's main page.

To ensure consistency with the author's intent, committee staff suggests an amendment to clarify that institutional accreditation documents, and not programmatic accreditation documents, are required to be disclosed under the provisions of this bill.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Competes

Center for Public Interest Law (CPIL) at the University of San Diego School of Law

Children's Advocacy Institute (CAI) at the University of San Diego School of Law

Public Advocates

The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS)

Opposition

None on file.

Analysis Prepared by: Laura Metune / HIGHER ED. / (916) 319-3960