

# Tougher Days Ahead

## Accreditors Acknowledge Message from Congress Heard, But Reactions Vary

By Sean Johnson, Staff Writer/Politics & Policy

It didn't take Michale McComis long to realize he was being boxed into a corner. At the witness table during the recent Senate Education Committee hearing looking into the standards of accrediting agencies, McComis found himself directly in the sights of Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and Al Franken, D-Minn., who badgered him about accrediting standards and how, if they were so rigorous, was it possible GAO inspectors found evidence of improper student recruitment techniques in 15 minutes when accreditors didn't find them during lengthy on-site visits. Then they launched into a discussion of student loan default rates, or how was it that McComis's agency, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools & Colleges, could possibly provide quality oversight of nearly 800 institutions with a staff of 32?

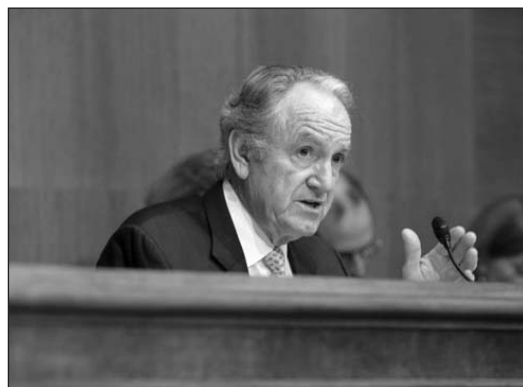
Despite his best assurances to the committee, McComis knew he had been put into a tough spot.

Three of the schools identified for improper student recruitment are accredited by ACCSC. He knew his agency would have to take corrective measures—measures that would no doubt be used by members of the committee as an admission that the accrediting standards of ACCSC, as well as other agencies accrediting for-profit schools, aren't up to the level Congress and the public have been led to believe.

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Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), HELP Committee Chair



Dr. Michale S. McComis, executive director, ACCSC

“Of course, if we did nothing, Sen. Franken would jump on that and say we did nothing,” McComis said in an interview following the Senate committee hearing. “What we are trying to do is determine what the truth is in the allegations made.”

Shortly after the hearings concluded, McComis sent a memorandum to all of the institutions that are accredited by

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Director of External Affairs  
Accrediting Council for  
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ACCSC announcing the creation of a special task force that would look into the allegations made by the GAO and highlighted during the hearing. The task force will evaluate the recruiting, advertising and admissions practices at member institutions. Additionally, the on-site teams conducting accrediting

reviews will also more closely assess practices in those areas.

One of the things the task force will try to determine is whether the infractions highlighted by the GAO and during the Senate hearings were isolated cases, or signs of a more systemic problem. It’s an important difference that McComis tried to demonstrate to the senators grilling him at the hearing.

The GAO investigation comprised of agents posing as students going through the recruitment and admissions process—a sort of secret shopper approach. No effort was made to investigate a representative sampling of schools to see if the problems were more broadly based, though senators seemed to not have a problem suggesting they were.

Whether the methodology was correct or not did not seem to unnerve members of the Senate panel. Instead, they seemed more intent on delivering a message to school accreditors—and especially the for-profit schools they regulate—that they aren’t doing their job well enough.

Chairman Tom Harkin set the tone with his opening statement about the growth of the proprietary sector:

“What is driving the explosive growth in this industry?” Harkin asked himself rhetorically, referring to the proprietary sector. The tone made it pretty clear he is not in the camp that would say it’s because they offer an educational service people want at a convenience and rate that consumers are willing to pay.

Several theories abound regarding this latest congressional spotlight on the for-profit sector and now its accreditors. They all seem to have one thing in common: money.

In the past several years, even before the last reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act*, Congress has pumped billions of additional dollars into student loan and grant programs. PELL Grants have been increased and student loan maximums raised. In addition, President Obama has announced his plans to expand the number of Americans who have received post-high school education.

All that has been good for the proprietary schools, which have grown substantially in the past decade. But they may not have been the target Congress intended. Despite the additional dollars pumped into the system by the federal government, it has come at a time when the traditional schools, particularly state institutions, have been struggling. State budget shortfalls have meant the rollback and elimination of programs at many

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traditional schools. Proprietary schools have stepped into that gap, particularly with non-traditional students in underserved areas.

