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CIQG**

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**SUMMARIES**

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**KEYNOTES &  
PLENARIES**

# Keynote Address

## Nicholas Kent

In his address, Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent offered a comprehensive critique of the current U.S. accreditation system and positioned accreditation reform as a central lever in the Trump administration's broader higher education agenda. Framing accreditation as the "central nervous system" of higher education, the Under Secretary argued that when accreditation fails to function effectively—through lack of competition, weak accountability, and misplaced priorities—the entire system suffers, resulting in poor student outcomes, rising costs, and declining public trust.

Under Secretary Kent grounded his argument in data illustrating growing skepticism about the value of higher education. He cited the expansion of the federal student loan portfolio to nearly \$1.7 trillion, high default rates, low graduation outcomes at some institutions, and survey data indicating that many Americans believe college did not adequately prepare them for the workforce. These outcomes, he asserted, demonstrate a disconnect between accreditation processes and the real-world results students and families expect.

A major focus of the speech was the structure of accreditation itself. The Under Secretary criticized long-standing regional and programmatic monopolies that limit institutional choice and suppress innovation. Drawing on his experience in Virginia, he highlighted the persistence of century-long relationships between institutions and accreditors as evidence of systemic stasis.

He argued that insufficient competition has allowed accreditation to drift toward bureaucratic compliance, ideological alignment, and legacy protections rather than measurable educational quality.

Under Secretary Kent outlined actions already taken by the Trump administration to introduce competition and modernization into the accreditation landscape. These include lifting the moratorium on recognizing new accreditors, streamlining processes for institutions seeking to change accreditors, and investing federal funds—through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)—to support emerging accrediting bodies and offset institutional transition costs. He emphasized that these steps are intended to foster innovation and accountability without imposing additional federal control.

The address also acknowledged examples of responsiveness within the accrediting community, highlighting agencies that have streamlined processes, supported alternative credentials, emphasized program-level outcomes, and reconsidered accreditation standards. The Under Secretary presented these efforts as evidence that reform is possible, while cautioning that accreditors unwilling to adapt risk losing credibility and relevance.

Looking forward, Under Secretary Kent previewed the Department of Education's planned Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization (AIM) negotiated rulemaking. He described it as a forum to reduce regulatory burden, address anti-competitive practices, refocus accreditation on student outcomes, revisit transfer-of-credit policies, and ensure compliance with federal and state laws. He concluded by situating accreditation reform within a larger package of higher education initiatives aimed at cost reduction, workforce alignment, consumer protection, and institutional accountability.

## Key Takeaways

- **Accreditation is central to higher education reform.** The administration views accreditation as a primary mechanism for restoring accountability, quality, and public trust in postsecondary education.
- **Student outcomes and return on investment are paramount.** Accreditation should focus on whether programs lead to meaningful employment, economic mobility, and transparent disclosure of costs and outcomes.
- **Competition is essential to quality assurance.** Long-standing regional and programmatic monopolies have limited innovation; introducing competition among accreditors is intended to drive responsiveness and improvement.
- **Modernization is already underway.** Policy changes, funding initiatives, and streamlined recognition processes are enabling new accreditors and giving institutions greater choice.
- **Accreditors must adapt or risk losing relevance.** Agencies that modernize standards, reduce unnecessary burdens, and emphasize outcomes are positioned to lead; those that do not may lose market share.
- **Four principles guide reform efforts.** Integrity, competition, accountability, and transparency will shape future accreditation policy and practice.
- **Accreditation reform is part of a broader agenda.** Changes to accreditation align with wider efforts to reduce costs, simplify student aid, strengthen consumer protections, and align education with workforce needs.

Together, these themes frame accreditation reform as a pivotal opportunity to realign quality assurance with the needs of students, families, employers, and taxpayers, while reshaping higher education for a more competitive and outcomes-driven future.

# Government Policy and Accreditation: Trends, Tensions, and Opportunities

**Sonny Ramaswamy and Leah Matthews**  
**Tim Letzring (Moderator)**

This plenary session, moderated by Tim Letzring, Senior Vice Provost at the University of Central Florida and member of the CHEA Board, featured perspectives from Sonny Ramaswamy, former President of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, and Leah Matthews, Executive Director of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC). The discussion examined the evolving role of accreditation and quality assurance in a period marked by technological disruption, political scrutiny, and shifting public expectations of higher education. The speakers explored how accreditors, institutions, and policymakers are navigating mounting pressures related to accountability, innovation, artificial intelligence, public trust, and global competitiveness.

A central theme of the discussion was the tension between compliance-driven regulatory frameworks and the need for adaptive, improvement-oriented quality assurance. Panelists reflected on the ways in which accreditation both safeguards academic standards and, at times, constrains institutional agility. They emphasized that quality assurance must evolve to remain relevant in a landscape where student learning environments, modes of delivery, and evidence of achievement are rapidly changing.

The conversation also addressed the growing policy attention directed at accreditation, including federal and state efforts to redefine accountability measures and performance expectations.

Speakers underscored the importance of maintaining peer review, institutional mission differentiation, and academic autonomy, while also responding constructively to calls for greater transparency and measurable outcomes.

Throughout the session, participants highlighted the need for collaborative leadership among accreditors, institutions, and government actors to ensure that quality assurance remains both credible and forward-looking. Rather than viewing innovation and accountability as competing priorities, the panel encouraged a reframing of accreditation as a vehicle for fostering meaningful improvement in student learning and institutional effectiveness.

## Key Takeaways

- **Quality assurance is at an inflection point.** Rapid technological change, including the growing influence of AI, is challenging traditional assumptions about assessment, evidence of learning, and institutional oversight.
- **Compliance and improvement must be better balanced.** While accountability remains essential, overly prescriptive standards can inhibit innovation and strain institutional capacity. Effective accreditation should prioritize continuous improvement and demonstrable impact on student learning.
- **Public trust depends on transparency and clarity.** Accreditors and institutions must more clearly articulate how quality assurance processes protect students and advance educational outcomes.
- **Policy scrutiny is reshaping accreditation.** Federal and state initiatives signal increasing expectations for performance metrics, outcomes data, and evidence of value, requiring proactive engagement from the accreditation community.

- **Collaboration strengthens credibility.** A resilient quality assurance system depends on sustained collaboration among accreditors, institutions, practitioners, and policymakers.
- **Mission diversity must be preserved.** Accreditation frameworks should respect institutional mission differentiation while ensuring accountability for student success and responsible stewardship across sectors.

*Sonny Ramaswamy, Former President, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*  
*Leah Matthews, Executive Director, Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)*  
*Tim Letzring (Moderator), Senior Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, University of Central Florida*

# Challenges to Accreditation in a Shifting Landscape

**Heather Perfetti and Mac Powell**  
**Nasser Paydar (Moderator)**

The second plenary session of the CHEA 2026 conference convened leaders of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) for a wide-ranging discussion on the evolving role of accreditation in a shifting federal, political, and public landscape. Moderated by CHEA's President, Nasser Paydar, the session featured:

- Heather Perfetti, Chair of C-RAC and President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education
- Mac Powell, Vice Chair of C-RAC and President, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

Framed by remarks earlier in the day from the U.S. Under Secretary of Education, the discussion focused on regulatory reform, public trust, transparency, competition, data, and the upcoming negotiated rulemaking process.

## Overview

Panelists acknowledged that accreditation is once again at an “inflection point,” marked by calls for regulatory burden reduction, new entrants into the accrediting space, and heightened scrutiny of higher education's value. Both Perfetti and Powell emphasized that while political pressures may fluctuate, accreditation's central purpose—ensuring quality and supporting student success—remains constant.

A recurring theme was the importance of engagement. Perfetti underscored the significance of ongoing dialogue with federal officials, noting that recent remarks reflect greater awareness of accreditor initiatives. She highlighted opportunities embedded in discussions of integrity, accountability, transparency, competition, and especially data—areas in which accreditors have already been actively engaged.

