



The Career College Information Source

Regionally Accredited Institutions' Code of Ethics and Conduct Seeks to Set Standards for Other Schools

By Cheryl Hentz, Staff Writer/Products & Services

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No one has to tell you how hard the for-profit college sector has been hit with negative press of late, and, as a result of complaints and negative press, the U.S. Department of Education has released even more stringent rules and regulations that schools must comply with. But there is one group of schools in this sector that, rules and regulations notwithstanding, has decided to go much farther in their transparency and pledge toward academic excellence.

Organized and led by Dario Cortes, Ph.D., president of Berkeley College, the group of 20 regionally accredited proprietary institutions began having a series of discussions this past February, the result of which culminated in July with the creation and signing of "The Accord of the Regionally Accredited Proprietary Institutions of Higher Education in the U.S.," or "The Accord," for short.

In essence, schools endorsing The Accord commit to practices that will provide students with clear and accessible financial data and metrics of student success. Specifically, under

The Accord the expectation is that by Dec. 15, 2011, schools will prominently display on their Web sites a "Pledge of Public Accountability" that includes information concerning their cost of tuition, graduation rates, student

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indebtedness, and available loan repayment data. Other best practices the endorsers have agreed to implement include facilitating the appropriate and efficient transfer of academic credit after an incoming student's transcript has been reviewed; communicating clearly in writing whether completion of a given program will qualify a student for licensure in a career field; and, communicating to students the estimated amount of financial aid they will receive before they enroll in classes.

The Accord also charges the endorsers to take action to improve higher education and solidify their sense of shared purpose and commitment. These recommendations go beyond regulatory requirements to include collecting data on student learning; participating in higher education organizations; advocating for federal and state policies that promote educational opportunities and better student outcomes; and elevating the national conversation on financial literacy to reduce unnecessary student borrowing.

“Berkeley College is a first-rate institution and I’m not surprised it would take the lead in assembling the regionally accredited institutions and regional accrediting bodies in one

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President, Briarcliff College***

room to discuss such important issues affecting higher education. Berkeley’s leaders took a bold and admirable step in calling upon leaders of institutions that have a common mission and purpose and that serve a similar group of non-traditional students to share best practices and improve performance,” said George Santiago, Jr., Ph.D., president of Briarcliff College. “The Accord serves as an example of the commitment institutions in our sector are making to meet or exceed the new federal regulations, to provide more information to the general public, and to operate with integrity in providing a high quality academic experience for students. The significance of this Accord and other documents like it is that private sector, postsecondary schools are taking proactive steps to

address the concerns that have been raised over the past couple of years and to work harder to serve the students who depend on us to improve their career opportunities.”

Judith Eaton, Ph.D., president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation agrees, saying The Accord is a “solid step forward in identifying ways to expand accountability and transparency by for-profit colleges and universities. The Accord signers’ pledge to provide easily accessible information on tuition, graduation rates, curriculum requirements, employment data and student indebtedness and loan repayment data, along with other relevant information, will benefit the public, students, parents, employers and the government. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has long focused on increased public accountability and transparency as central to the work of higher education and accreditation.”

Proprietary institutions make quality higher education accessible to 1.85 million students from lower income families, underrepresented minorities and adult learners, as well as first-generation college attendees. It is that kind of responsibility that makes such an “accord” even more important.

“We are excited to have begun this effort with the support of 19 other proprietary colleges and universities, and we expect more institutions to endorse The Accord as they become familiar with it in the months ahead,” Cortez said. “It’s not a blueprint, but rather a roadmap for the future. It’s a way to lead us away from the hostile environment and pointing fingers and talking about ‘bad actors,’ to talking about academic quality, faculty excellence, curriculum, graduation, persistence of our students and ways to improve the quality of what we do.”

One might think that with so many career colleges out there, deciding who to include in the discussion would have been difficult, but Cortez said it wasn't that challenging to whittle the list down.

"The main factor was I wanted to have a national conversation with regionally accredited, for-profit institutions. So I went about sending out an invitation to those who we felt were in that group. We had some who were large, publicly traded, some smaller family-owned businesses, privately held institutions, and we all came together. They all felt the need to have this gathering and have the ability to this kind of exchange with each other," Cortez said. "I was pleasantly surprised that they were willing to talk, not so much about gainful employment or any rules for that matter, but really about what ended up being in The Accord."