“There are a couple of different hypotheses about why now and why this level of scrutiny,” said Anthony Bieda, director of external affairs for Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges & Schools. “I think it could be the issues of the short sellers (on Wall Street), or the need for a campaign issue. But mostly, the fact the industry is growing has caught the attention of policymakers.”

The GAO report and the initial part of the hearing focused on whether schools were using unscrupulous methods to attract and enroll students. It was noted the proprietary sector has grown in recent years beyond its traditional scope of certificate programs to now offering bachelor’s and advanced degrees. At the same time, the sector’s participation in the Title IV student loan program has increased to about \$24 billion, which represents 23 percent of the \$105 billion doled out.

A previous GAO report issued in 2009 reported that students attending for-profit schools were more likely to default on the federal student loans than those attending other sectors. Since schools cannot participate in the Title IV program without approval from a recognized accrediting body, the accreditors are now under the microscope.

To test the recruitment and admissions procedures, the GAO sent undercover applicants to 15 for-profit campuses along with covert cameras to record the interactions. The GAO’s investigation showed that four of the schools “encouraged fraudulent practices, such as encouraging students to submit false information about their financial status. In addition, all 15

colleges made some type of deceptive or otherwise questionable statement to the undercover applicant.”

The deceptive statements ranged from less than clear information on graduation rates to inaccurate information on job placement and job salaries.

Questionable methodology or not, the actions were not those the industry would have preferred to see captured on film and shown to a Senate committee. While it might be compelling political theater, Bieda says the GAO investigation and Senate hearings failed to show there is a greater systemic problem that needs to be addressed.

Of course, he would have preferred they found nothing at all.

“I have not heard that this was initiated because there was an accurate measurement of a problem,” Bieda said. “That is not saying that there aren’t reasons for an increase in complaints. We believe that at any point in time, if we are doing an objective review, we might find behaviors that rise to a level of being questionable.”

What he and other accreditors reject, is the notion that the problem is widespread, or endemic to the industry. He is particularly skeptical of the “secret shopper” techniques used to gather the evidence of problems.

“If ACICS had determined there was a discernible trend, I think we would want to sit down and discuss why it exists,” Bieda said. “I’m not sure the secret shopper method would rise to the top of our list for gathering information if we want to reduce and eliminate certain types of behavior.”

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Executive Director  
Accrediting Bureau of Health  
Education Schools***

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That being said, ACICS acted quickly in the wake of the hearings to notify its membership that practices found in the GAO report are unacceptable, even if they turn out to be an anomaly. In both a letter and a memorandum attached to it, the council highlighted the areas of concern, announced a complete review of its standards, and put member institutions on notice that in upcoming accreditation cycles, a higher level of documentation and verification will likely be required.

Many of the other national accrediting bodies took similar measures, regardless of whether the schools

identified by the GAO or at the hearing had been recognized by their agency or not.

“That fact does not modify ABHES’s intent to take seriously the issues raised and act accordingly,” said Carol Moneymaker, executive director of the Accrediting

Bureau of Health Education Schools. “We are also doing some other things such as announced visits to recognized schools.”

ABHES scheduled a special meeting of its board following the hearings that was to be dedicated solely to the issues raised in the GAO report and the Senate hearing. Moneymaker said ABHES is always reviewing its policies, procedures, and accrediting standards and will continue to do so.

Despite the findings of the GAO highlighted at the hearing, Moneymaker said the accrediting process remains an important check on institutional quality, one that it should continue to share with federal and state regulators. While an

accrediting agency may be primarily focused on the programmatic aspects of the school, that is, are the curriculum and faculty appropriate; it does have an interest in a school’s admissions practices and should continue to play a part, Moneymaker said.

“The key is student outcomes,” Moneymaker said. “We need to make sure the students admitted can benefit. It affects both standards and placement.”