Powell emphasized the urgency of restoring public trust in higher education. Citing long-term declines in public confidence, he argued that accreditors must take shared responsibility for the current climate and respond with greater openness, adaptability, and evidence-based advocacy.

## Major Themes

### 1. Data as the Cornerstone of Public Trust

Both panelists agreed that anecdotes will not sustain confidence in higher education. Instead, rigorous, transparent data must demonstrate institutional performance and long-term value for students.

ACCJC's public dashboards and return-on-investment metrics were cited as examples of proactive transparency.

- A forthcoming national data summit and white paper initiative—supported by foundations and major policy stakeholders—will further elevate data-informed dialogue.
- Data should move institutions beyond defensiveness toward meaningful improvement conversations focused squarely on student outcomes.

## 2. Balancing Accountability and Improvement

The discussion surfaced tension between compliance-driven oversight and quality-improvement orientation. Powell traced accreditation's historical roots as a voluntary quality designation, cautioning against reducing it to a purely enforcement mechanism. Perfetti reinforced that accreditation processes—particularly self-study—are designed to drive institutional improvement, with compliance as a collateral outcome rather than the primary goal.

## 3. New Accreditors and Competitive Pressures

The emergence of new accreditors reflects broader policy shifts and dissatisfaction voiced in public forums. Perfetti welcomed competition, provided new agencies are held to equivalent standards and recognition requirements. She emphasized the importance of maintaining credibility across the accrediting community.

## 4. The Regulatory Triad and Shared Responsibility

Panelists reminded attendees that accountability does not rest solely with accreditors. State and federal roles within the regulatory triad are equally central. Misunderstandings about accreditation's scope—what it can and cannot do—must be addressed through proactive education and myth-busting.

## 5. Negotiated Rulemaking as a Critical Moment

Significant attention was given to the upcoming negotiated rulemaking process. Perfetti stressed the importance of nominating knowledgeable, strategic representatives and entering negotiations prepared to compromise while protecting core principles. Audience member Michael McComas, a veteran negotiator, reinforced that success depends on consensus-building, clarity around student achievement definitions, and readiness to respond swiftly to proposed language.

## 6. Speaking with One Voice—Focused on Students

While acknowledging the difficulty of alignment across diverse accreditors, Powell urged the field to rally around a singular, durable message: support for students. Narrowing communication to student success and long-term opportunity may offer the strongest common ground in a polarized environment.

## 7. Institutional Culture and Leadership

In response to questions about presidential leadership, Powell and Perfetti emphasized that accreditation most effectively influences institutional culture when it centers on student outcome data and mission alignment. Peer review teams should catalyze honest conversations about where students succeed and where they do not—prompting action rather than defensiveness.

## Conclusion

The session reflected both realism and resolve. Accreditation faces renewed scrutiny, policy experimentation, and shifting public expectations. Yet panelists conveyed confidence that through transparency, data leadership, constructive engagement in federal processes, and an unwavering focus on students, accreditors can strengthen both their credibility and higher education's public value. At a time of regulatory change and public debate, the plenary affirmed that accreditation's enduring purpose—quality assurance in service of students and society—remains both relevant and essential.

## Key Takeaways

- Accreditors must lead with credible, accessible data to demonstrate higher education's public value.

- Accreditation's power lies in peer review and continuous improvement, not merely regulatory enforcement.
- A competitive environment increases the need for shared standards, credibility, and clarity of purpose.
- Accreditation is one pillar of accountability; strengthening the triad requires collaboration and clearer public understanding.
- Effective preparation and a degree of unified perspective on major issues (e.g., transparency, student outcomes, data use) will be essential to shaping policy constructively.
- A shared commitment to student success provides the most credible and defensible unifying message.
- Accreditation drives cultural change when institutions confront their own data transparently and align improvement efforts with mission and student needs.

# Global Trends in Tertiary Education Quality Assurance - Challenges and Opportunities

**Susanna Karakhanyan and Kevin Kinser**  
**Michelle Claville (Moderator)**

The third plenary of the CHEA 2026 conference featured highlights from the Second Global Trends in Tertiary Education Quality Assurance study, a flagship initiative of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Moderated by Michelle Claville, Vice President for Research and International Initiatives at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the session brought together two principal leaders of the study: Dr. Susanna Karakhanyan, Past President of INQAAHE and Director of Higher Education Regulation and Licensing at the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (UAE), and Dr. Kevin Kinser, Professor and former Head of the Department of Education Policy Studies and Senior Scientist at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University (USA).

Published in 2025 as a five-year follow-up to the 2020 edition, the study is the most comprehensive global examination of both internal and external quality assurance (QA) systems to date. It draws on surveys from nearly 1,000 tertiary education institutions and 241 QA bodies across 99 countries, 30 regional and international organizations, 30 focus groups spanning 82 countries, and baseline data collected directly from governments in all major UNESCO regions. Importantly, it integrates institutional, agency, and regional perspectives rather than promoting a single QA model.

## Overview of Global Context

Dr. Karakhanyan situated the findings within sweeping global “mega-trends”: massification of tertiary education; political shifts (including unprecedented global election cycles); expanding cross-border education; technological transformation, especially artificial intelligence; and a narrative shift from “access to education” to “access to quality education.”

The baseline data reveal both expansion and imbalance. Globally, approximately 100,000 tertiary education institutions operate across UNESCO levels 5–8. The study identified 801 QA bodies worldwide, yet only 178 are recognized against international or regional standards. About 15 percent of countries lack formal external QA systems, and nearly half of tertiary providers are not covered by robust QA mechanisms. At the same time, other institutions report “accreditation fatigue,” reflecting uneven distribution of oversight and duplication between internal and external processes.

## Key Findings: Internal Quality Assurance

Dr. Kinser emphasized several recurring themes:

### 1. Ambiguity of “Quality”

While institutions frequently invoke “excellence,” there is no shared global definition of quality. This conceptual vagueness allows flexibility but complicates measurement, accountability, and reform.

### 2. Centralization and Administrative Silos

Internal QA is increasingly centralized within specialized administrative units. Although this professionalizes QA, it can distance quality processes from frontline faculty and instructional practice, limiting behavioral and pedagogical transformation.

### 3. Compliance Orientation and Redundancy

Internal systems often evolve reactively in response to external requirements. Overlaps, contradictions, and duplications between internal and external QA contribute to compliance burdens rather than meaningful improvement.

### 4. Limited Transformative Evidence

While accreditation is widely regarded as potentially transformative, concrete examples linking QA processes to demonstrable improvements in teaching, learning, or student success are difficult to identify. Structural changes in governance are more visible than shifts in classroom practice.

### 5. Technology as Opportunity and Strain

Advances in AI and data analytics offer powerful tools for monitoring and improvement but also create “data fatigue” and raise new questions about interpretation and capacity. A consistent theme was that genuine enhancement depends heavily on institutional leadership buy-in. Where senior leadership integrates QA findings into data-driven governance and strategic decision-making, improvement is more likely to occur.

## Key Findings: External Quality Assurance

- **Proliferation without coherence:** Rapid growth in QA bodies and regional networks has not yielded consistent dialogue or harmonization. Fragmentation undermines trust and comparability.
- **Voluntary and uneven coverage:** Accreditation remains voluntary in many contexts, leaving substantial portions of tertiary education outside formal review.

- **Cross-border expansion and commercialization:** Growth in international accreditation and branch campuses introduces both opportunity and risk. Concerns persist regarding trust, contextual sensitivity, and commercialization.
- **Political influence:** Despite aspirations toward independence, QA functions as a governmental steering mechanism in many systems, with increasing alignment to political agendas rather than purely academic priorities.
- **Compliance vs. enhancement tension:** Across regions, institutions and QA agencies report tension between regulatory control and improvement-oriented support. In some systems, attempts to separate compliance and enhancement functions have introduced new overlaps and ambiguities.