From his original list of about 94 schools, a total of 42 were represented at the original February meeting at the Princeton Club in New York City. He also invited regional accrediting agencies, as well as representatives from the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards. After some initial discussion over the course of a day and a half, of the 42 institutions, Cortez put together an advisory group of 10–12 people and they began discussing with more specificity the content and language, as well as some of the more technical details of the agreement.

Of course, that begs the questions: How much must you codify and how much can you trust in? Or must you spell out everything to make sure nothing slips through the cracks, no matter how trustworthy someone might be?

"I think in the traditional and non-traditional colleges and universities, we all need to adhere to the common principles of ethics and to be sure that our practices are at the highest level with a tremendous amount of rigor. There's a sense of trust that every institution has to elevate itself to, to be sure they're doing the right thing. And I think

there are ways, both within the federal government and through other regulations at the state level and the accrediting level where, for those institutions who do

not continue to comply with rules, regulations, responsibilities, academic quality, etc., there are ways for them to be taken to task," Cortez said. "On the other hand, for us, we need to continue to affirm that the principles of this Accord deal with the fact that we are for the public good and that we are based on academic quality and institutional integrity, and that we continue to practice those. We hope very much and assume that everyone takes that responsibility seriously."

At the end of the process, all 94 institutions received a copy of The Accord and were asked to consider becoming an endorser of it. The original 20 who signed were comfortable with it, as is.

"Of the others, many are still considering becoming a member while others are looking for other types of accords that they feel are more appropriate to them," Cortez said. "For me, there can be different ones that serve different purposes equally to serve the better good of students and the academic quality of our program."

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Unlike the layers of committee that many things in higher education often have to go through, this process was very different, Cortez explained.

“Nothing ever gets done quickly in academia. In most traditional univer-

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sities you have to go to the faculty senate and then the chancellor, then the president of the system and the board of regents, and it seems to take two to three years to get anything done,” he said.

“One of the assets of our sector is we move things rapidly

and we are able to be very agile in getting things done. So this process was actually very seamless.”

Despite the fact that many things covered in The Accord are also things the federal government has touched on with some of its new regulation and rules, Cortez said none of that precipitated the discussions his group held or The Accord that came out of them.

“We’re all concerned about federal intervention, the DOE, gainful employment, and we know we need to comply with them; we already have. But this summit, this Accord, wasn’t a response to any rules. It was a conversation about our sector and the things we face as institutions, and how we can have a standard of conduct that we can all adhere to and also be more transparent,” he said. “If we begin this conversation today and we continue to elevate the bar, I think that people will

perceive our sector to be one that is focused on students and academic excellence, and that we provide a role in this country to serve students at all levels in the same vein and with the same quality as the rest of the institutions.”

Whether The Accord will help change the image of career colleges in this country is something that remains to be seen over time, but Craig F. Pfannenstiehl, president of Bay State College, said it certainly can’t hurt, and is sure to benefit students.

“It enhances transparency and focuses on outcomes that matter to students, so I think that’s helpful. If the rest of higher ed decided to commit to the same kind of transparency I think that would be beneficial for a much larger group of students, and certainly for higher education in general,” he said.

Santiago said while he’s not aware of other schools working on accords of their own, there is another group of institutions working to develop a set of standards that would serve all institutions of higher education, not just a select few.

“Many of the challenges institutions in our sector face are similar to those experienced by non-profit institutions that serve a similar demographic, so we want to include all institutions in this effort to serve students better,” he said. “I’m hopeful that eventually most, if not all, schools—including traditional non-profit colleges and universities—will rally around a single set of clear standards, backed by external validation, that demonstrate the quality of the education provided.”

*THE ACCORD
OF THE
REGIONALLY ACCREDITED PROPRIETARY INSTITUTIONS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE U.S.*

We are colleges and universities within the United States and Puerto Rico with a strong commitment to educating students at a time when there is both growing demand for higher education and limited financial resources. We are regionally accredited proprietary¹ institutions of higher education, including family-owned, employee-owned, privately held and publicly traded universities and colleges. In earning regional accreditation, we have gained approval by the same standards of academic quality, institutional governance, and administrative capacity that apply to all public and independent institutions that seek to participate in Federal Student Aid programs.