Indeed, the accreditor’s review of admissions is an important component of the oversight that is also shared by federal and state regulators, said Kate I. Henriouille, executive director of the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation. No school accredited by COMTA was highlighted during the hearings. While COMTA has not taken any formal action since the hearings, she said it is important for accreditors to remain vigilant and to defend their role in the process, including a review of the admissions process.

“If a citizen is going to go to school to get training to get a job, there needs to be an assurance they are qualified for the training and that there are jobs around in numbers plentiful enough to justify the program,” Henriouille said.

Henriouille expressed confidence the standards of her organization are stringent enough, and while no formal program of review has been launched, she said she is providing information for member schools regarding admissions policies and best practices.

As well all accreditors should, said Michael Lambert, executive director of the Distance Education and Training Council.

“My sense of it is that this is a wake up call for everyone in the for-profit sector,” Lambert said. “There should be no such thing as business as usual for anyone—the schools, the accreditors

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and the regulators. There is a need for a lot more attention to the rules.”

As Lambert sees it, the accreditation process is an implied trust between the school and the accreditor that everyone is going to do the right thing when it comes to educating the student. That being said, many of the criticisms that came out of the hearings are unrealistic. The accreditation process was not designed, nor are the staffs equipped, to be the cops on the beat.

“The assumption that we are there to catch and stamp out fraud is wrong. It’s not our role,” Lambert said. “There is nothing that can guarantee 100 percent compliance 100 percent of the time.”

What accreditors can do, Lambert suggested, is a better job of explaining to the public what accreditation is, what it means when a school is accredited and how accreditation fits into the regulatory relationship with state and federal agencies. CHEA spent more than a year on one of its recent publications about what students should ask an institution before they enroll. He is frustrated that members of Congress don’t seem to want to discuss the effort accreditors make to ensure that schools are delivering a quality education that can give students the tools to build a better life.

DETC does not plan any immediate actions to address the allegations in the GAO reports and does not plan changes to the procedures of its accreditation visits. DETC routinely conducts unannounced checks on the programs offered by its member institutions. An upcoming October workshop in Denver will devote the opening session to what has transpired.

“The idea now is not to talk about changes, but to get to work making sure everyone is in compliance with the standards that are expected,” he said.

Regardless of the steps taken by schools and accrediting agencies, Roger Williams is not convinced it will make much of a difference to Congress because it won’t give them what they want, which is an easy answer.

“Accountability does not come easy and it does not come cheaply,” said Williams, executive director of the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training. He cautions against making accreditation the panacea branding that an institution is problem-free.

“This is an issue I have been hearing about for 20 years and it’s really not that complex. We just oversell it,” Williams said. “There are real limits to what accreditation can say. There are a lot of good things it does, particularly when done rigorously. But as the clock ticks by the time the team has been there, things can get lax. It’s not that the school is not a good school, but maybe the attention to rigor suffers a bit.”

In an effort to make sure it does not, Williams said, ACCET recognition is good for three years and then it’s time for another visit.

When it comes to the results of the GAO report and the line of questioning used by many of the senators at the hearing, Williams said the results could just as easily be explained by looking at the schools that were singled out for visits by the “secret shoppers.” The common characteristic: the schools were all large, an environment where day-to-day oversight is not as easy to maintain.

ACCET made the findings of the GAO and the hearing a part of its

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August Commission meeting, and the discussions have been highlighted for its member institutions. The accrediting body has performed unannounced

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agencies, Williams does not see their role diminishing. While Sen. Harkin suggested the agencies will be the

inspections of its accredited schools since 1993 and will continue to do so as it maintains its standards.

While some in Congress, along with federal regulators at the Department of Education, will continue to target the accrediting

subject of future hearings, Williams questioned what the alternative to accreditation would be.

“We are the ones in the best position to make a difference,” he said, questioning how state and federal regulators could realistically take on the function. “Coming out of the dark days of the early 1990s, we were doing things right. Perhaps we have relaxed a bit, but reasonable oversight is a good thing for a school. There is a need for the accreditors.”

**Editor’s Note:** We invited both Dr. Gary Puckett, Council on Occupational Education (COE) and Dr. Tony Mirando, National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts & Sciences (NACCAS) to participate in this story and both declined.

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