## Cross-Cutting Themes

Several broader lessons emerged:

- **Definitions matter.** Without clear definitions of quality, measurement and improvement remain elusive.
- **Context is critical.** Early QA models were often transplanted across borders without sufficient adaptation. Encouragingly, the study finds many systems now revising standards to align more closely with national priorities and systemic needs.
- **Student voice remains uneven.** Strong student engagement in QA is most developed in Europe; elsewhere, institutionalized student participation is limited.

- **Self-critique is necessary.** QA systems must assess their own effectiveness rather than defaulting to “more QA” as the remedy for weak performance.

## Core Takeaways for QA Leaders

When asked to identify the most important lesson from the current cycle, Dr. Kinser pointed to the remarkable global convergence around shared QA practice, evidence that international policy ideas have traveled widely and taken root. Dr. Karakhanyan underscored the enduring fragmentation and imbalance in coverage, warning that without greater coherence and trust-building, QA will struggle to fulfill the global commitment to equitable access to quality education.

Together, the findings present a nuanced picture: quality assurance is globally institutionalized, conceptually influential, and professionally sustained—yet uneven in reach, often compliance-driven, and still searching for demonstrable transformative impact. For QA leaders worldwide, the challenge is clear: move beyond procedural uniformity toward context-sensitive, evidence-informed systems that balance accountability with genuine enhancement and sustain trust across increasingly diverse and dynamic higher education landscapes.

*Susanna Karakhanyan, 7th (Past) President, International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Director of Higher Education Regulation & Licensing, Abu Dhabi, Department of Education and Knowledge, United Arab Emirates*

*Kevin Kinser, Professor and Former Head of the Department of Education Policy Studies, Senior Scientist at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University*

# Keynote Address

## Jon Fansmith

In his keynote address at the CHEA Annual Conference, Jon Fansmith provided an insightful analysis of the current landscape of higher education policy in the United States. He discussed the significant shifts in federal policy, particularly under the current administration, and the implications for accreditation, funding, and institutional autonomy. Fansmith emphasized the need for institutions to navigate these changes while maintaining their missions and ensuring student success.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Shifting Landscape of Higher Education Policy

Fansmith noted that federal higher education policy is undergoing a major transition, with the current administration prioritizing significant reforms. This marks a departure from previous administrations, where higher education was not as central to national political debates.

### 2. Accreditation as a Political Tool

He addressed the controversial characterization of accreditors as tools for “political and ideological enforcement.” Fansmith criticized this narrative, suggesting that it undermines the role of accreditation in ensuring quality and accountability in higher education.

### **3. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act**

Fansmith highlighted the impact of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which included substantial funding changes and new policy provisions for higher education. He described the act as potentially the largest piece of higher education legislation in two decades, introducing new accountability measures and borrowing limits for graduate students.

### **4. Implementation Challenges**

The implementation of the act poses significant challenges for institutions, particularly with tight deadlines for new regulations. Fansmith expressed concern about the feasibility of meeting these deadlines and the potential negative impact on students and financial aid counselors.

### **5. Pell Grants and Short-Term Programs**

A major change included extending Pell Grant eligibility to short-term, workforce-oriented programs. However, Fansmith pointed out that the new eligibility requirements entail rigorous standards that may exclude many current programs.

### **6. Revisions to Graduate Borrowing**

The elimination of the Grad Plus program and the introduction of caps for graduate loans were significant changes. Fansmith emphasized that these restrictions could disproportionately affect fields such as nursing and education, leading to fewer graduates entering essential professions.

### **7. Accountability Measures**

Fansmith discussed the newly instituted accountability measures requiring programs to meet specific income thresholds to qualify for federal student loans. He warned that these measures could severely limit access to education in fields that traditionally offer lower starting salaries.

## 8. Political Dynamics in Congress

He noted the changing dynamics within Congress, where bipartisan support for higher education programs has become more pronounced. Despite political divisions, there is a growing recognition of the importance of funding for higher education.

## 9. International Student Enrollment Decline

Fansmith highlighted a concerning 17% decline in new international student enrollments, attributing it to the current administration's policies and rhetoric, which have created a less welcoming environment for international students.

## 10. Future Outlook and Optimism

Despite the challenges, Fansmith expressed cautious optimism about the potential for a renewed appreciation for higher education among the public. He cited a slight rebound in public opinion regarding the value of college education as a positive sign for the future.

## Conclusion

Jon Fansmith's keynote address provided a comprehensive overview of the evolving landscape of higher education policy, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. His insights into the implications of recent legislative changes, particularly regarding accreditation and financial aid, underscored the need for institutions to adapt while remaining committed to their missions. Fansmith's perspective on the importance of collaboration and communication among stakeholders in higher education offers a pathway for navigating the complexities of the current policy environment.

*Jon Fansmith, Senior Vice President for Government Relations and National Engagement,  
American Council on Education (ACE)*

# Leading with Integrity: Ethical Leadership for Accreditation's Future in a Time of Change

**Darryll Pines and Mark Becker**  
**Nasser Paydar (Moderator)**

The fourth plenary session, "Leading with Integrity: Ethical Leadership for Accreditation," focused on the challenges and responsibilities of ethical leadership in higher education amidst a landscape of scrutiny and rapid change. The session featured insights from Darryll Pines, President, University of Maryland, and Mark Becker, President Emeritus, Georgia State University and Chair of the Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE), who discussed the implications of current policies on accreditation and the ethical considerations that leaders must navigate.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Ethical Leadership Amidst Polarization

Darryll Pines emphasized the political nature of university leadership, noting that the role of a university president has become increasingly political. He highlighted the importance of understanding core values and institutional missions as essential to ethical leadership.

### 2. Accreditation as a Tool for Accountability

Pines acknowledged the critical role of accreditors in maintaining standards of excellence. He called for transparency and a partnership between institutions and accreditors to uphold these standards, especially during challenging times.

### **3. Current Challenges in Higher Education**

The plenary addressed various challenges facing higher education, including issues related to research funding, financial aid, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and governance. Pines highlighted the impact of recent changes in federal policies, particularly regarding funding and support for underrepresented groups.

### **4. Impact of Federal Policy Changes**

Pines and Becker discussed the implications of the administration's policies on higher education funding, noting that changes in federal aid and accountability measures could affect institutional operations and student outcomes.

### **5. Navigating Governance and Oversight**

Becker shared insights on the importance of staying within institutional governance boundaries. He cautioned against boards of trustees overstepping their authority, which can lead to conflicts in governance and accreditation.

### **6. Accountability and Institutional Integrity**

Both panelists underscored the need for institutions to maintain their integrity and accountability. Pines recounted a past incident involving student safety that highlighted the importance of clear governance and decision-making processes.

### **7. Responding to Public Concerns**

Pines noted the importance of addressing public concerns about the value of higher education. He shared examples of initiatives at the University of Maryland aimed at improving literacy and addressing social issues, demonstrating how institutions can make a positive impact on society.

## 8. Collaboration and Shared Governance

Becker emphasized the significance of collaboration among faculty, administrators, and accreditors. He highlighted how engaging diverse voices can lead to better outcomes and a more effective accreditation process.

## 9. The Role of CPHE in Accreditation

Becker provided an overview of the newly established Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE), aimed at addressing the frustrations with existing accreditation processes. He outlined the commission's goals of enhancing transparency, focusing on outcomes, and improving efficiency in accreditation.

## 10. Bridging the Gap Between Institutions and Accreditors

Both Pines and Becker stressed the importance of building trust and communication between institutions and accrediting bodies. They highlighted the need for accreditors to understand the unique missions of institutions and to provide clear examples of how to meet accreditation standards.

## Conclusion

The plenary session highlighted the complexities of ethical leadership in higher education during a time of significant change and scrutiny. Pines' and Becker's insights underscored the importance of maintaining integrity, transparency, and collaboration within the accreditation process. As institutions navigate these challenges, the focus on outcomes and the value of higher education will be crucial in shaping the future of accreditation and institutional success.