In February 2011 the presidents and leaders of our institutions convened in New York City to assess our practices and renew our commitment to a national system of higher education that promotes access and attainment for all Americans who seek a higher education. The result of our deliberations – what we call *The Accord* – is a set of principles to which we will hold ourselves accountable to ensure high standards of conduct and transparency. In affirming these principles we believe that we will better serve our students and the American public. We address this statement of principles to a range of higher education constituencies, including students and parents, employers, higher education institutions of the for-profit and non-profit sectors, the U.S. Department of Education, the nation’s higher education associations, regional and national accrediting agencies, members of the media, and the American public.

SERVING A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE

While proprietary institutions, both accredited and non-accredited, have been part of the higher education landscape for over a century, within the past 20 years they have emerged as significant players in meeting the nation’s need to create a more highly educated and adaptive workforce. The United States has set a goal of restoring the nation to a position of world leadership in the proportion of its population that has earned a college degree by 2020 – a goal that will require increasing the number of those currently projected to earn a degree by some eight million people in the course of this decade.

Meeting this goal will require a substantial increase in higher education capacity across the U.S. at a time when public funding to support higher education has become increasingly limited. While for-profit colleges and universities accounted for a small segment of higher education through the last century, in the more recent past they have led the nation in expanding capacity, helping to extend the prospect of economic and social advancement to more Americans through higher education. Proprietary institutions now account for 12% of higher education enrollment in the U.S.; a large portion of these students are from lower-income families, including under-represented minorities and first-generation college attendees. Many students are adults juggling the demands of postsecondary education with those of work and family.

The recent dramatic growth of for-profit colleges and universities is but the newest chapter in the narrative of higher education in the U.S. from the nineteenth century to the present day. It is a story that begins with the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant institutions to educate growing numbers of Americans

¹ In this discussion the use of the words proprietary and for-profit are interchangeable.

to power the nation's expanding economy. The next major advance was the GI Bill, extending educational opportunity to a greatly expanded population of students following the Second World War. Community colleges from the 1950s onward along with the growth of multi-campus state systems of higher education further expanded the nation's educational capacity. Shortly thereafter the federal government became the major investor in student financial aid, helping extend the offer of higher education to a greatly expanded range of students regardless of financial circumstance.

Proprietary institutions have contributed to this narrative by investing private capital to expand access to higher education for a population of students that for the most part has been less well served by traditional universities and colleges. Innovations within the proprietary sector to provide more accessible classrooms, more accommodating class schedules, and greater opportunities for online instruction have proven attractive to students who have sought learning environments of different kinds from those of traditional higher education institutions.

We understand well that the extraordinary growth within our sector has resulted in the need for the regionally accredited proprietary institutions of higher education to come together to address, among other issues, recruiting practices, degree completion rates and student default rates on federal student loans.

STATEMENTS OF PRINCIPLE

We have learned much from our growth, and from our participation in the processes of gaining and maintaining regional accreditation. We also understand that given the size of some of our institutions and the number of students we serve in our sector, it is of the utmost importance that we maintain and augment an environment of greater transparency and high ethical standards. We commit to developing processes through which our institutions will more rigorously monitor compliance with these standards at every level.

Confident in our capacity to lead by example, we have collectively committed our institutions to the following principles of practice:

- *Mission-centeredness*: a commitment as higher education institutions to serve the nation's needs, helping create an educated and adaptive workforce in a global economy;
- *Academic quality*: a commitment to offer programs of study that provide graduates with the requisite knowledge and skills for entry and advancement in their chosen careers;
- *Institutional integrity*: a commitment to honor and practice professional standards of conduct at every level within our institutional and organizational structures;
- *Student success*: a commitment to advance our students' capacity and achievement in learning, as gauged by their success in completing programs of study and making positive contributions to society as graduates; and,
- *Transparency*: a commitment to make information clearly available to students and the public about an institution's educational programs, costs, completion rates, student loan default rates, and other pertinent matters.

A PLEDGE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

We believe any decision involving a major financial commitment should be grounded in relevant information made available in a clear and accessible form to each student. Accordingly, there is a need for a clear and publicly verifiable body of information and measures that all institutions should publicize to prospective students, their families, and their employers. Those metrics ought to be prominently displayed on an institution's web site in the form of *A Pledge of Public Accountability* that includes active links to relevant baseline indicators:

- The cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks per year;
- The institution's graduation rate;
- Curriculum requirements;
- Employment data; and,
- Student indebtedness, and available loan repayment data.

In addition, an institution's Pledge of Public Accountability should include active links providing:

- Contact information for the institution's leaders and student support services professionals who are available to help students succeed;
- The names and academic qualifications of all full-time faculty members; and,
- The telephone number of the institution.