*Darryll Pines, President, University of Maryland, College Park*

*Mark Becker, President Emeritus, Georgia State University, Chair, Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE)*

*Nasser Paydar (Moderator), President, CHEA*

# The Future of Accreditation in a Global Higher Education Landscape

**Carolyn Campbell and Jamil Salmi  
Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić (Moderator)**

## Overview

The session opened with Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić emphasizing the dynamic nature of higher education and the importance of adapting quality assurance practices. The discussion featured two prominent panelists, Carolyn Campbell and Jamil Salmi, who shared insights on the evolving expectations and challenges in quality assurance and accreditation in the context of globalization and internationalization.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Globalization's Impact on Quality Assurance

Jamil Salmi noted a significant shift in the global landscape, highlighting that traditional notions of higher education are being challenged. He identified a breakdown of the post-World War II international order, with various countries (e.g., Russia, Hungary, and the U.S.) exhibiting similar trends in higher education policies that undermine quality assurance principles like independence and academic freedom.

### 2. The Role of Data in Quality Assurance

Carolyn Campbell emphasized the necessity for a robust, evidence-based approach in quality assurance. She pointed out that while many institutions engage in internationalization activities, there remains a lack of data on student outcomes. She called for a focus on developing global competencies among graduates to navigate a rapidly changing world.

### **3. Opportunities and Risks in International Collaboration**

The panelists discussed the dual nature of international collaboration in quality assurance. Campbell identified opportunities for quality assurance agencies to offer services across borders but cautioned against the risks posed by mismatched expectations and regulations between host and sending countries. Salmi reinforced the importance of collaboration among agencies to share experiences and address the challenges of technological advancements, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **4. Evolving Standards in Quality Assurance**

The discussion touched on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, which are currently under revision. Campbell explained that these guidelines have been shaped through extensive collaboration among various stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area, and that their adaptability to different educational contexts is crucial for their longevity.

### **5. Future Directions for Quality Assurance**

Salmi discussed the importance of focusing on outcomes and competencies achieved by graduates. He highlighted the need for higher education institutions to embrace lifelong learning, suggesting that systems for continuous professional development should be developed globally. He also mentioned the importance of integrating social relevance into educational programs.

### **6. Engagement of Stakeholders**

Both panelists stressed the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the quality assurance process. Campbell advocated for including student voices in accreditation reviews, a practice already established in Europe, and Salmi echoed the need for collaboration among various educational entities to enhance trust in quality assurance systems.

## 7. Challenges Ahead

The panel concluded by acknowledging the numerous challenges faced by quality assurance agencies, including political pressures and the rapid pace of technological change. Salmi called for a "beta mindset," where agencies must remain flexible and willing to adapt to new realities. Campbell emphasized that without proactive measures, quality assurance systems risk becoming irrelevant.

## Conclusion

The session highlighted the pressing need for innovation in quality assurance practices within the context of globalization and technological change. The insights from Campbell and Salmi provide a roadmap for stakeholders in higher education to navigate these complexities while maintaining the integrity and relevance of accreditation processes. The discussions on data utilization, stakeholder engagement, and the evolution of standards serve as critical considerations for the future of quality assurance in higher education.

# Faith-Based Institutions and Quality Assurance in an Age of Diversity

Aaron Dominguez, Shane Reese, and  
Rabbi Ari Berman  
David Schmidt (Moderator),  
Amy Dykens (Introducer)

## Overview

The plenary session focused on the intersection of accreditation and faith-based institutions. The panel aimed to explore how accreditation can engage effectively with these institutions while navigating the complexities of autonomy, diversity, and accountability. The conversation revolved around two key questions: how accreditation frameworks can respect religious missions while ensuring compliance with academic standards and what broader improvements can be made in quality assurance.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Navigating Dual Accreditation Standards

Aaron Dominguez highlighted the unique position of the Catholic University of America, which must meet both American accreditation standards and those dictated by the Vatican. He emphasized the need for accreditors to help faith-based institutions not just survive but flourish, by recognizing their unique missions and contributions to student success.

## **2. Faith as a Core Component of Education**

Rabbi Ari Berman described Yeshiva University as a Jewish institution that intertwines its 3,000-year heritage with modern educational standards. He stressed that the university's mission to serve humanity aligns well with accreditation goals, advocating for an understanding of faith-based missions as complementary to academic excellence.

## **3. Public Trust and Accountability**

Shane Reese pointed to a broader discussion among university leaders about the declining public trust in higher education. He advocated for transparency and accountability, suggesting that institutions should articulate their missions clearly and measure their success against those missions. This approach can help restore trust and demonstrate the value of faith-based education.

## **4. Diversity in Faith-Based Institutions**

The panelists discussed the diversity within faith-based institutions, emphasizing that they attract students from various backgrounds who seek a values-driven education. This diversity enriches the educational experience and contributes to a sense of community.

## **5. Student Safety and Institutional Responsibility**

The conversation shifted to the pressing issue of student safety, particularly in light of recent events surrounding antisemitism and discrimination on campuses. Berman noted the importance of accreditation bodies taking these issues seriously, as they are fundamental to creating a safe environment for all students.

## 6. Measuring Outcomes Beyond Financial Metrics

The panelists acknowledged the challenge of measuring success in disciplines that may not yield high financial returns, such as the humanities and theology. Dominguez emphasized the need to focus on the holistic development of students and the unique outcomes that faith-based institutions provide, including moral and spiritual growth.

## 7. Collaborative Strategies for Accreditation

The panelists proposed collaborative strategies for accrediting bodies, including sending reviewers who understand and empathize with the missions of faith-based institutions. Dominguez suggested that institutions offer their faculty for accreditation visits to enhance mutual understanding and communication.

## 8. Raising Institutional Funds

Berman discussed the importance of raising funds to support scholarships, which can help reduce student debt and make faith-based education more accessible. He emphasized that partnerships with donors who share the mission of these institutions are crucial for long-term sustainability.

## 9. Integration of Faith and Education

Reese underlined the integration of faith into the educational experience at BYU, where spiritual commitments are seen as essential to student success. The institution fosters a culture of service and community engagement, which aligns with its mission of developing well-rounded individuals.

## Conclusion

The session underscored the vital role that accreditation plays in supporting faith-based institutions as they navigate the complexities of maintaining their missions while adhering to academic standards. The insights from Dominguez, Berman, and Reese highlight the need for a collaborative approach that respects the unique contributions of faith-based education to the broader landscape of higher education. As these institutions continue to flourish, they offer valuable lessons in fostering community, ensuring student safety, and balancing academic excellence with spiritual commitments.

*Aaron Dominguez, Executive Vice President and Provost, Catholic University of America*

*Shane Reese, President, Brigham Young University*

*Rabbi Ari Berman, President, Yeshiva University*

*David Schmidt (Moderator), Interim Provost, Webster University; Member of the CHEA Board of Directors*

*Amy Dykens (Introducer), President and CEO of Weave (Platinum Sponsor)*

# Autonomy Under Pressure: Accreditation, Transparency, and Public Trust in Policy and Politics

**Jamienne Studley and James Kvaal  
Jan Friis (Moderator)**

The plenary of the 2026 CHEA Conference brought together two nationally respected higher education leaders for a wide-ranging discussion on accreditation's role in an increasingly volatile policy environment. Moderated by Jan Friis, the session featured:

- Jamienne Studley, former President of the WASC Senior College and University Commission; former Deputy Under Secretary of Education; former Chair of NACIQI; and former President of Skidmore College.
- James Kvaal, Vice President for National Programs at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; former U.S. Under Secretary of Education; former President of The Institute for College Access & Success.

Together, the panelists examined how accreditation can remain independent, credible, and mission-driven while responding to mounting federal scrutiny, public skepticism, and political polarization.

## Framing the Challenge: Why Accreditation Is Under Pressure

Studley opened with a broad analysis of the current climate. Accreditation, she argued, is uniquely vulnerable: a system of independent, nonprofit, peer-based organizations entrusted with enabling institutions to access federal student aid. To policymakers and the public, this structure can appear opaque or mysterious. In a moment when higher education itself is politically contested—seen alternately as an engine of opportunity or a symbol of division—accreditation becomes an easy target.

She emphasized that critiques of higher education are often rooted in larger societal tensions: economic insecurity, perceived cultural divides, and resentment over public investment in college students but not in non-college pathways. The longstanding rhetoric of “college for all,” she suggested, may have unintentionally contributed to division. A reframing toward “learning for all” could better reflect diverse pathways and lifelong learning.

Kvaal agreed that the political moment is serious and unlikely to dissipate quickly. While critical of current policy directions he views as destructive, he acknowledged that some public concerns are grounded in real experiences: uneven graduation rates, student loan burdens, and cases of institutional failure. Accreditation, he argued, must confront these realities while defending the broader value of higher education.

## Outcomes, Equity, and the Limits of Metrics

A central theme of the session was student outcomes. Both panelists reflected on their work advancing the College Scorecard and gainful employment metrics during prior administrations.

Kvaal underscored bipartisan support for incorporating student outcomes into quality assurance. Graduation rates, earnings data, and loan repayment metrics are now embedded in the policy landscape. However, he warned against reducing the value of education to individual return on investment. Overreliance on earnings data risks narrowing support for public service fields, the arts, and other socially vital but lower-paying professions.

Studley highlighted the ethical complexity of outcomes-based accountability. Metrics can be used constructively—to prompt tuition adjustments, program redesign, or stronger student supports—but they can also create perverse incentives, such as restricting access to boost graduation rates. She urged accreditors and institutions to pursue both access and success simultaneously, pointing to evidence that improved student outcomes need not come at the expense of equity.

Both panelists agreed that higher education must articulate a fuller conception of excellence—one that includes accessibility, affordability, completion, meaningful employment, and civic contribution.

## **Accreditation as Buffer and Mediator**

A recurring question was how accreditation can serve as a buffer between government oversight and academic freedom.

Kvaal emphasized accreditation's comparative advantage: contextual judgment. Unlike blunt federal thresholds, accreditors can examine institutional performance in light of local labor markets, mission, governance capacity, and external shocks. This discretionary authority—though difficult to explain publicly—is precisely what enables nuanced, responsible oversight.

Studley reinforced that discretion is both accreditation's strength and its vulnerability. Policymakers often distrust discretionary systems, yet higher education historically advocated for peer-based, nongovernmental quality assurance to protect academic independence. Transparency, she argued, is essential to sustaining that trust.

One practical proposal she revisited was an “accreditor dashboard”—a system-level performance overview that would allow policymakers and the public to assess accreditor effectiveness across their portfolios, rather than relying on anecdotes about individual institutions. Such tools could strengthen confidence in accreditation's judgment.

## **Governance, Autonomy, and Political Cycles**

The panel also addressed negotiated rulemaking and the evolving federal role. Studley encouraged the nomination of experienced, knowledgeable negotiators capable of understanding the long-term implications of regulatory changes. Kvaal noted that the current environment appears to prioritize consensus-building, suggesting strategic clarity about non-negotiable principles.

On the question of autonomy, both speakers acknowledged accreditation's dual identity: quality improvement partner and gatekeeper to federal funds. While accreditors often see themselves as improvement-oriented, external stakeholders perceive accreditation as a seal of approval tied to public investment. Reconciling those roles remains an ongoing challenge.

Studley also emphasized governance as a critical area of shared interest across political perspectives.

Effective institutional governance underpins quality and continuity, and accreditor review of governance structures may represent a point of bipartisan agreement.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. **Accreditation operates in a highly contested environment.**

Broader societal divisions about higher education shape policy debates about quality assurance.

**2. Outcomes matter—but must be handled wisely.** Metrics should inform improvement without undermining access, equity, or non-economic educational value.

**3. Judgment and discretion are strengths.** Accreditation's peer-based, contextual review process offers nuance that federal rules cannot replicate.

**4. Transparency is essential to legitimacy.** Clear communication about decisions and performance can counter perceptions of secrecy.

### 5. **Governance and academic freedom are foundational.**

Accreditation helps safeguard institutional autonomy and the marketplace of ideas.

**6. Engagement is critical.** The negotiated rulemaking process presents both risks and opportunities; expertise at the table matters.

**7. This is a defining moment.** Both panelists framed the current period as an opportunity for leaders in accreditation and higher education to shape the future of public trust and educational quality.

The session closed on a note of cautious optimism: despite political volatility, accreditation remains a uniquely powerful instrument for protecting academic values while ensuring accountability. How the field responds in this moment may shape the trajectory of higher education for years to come.

*Jamienne Studley, former President, WASC Senior College and University Commission;  
former Deputy Under Secretary of Education; former Chair, NACIQI; and former President, Skidmore College*  
*James Kvaal, Vice President for National Programs at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching;  
former U.S. Under Secretary of Education; former President, The Institute for College Access & Success*  
*Jan Friis (Moderator), CHEA Senior Vice President for Government Affairs*

# Measuring What Matters: Integrity, Innovation, and Student Outcomes

**Malina Monaco and Crissy Lewis  
Catherine Wehlburg (Moderator)**

The closing plenary of the 2026 conference brought together leaders from programmatic accrediting organizations to examine how accreditation is evolving amid rising public scrutiny of higher education outcomes. Moderated by Catherine Wehlburg, President of Athens State University and CHEA Board Member, the session explored how accreditors are balancing rigor, transparency, innovation, and continuous improvement in a rapidly changing environment.

## **Panelists included:**

- Malina Monaco, Senior Vice President for Accreditation, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)
- Crissy Lewis, Vice President of Quality and Improvement, Council on Chiropractic Education (CCE)

Together, they reflected on how their agencies are rethinking student outcomes, institutional accountability, and the role of accreditation itself.

## **Reframing Student Outcomes: From Counting to Competence**

A central theme of the discussion was the shift from input- and volume-based measures toward meaningful demonstrations of competence and impact.

Lewis described chiropractic education’s evolution from counting clinical procedures to assessing performance quality. Earlier standards emphasized how many times a student performed a task; today, CCE requires students to demonstrate mastery across 31 outcomes embedded within eight “meta-competencies.” This transition required significant cultural change, data system development, and faculty retraining. The focus has moved from data collection mechanics to ensuring data are meaningful, aggregated effectively, and used for program improvement.

Similarly, Monaco noted that educator preparation has shifted from emphasizing admissions selectivity and employment rates to measuring graduate impact. Because teacher shortages mean nearly all completers secure employment, job placement is no longer a useful metric. Instead, CAEP now emphasizes post-graduation impact on P–12 student learning and teacher retention. While impactful, these measures are complex and data-intensive. Only a small number of states provide value-added data, requiring institutions to build partnerships with school districts to obtain meaningful evidence. Both panelists underscored the importance of multiple measures—quantitative and qualitative—to avoid oversimplifying educational quality.

## **Compliance as a Byproduct of Quality**

A defining insight from the session was the reconceptualization of compliance. Rather than designing systems to “meet accreditation,” panelists argued that institutions should build robust quality assurance systems first—compliance then follows naturally.

Monaco emphasized that sustainable systems are designed for continuous improvement, not regulatory minimums.

Institutions that build agile, data-informed processes can adapt to changing standards and external pressures. Compliance, in this framework, becomes a byproduct of excellence rather than its primary aim.

Lewis reinforced this idea by urging programs to remain focused on their mission—the “why” behind their work. If institutions concentrate on preparing graduates to serve communities effectively, accreditation requirements align organically.