We also commit ourselves to these practices that make our institutions more transparent to students before they enroll. We pledge that our institutions will:

- Facilitate the appropriate and efficient transfer of academic credit after an incoming student's transcript has been reviewed;
- Communicate clearly in writing whether completion of a given program will qualify a student for licensure in a career field; and,
- Communicate to students the estimated amount of financial aid they will receive before they enroll in classes.

Furthermore, to the extent each institution deems appropriate, it will consider means to encourage promising students to explore their educational potential without penalizing those who lack the preparation needed to succeed.

THE WAY TO IMPROVED PRACTICE

We believe these actions are consistent with our goals in assuring integrity and accountability in our higher education programs. We also believe that the achievements of regionally accredited proprietary institutions of higher education as endorsers to this *Accord* will compare favorably to those of traditional universities and colleges, particularly if the requisite comparison focuses on students of similar economic, social, and educational

background and enrollment status. What is required is an extension of the collected data that report the long-term outcomes of all students in more clear and comprehensive ways.

We believe there are important actions that all institutions should take to solidify the sense of shared purpose and commitment that the nation requires. They include:

- A commitment to build a rigorous institutional research function to gather data on student learning and its impact in preparing graduates for constructive participation in the economic and social vitality of the nation. There is a need for a more comprehensive national database to calibrate the success of all institutions in advancing the growth of students' educational capacity and achievement; for-profit institutions should demonstrate national leadership in the development and implementation of such a database for the proprietary sector.
- Participation in higher education organizations and accrediting agencies, which work to improve institutional quality and integrity as well as higher education's role in achieving the nation's public purposes. In adding their voices to the national and regional conversations, proprietary institutions gain opportunities both to contribute their own perspectives and to benefit from the thinking of traditional higher education institutions.
- Advocacy for federal and state policies that facilitate higher education's ability to serve the nation's public purposes more effectively – and to seek constructive change in policies that could undermine the strength of higher education's promise.
- Elevating the national conversation on how to improve financial literacy, reduce unnecessary student borrowing and reinforce an individual's obligations with regard to timely repayment of loans.


We will address these issues together through periodic meetings focused on the topics of transparency, quality metrics, ethical conduct, student indebtedness, and student success.

SINGULARITY OF PURPOSE

We believe that common adherence to the principles and practices of this *Accord* will greatly enhance our ability to serve students and ensure public trust in higher education. We affirm the principles of mission-centeredness, academic quality, institutional integrity, student success, and transparency. We believe that the implementation of practices described in this *Accord* should be subject to external review and verification, and the practices should be core elements of institutional accreditation.

We recognize the pressing need to expand the capacity of higher education in the U.S. to advance student learning and to facilitate student success. As endorsers of *The Accord*, we are ready to exert leadership in committing to principles and practices that are in alignment with all of higher education, and that ensure the proprietary sector's ability to extend the opportunity of higher education to a greatly expanded share of the U.S. population.

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The Accord derives from a discussion among institutional leaders from 42 regionally accredited proprietary colleges and universities convened in New York City by the President of Berkeley College with the support of the Berkeley College Board of Trustees. The Summit was facilitated by Robert Zemsky, PhD, Professor, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education Chair, The Learning Alliance for Higher Education; David W. Breneman, PhD, University Professor and Newton and Rita Meyers Professor in Economics of Education University of Virginia; and, Anne Duffield, Founding Principal Ann Duffield & Colleagues.

The meeting included representatives from institutions in 18 states including 30 presidents, seven trustees, two executive vice presidents, five chancellors/provosts and seven vice presidents. Other participants included representatives from the senior leadership of the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), and officers of three regional accrediting agencies: the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The goal of the meeting – as articulated by Berkeley College President, Dario A. Cortes, PhD, and the Chairman of the Berkeley College Board, Kevin L. Luig – was to foster a conversation among for-profit institutions that could help inform a larger national conversation focusing on the mission and purposes of expanding higher education access and completion.

ENDORSERS

Endorsers to *The Accord* as of July 15, 2011:

American Public University System	Midstate College
AOMA Graduate School of Integrative Medicine	MTI College
Bay State College	New England College of Business and Finance
Berkeley College	Northcentral University
Five Towns College	Rasmussen College
Florida National College	Strayer University
Huertas Junior College	Technical Career Institutes, Inc.
ICPR Junior College	United States University
Jones International University	University of Advancing Technology
Lincoln College of New England	Waldorf College