### **Transparency, Failure, and Public Trust**

The panel addressed the tension between transparency and reputational risk. Institutions often hesitate to publicize weaknesses, yet both panelists argued that failure is a powerful source of learning. Monaco encouraged institutions to openly discuss areas for improvement with stakeholders and to frame accreditation reviews as snapshots in an ongoing improvement journey. Increasingly, educator preparation programs report not only strengths but also targeted improvement initiatives.

Lewis highlighted the distinction between easily digestible public metrics (licensure rates, graduation rates) and the broader competencies that define professional readiness, such as cultural competence and evidence-based decision-making. A balanced public narrative must include both.

### **Innovation and the “Accreditor Won’t Let Us” Myth**

Panelists challenged the common institutional refrain that accreditors inhibit innovation. Neither CAEP nor CCE standards prohibit new approaches; rather, they establish guardrails within which innovation can flourish.

In educator preparation, innovation has transformed clinical models, including yearlong residencies and apprenticeship pathways. In chiropractic education, flexibility exists so long as programs meet competency thresholds and licensure expectations.

When innovation fails, panelists stressed, it should be analyzed and refined—not abandoned. Accreditation should create space for experimentation grounded in evidence.

## **Building Partnership and Trust**

The session emphasized accreditation as a collaborative partnership rather than an adversarial inspection. Both agencies have implemented proactive engagement strategies:

- Regular office hours and consultations
- Program workshops and guidance documents
- Transparent reporting on common areas for improvement
- Enhanced reviewer training focused on communication and collaboration

Monaco noted that reviewer conduct significantly shapes institutional perception. CAEP has invested heavily in retraining reviewers to move away from “gotcha” mentalities toward holistic, peer-based review.

Lewis described new pre-self-study consultations to help programs anticipate expectations and avoid common pitfalls. Proactive communication, she argued, reduces fear and builds trust.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. **Outcomes must reflect impact, not just completion.**

Employment and licensure rates are necessary but insufficient indicators of quality.

### 2. **Continuous improvement should drive system design.**

Compliance emerges from strong quality assurance systems.

**3. Transparency strengthens credibility.** Institutions should openly address challenges and improvement efforts.

**4. Innovation is compatible with rigor.** Standards provide guardrails, not roadblocks.

**5. Partnership is essential.** Effective accreditation depends on communication, trust, and well-trained reviewers.

**6. Accreditation is a snapshot, not an event.** Quality assurance is continuous; review captures a moment in that journey.

*Malina Monaco, Senior Vice President for Accreditation, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)*

*Crissy Lewis, Vice President of Quality and Improvement, The Council on Chiropractic Education*

*Catherine Wehlburg (Moderator), President, Athens State University, Alabama*



**CONCURRENT  
SESSIONS**

# Rethinking the U: Academic Master Planning that Connects Integrity, Tradition, and Transformation

**Catherine Wehlburg**

This session explored how institutions could strategically design and use academic master plans that honored long-standing values while boldly embracing change. As higher education faces increasing pressures to evolve, the session examined how planning grounded in integrity could serve as a catalyst for meaningful, lasting quality enhancement. Participants engaged in a forward-focused discussion on aligning mission, strategic innovation, and academic excellence in transformative and sustainable ways.

*Catherine Wehlburg, President, Athens State University*

# Global Standards, Local Contexts: How Accreditation Advances Equity in Higher Education

**Banhi Bhattacharya and Sakil Malik**

This session examines how accreditation can drive transformation in higher education, particularly in underdeveloped and developing countries. Drawing on experiences from India, South Africa, and Qatar, we explore how institutions embed integrity, balance global standards with local realities, and innovate responsibly.

These case studies will illustrate how robust quality assurance and accreditation frameworks, designed to intensify training for students and clinician-educators, can advance accountability and equity, and serve as a tool to enhance social care.

The first case studied is the Staff Development Program led by the District Mentor of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) at Milli Al-Ameen College for Girls in Kolkata, India. The program aimed to equip the college staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to prepare for NAAC accreditation and ensure continuous improvement in educational practices. It resulted in several positive outcomes such as increased awareness and enhanced collaboration, motivation, and confidence among staff members in their journey to meet NAAC standards through effective implementation of quality enhancement strategies.

The second case is based on South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE) reports on transformation that resulted due to the implementation of its higher education quality evaluation processes through accreditation, audits, and quality guidelines developed. The findings show how accreditation aligned to national equity priorities in South Africa has driven long-term systemic change and transparency to support government and public action.

The third case shows how Qatar's higher education sector has undergone rapid transformation as part of the country's national development trajectory. To ensure system-wide quality, equity, and transparency, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education established the Qatar National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qatar Quality Assurance (QQA) licensing and accreditation regime.

These mechanisms regulate all private and public higher education institutions. The Qatar accreditation system has embedded systematic equity requirements, transparent learning outcomes, and strong accountability mechanisms leading to:

- A centralized national framework that ensures all higher education institutions, including rapidly expanding private institutions, follow equity-oriented standards.
- Transparency in learning outcomes that empower students to make informed decisions and enables employers to understand qualifications clearly.
- Evidence-based equity reporting that compels institutions to confront gender- and nationality-based achievement gaps.

- Progress towards meeting the Qatar National Vision 2030 whereby quality assurance supports national human capital development.

These case studies will illustrate how accreditation can advance accountability and equity, offering valuable lessons for all interested stakeholders.

### **The presentation addressed:**

How accreditation empowered under-resourced colleges when equity was embedded in standards, student-centered evidence catalyzed equity improvements, and both narrative and quantitative data were used effectively (India)

How accreditation aligned with national equity priorities drove long-term systemic change, with transparency and system-level reporting supporting government action and public accountability (South Africa)

How accreditation structured through a centralized national framework ensured equity and quality across both public and private higher education sectors (Qatar)

### **Quality Connections**

The cases discussed in the presentation indicate how across global contexts, accreditation functions not only as a compliance mechanism but as a strategic lever for equity, institutional transformation, and public accountability. The examples from India, South Africa, and Qatar demonstrate how quality assurance systems—when intentionally designed—can empower institutions and advance national priorities.

Taken together, these examples show that accreditation—when equity-driven—can:

- Empower institutions through purposeful, contextualized standards. Advance national transformation agendas through transparent reporting
- Protect students and ensure fairness through coherent and centralized frameworks
- Reinforce foundational institutional values such as accountability, inclusiveness, and continuous improvement. Ultimately, accreditation becomes not just a mechanism for evaluating quality, but a powerful tool for shaping it—especially when equity is positioned at the center of design and practice.

## Takeaways:

**1. Equity-Driven Accreditation Empowers Institutions:** When equity is embedded in accreditation standards (India), even under-resourced colleges can improve quality by using student-centered evidence—both narrative and quantitative—to identify barriers and strengthen learning experiences.

**2. Alignment to National Priorities Drives Systemic Change:** In systems like South Africa's, accreditation aligned to equity and social justice goals enables long-term transformation. Transparent, system-level reporting supports government action, public trust, and institutional accountability.

**3. Centralized Frameworks Ensure Fairness Across Sectors:** Qatar's national accreditation framework shows how coherent, standardized expectations across public and private institutions ensure consistency, protect students, and reinforce values of rigor, integrity, and continuous improvement.

**4. Design for learning, not just listing:** Use standards and cycles to incentivize formative reflection, targeted remediation, and timely follow-through by adapting accreditation criteria to match national/local priorities.

# Navigating the Data Imperative in Programmatic Accreditation

**Gina Scarboro, Jenna LeBlanc, and Amy Dykens**

The landscape of programmatic accreditation was described as rapidly evolving, driven by increasing demand from students, programs, employers, professional boards, and the public for transparent, comprehensive, and actionable data. This session brought together leaders from the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, the Accreditation Review Committee for the Anesthesiologist Assistant, and accredited programs to examine strategies for effectively collecting, analyzing, and using data to demonstrate program quality and ensure graduate preparedness for professional practice.

The discussion highlighted the role of programmatic and specialized accreditors as critical gatekeepers responsible for ensuring that graduates possessed the competencies, knowledge, and skills required by their respective fields and employers. Speakers examined the types of data prioritized by these accreditors, including graduate employment rates, licensure examination pass rates, employer satisfaction surveys, and competency-based assessment results. The session also explored the systems and technologies used to collect and analyze profession-specific data, emphasizing how these tools supported tracking student progression from enrollment through entry into professional practice.

The presentation addressed the expanding role of data analytics and emerging technologies in strengthening the alignment between educational programs and workforce readiness. Participants learned about best practices for leveraging data to demonstrate how programs met industry standards, responded to workforce needs, and prepared graduates to make meaningful contributions to their professions.

Speakers further discussed how programmatic accreditors could move beyond basic compliance requirements to employ data storytelling approaches that highlighted student success, graduate competency, and the real-world impact of educational programs on professional practice and workforce development.

*Gina Scarboro, Executive Director, Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP)*

*Jenna LeBlanc, Program Director, Cytotechnology and Molecular Cytology, Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences*

*Amy Dykens, CEO, Weave Education and Host, Accreditation Conversations podcast*

# Can AI Help with Accreditation?

**Justin Gandy**

This session was an exploration of the appropriateness of using artificial intelligence (AI) for accreditation. Few things have shifted the landscape of higher education as much as AI has over the past few years and, while great caution is still warranted, AI presents those working in accreditation some helpful tools to improve productivity while maintaining academic integrity.

AI allows for powerful analysis and potential time savings, but the key is finding places where it can help ease some of the labor-intensive tasks in accreditation work while preserving for humans those areas where security, accuracy, fairness, and judgment are all legitimate concerns. Additionally, AI has proven to be a very effective “sparring partner” and can help identify deficiencies or gaps in our reports.

Most people use AI predominantly for content generation. After all, the “G” in ChatGPT stands for “generative,” and AI tools are great at generating movies, images, songs, reports, schedules, recipes, and an almost endless list of other things. While “generation” is often the most used application of AI, it is also one of the least helpful in terms of accreditation work. Other uses of AI include roles such as tutor, evaluator, researcher, simulator, scenario planner, learning assistant, and even agent, all of which can be helpful in accreditation.

Two of the major concerns in accreditation work are properly understanding the standards and ensuring our reports adequately cover all the standards.

Accreditors have an interesting knack of cramming multiple requirements into very few words, and it can be easy to miss or misunderstand key elements. AI is very good at analyzing multiple documents, websites, PowerPoints, and even videos and distilling that information into understandable explanations.

Additionally, our work is generally read by reviewers with very little outside knowledge of our institutions, and things we believe are clear can be easily overlooked by reviewers; an issue that can be compounded when reviewers only read assigned segments of our reports. AI is really good at playing the role of “picky reviewer” to help identify areas where our reports can be strengthened.

The primary focus of this session was to suggest and demonstrate appropriate ways to use AI in accreditation work. Participants walked away with three “turnkey” tools they can begin using immediately. Participants did not need any prior knowledge or experience with AI, but they were encouraged to bring a laptop in order to “test” some of the tools throughout the presentation.

# Harnessing Quality Data for Learner and Program Success

**Elliot Gillerman and Michelle Van Noy**

Non-degree credentials (NDCs) had become an increasingly popular means of delivering job-aligned training, yet assessing their quality and impact remained a significant challenge for institutions and policymakers. This presentation explored how high-quality data could empower institutions to move beyond simple compliance reporting toward a culture of continuous, data-driven improvement. The discussion addressed how robust data strategies were essential for enhancing learner outcomes, closing equity gaps, and ensuring programmatic alignment with workforce needs.

The presentation examined persistent challenges in data collection and analysis for NDCs, including fragmented data systems, the lack of standardized definitions, and difficulties in tracking learners over time. At the same time, presenters highlighted emerging progress and best practices among institutions actively building effective data infrastructures to overcome these barriers. In alignment with the conference theme, the session demonstrated that the NDC ecosystem was well positioned for innovation, but required high-quality data not only to ensure accountability to employers and learners, but also to drive ongoing program improvement and refinement.

The presenters emphasized that this need for quality data had become increasingly non-negotiable for meeting accreditation and accountability standards and for accessing transformative funding opportunities such as Workforce Pell, which required evidence of program return on investment. Embracing these data expectations, the session noted, could create an ecosystem that supported long-term research, facilitated systemic improvement, and fostered a more transparent and effective credentialing environment for both learners and employers.

Participants left the session with a clearer understanding of key non-degree credential data challenges and opportunities, as well as strategies for deploying data to identify and address gaps in student achievement. The presentation also explored the potential of emerging and collaborative data models. One such model, CredLens, a national data trust, was highlighted for its ability to provide credential issuers with outcomes insights derived from verified data. The session further examined how data required to identify student outcomes for eligibility for funding programs such as Workforce Pell could also be leveraged to drive program improvement. Finally, presenters shared updates on state-level progress in building noncredit data infrastructure, including efforts emerging from the Rutgers State Noncredit Data Project.

*Elliot Gillerman, Senior Vice President, Strategy & Insights, CredLens*  
*Michelle Van Noy, Director, Education and Employment Research Center,*  
*School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers*

# The Politics of Quality and Intermediary Bodies in Higher Education

**Fay Lim-Lambie**

This discussion examined the dual roles of quality assurance intermediary bodies in higher education and their intersection with academic quality. In an era characterized by rapid disruption in higher education and increasing political pressure, the session explored the unique position of intermediaries—such as accrediting bodies, government oversight agencies, and regulators—that operate at the nexus of public trust and quality assurance. The presentation contributed to broader conversations about academic quality in higher education when multiple systems and actors intersect.

Drawing on a recent higher education policy shift in nursing education in Ontario, Canada, the discussion focused on the Province of Ontario's 2020 decision to allow colleges to deliver standalone Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) degrees independently of a university partner. This policy change served as a comparative case through which the presentation examined parallels between the Canadian and U.S. contexts. Organizations such as CHEA, its member bodies, and comparable quality assurance agencies in Canada were highlighted for their critical role in mediating external disruptions, political and economic pressures, workforce demands, government oversight, and access, while sustaining legitimacy and academic quality in higher education.

The session emphasized how intermediary bodies functioned as stabilizing forces within complex policy environments, shaping how quality was interpreted, defended, and operationalized amid changing regulatory and labor market conditions.

## Key Takeaways

Quality in higher education was shown to have an inherent political dimension, with policy shifts—such as Ontario’s nursing degree reform—illustrating the dynamic interplay among intermediaries, political actors, and institutions.

Intermediary bodies played a critical role in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of higher education programs. Intersecting dimensions of quality were integral to program integrity. These include standards and governance creating both legitimacy and quality assurance, while collaboration amongst institution and intermediaries was an essential lever in policy shifts.

# Assuring Consistency in Accreditation Decisions: Two Approaches

**Lisa Beatty and Leah K. Matthews**

Maintaining consistency, equity, and transparency in accreditation decisions is essential to preserving the credibility and quality of accredited institutions and programs. This session invites participants to explore effective approaches for strengthening fairness and consistency throughout the accreditation review and decision-making cycle.

The executive directors of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) and the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) led an engaging, practice-focused conversation on what it takes to foster dependable and equitable evaluation outcomes. Drawing on extensive experience in leading accrediting organizations, the presenters shared insights into building systems that promote clarity, reduce variability, and support consistent interpretation of accreditation standards.

Key topics included the importance of ensuring that councils, commissions, and review bodies operated from a unified understanding of accreditation standards and procedures. Speakers highlighted how evaluation tools, common rubrics, and structured review protocols supported consistency in accreditation decision-making. The session also emphasized the critical role of robust training for evaluators, commissioners, and staff, exploring how regular professional development and case-based learning enhanced reviewer competence.

Consistency practices received special attention, including how clear rationales and consistent language contributed to both fairness and institutional trust. Presenters also discussed mechanisms for improving and strengthening consistency, such as pre-visit briefings, post-review debriefs, and periodic cross-team alignment sessions.

Designed for both new and experienced accreditation professionals, the session offered practical guidance for strengthening the reliability and integrity of accreditation decisions. Participants left with a deeper understanding of how coherent systems and intentional reviewer preparation contributed to fair, rigorous, and credible accreditation outcomes.

## Takeaways for Participants

- Practical strategies for aligning governance structures and decision-making bodies
- Tools and protocols for standardizing evaluation processes
- Approaches to strengthening training and preparation for evaluators and commissioners
- Insights into creating transparent, well-documented decision rationales
- Methods for ongoing calibration to ensure consistency across teams and review cycles

*Lisa L. Beatty, Executive Director, ABHE Commission on Accreditation*

*Leah K. Matthews, Executive Director, Distance Education Accreditation Commission (DEAC)*

# Algorithmic Governance: How AI is Reshaping Higher Education Institutional Norms and Quality Assurance Standards

**Melanie Gottlieb**

The session explored how artificial intelligence is fundamentally transforming institutional governance and norms. It addressed the critical need for accrediting organizations to understand AI's impact on institutional integrity, compliance frameworks, and student success as they navigate this technological shift. The discussion focused specifically on the AI-enabled use of student data and information for various purposes.

## Key Points

**Data Governance and Integrity:** AI requires unprecedented student data access, challenging traditional FERPA frameworks and requiring new roles like "AI ethics stewards."

**Redefining Student Success:** Traditional metrics are being supplemented by predictive indicators of engagement and risk, raising questions about mission alignment.

**Professional Evolution:** Institutional roles are shifting from record-keeping to strategic data analysis and AI system management.

**Algorithmic Equity:** Institutions must identify and mitigate bias in automated decision-making regarding admissions and financial aid, and every other aspect of administrative function that AI is touching.

**Vendor Accountability:** Reliance on external AI vendors creates vulnerabilities regarding data security, intellectual property, and institutional control.

## Quality Connections

This topic is directly relevant to quality assurance and accreditation as it requires the development of new frameworks to evaluate whether AI innovations enhance or compromise educational quality. The session supported the CHEA mission by providing accreditors with tools to evaluate emerging technologies while protecting institutional autonomy and human-centered educational values.

## Takeaways

**The Urgency of Standard Adaptation:** The adoption of AI in higher education requires accrediting agencies to rapidly develop or update evaluation standards, moving beyond traditional compliance to actively assess AI's impact on data governance, integrity, and the fundamental quality of education.

**The Necessity of a Risk-Based Lens:** Effective quality assurance in the AI era demands a shift to systematic, risk-based auditing to proactively identify and mitigate systemic threats, such as embedded algorithmic bias, unmanaged data privacy risks, and over-reliance on external vendors.

**Governance as a Mission-Critical Function:** A key lesson for institutions is that robust AI governance is not merely an IT issue but a mission-critical function, requiring accreditors to evaluate whether frameworks are in place to ensure operational efficiency is consistently aligned with, and does not compromise, student-centered educational values.

**Collaborative Policy Development:** The complexity of AI governance highlights the need for quality assurance professionals to utilize shared resources and policy examples to collaboratively guide member institutions in establishing responsible, sector-wide standards.

*Melanie Gottlieb, Executive Director, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, AACRAO*

# From Vision to Verification: Leading with Integrity, Innovation, and Impact in Caribbean Higher Education

**Lora Battle Bailey, Ph.D.**

In session, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Lora Battle Bailey offered a compelling examination of integrity-driven leadership within the context of Caribbean higher education. Speaking from her role at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), Dr. Bailey presented an institutional case study grounded in the lived realities of a small, culturally rich, and geographically distinct public university navigating an increasingly complex accreditation and accountability landscape.

Dr. Bailey's narrative positioned integrity not as an abstract ideal but as a governing architecture—one that shaped institutional priorities, informed decision-making, and built the structural coherence required for institutional resilience. Through UVI's ongoing engagement with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), integrity emerged as both the catalyst and the compass for meaningful organizational transformation. The institution's work illustrated how transparent leadership practices, mission-centered communication, and honest self-study processes strengthened not only accreditation readiness but also the foundational systems that supported student learning and academic quality.

Rather than framing accreditation as a periodic evaluative moment, Dr. Bailey described it as a continuous pathway toward strength and coherence. She explained how UVI's MSCHE experience encouraged a systematic convergence of academic affairs, institutional effectiveness, governance, and student support functions. Accreditation, in this framing, functioned as a clarifying mechanism—one that surfaced institutional misalignments and encouraged a shared language of quality. It enabled UVI to re-examine the connection between mission and practice, mobilize cross-divisional dialogue, and create structures that better supported evidence-based decision-making.

Dr. Bailey emphasized that the pace of technological change—particularly the rise of artificial intelligence and digital transformation—further underscored the need for integrity-based governance. Innovation, she argued, needed to be accompanied by intentional structures that protected academic values and prioritized equitable access. UVI's emerging approach to innovation centered on careful policy development, faculty engagement, and ethical implementation. The institution recognized that technology, when thoughtfully integrated, could strengthen teaching and learning, but when adopted without guardrails, might introduce new risks to academic quality. Dr. Bailey's narrative therefore advocated for a model of innovation that was measured, transparent, and fundamentally aligned with institutional mission.

An important component of the narrative was UVI's aspiration to build future research capacity. Dr. Bailey presented this ambition with clarity and realism, positioning it not as a current hallmark of the institution, but as a deliberate and long-term institutional direction.

She highlighted the cultural and structural challenges that small, underrepresented institutions often faced when striving to develop research infrastructure, while also affirming the possibility of progress through incremental capacity-building, policy alignment, faculty development, and intentional planning. In her account, aspiration emerged as a strategic asset—one grounded in integrity rather than inflated claims.

Throughout the presentation, Dr. Bailey positioned UVI as a model of Caribbean resilience—a demonstration that excellence in higher education was not determined by size or geography, but by clarity of mission, alignment of systems, and the consistent application of integrity across leadership practices. She noted that institutions serving historically marginalized populations often developed adaptive leadership characteristics that were increasingly instructive for the broader higher education landscape. These institutions, she argued, revealed how structural limitations could give rise to strategic ingenuity and a deeper understanding of the relationship between community, culture, and academic purpose.

Dr. Bailey concluded by asserting that the future of accreditation and institutional accountability would require leaders to embrace integrity as both a stabilizing force and a platform for innovation. Integrity, she maintained, provided coherence in times of disruption, ensured authenticity in institutional narratives, and created the conditions under which mission fidelity could coexist with modern expectations for data, transparency, and digital progress. Her address ultimately called upon higher education leaders to reimagine accreditation as a source of institutional courage—one that empowered universities to align boldly with their values while navigating the uncertainties of a shifting landscape.

This narrative situated the University of the Virgin Islands as an emergent exemplar of mission-centered leadership, demonstrating how institutions could harness integrity and intentionality to strengthen quality assurance, prepare for future capacity-building, and sustain academic excellence amid evolving demands.

# The Outcomes Story in Programmatic Accreditation

**Zach Waymer and Robb Smith**

Specialized and professional accreditors ensure quality in higher education by holding programs accountable for outcomes that produced competent graduates. The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors' (ASPA) 2026 Outcomes Report, an update to a survey originally conducted in 2016, examined how specialized and professional accreditors used competency assessment, program-determined indicators, and bright line measures as indicators of student achievement. In addition to sharing updated findings, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) presented an accreditor's perspective on how it determined which outcomes to measure and require within its standards, as well as how those measures were reported and evaluated.

## Key Points

ASPA member accreditors represented a mix of CHEA- and U.S. Department of Education-recognized accreditors, as well as non-recognized accreditors.

All programmatic accreditors, regardless of recognition status, used one or more outcomes measures related to competency assessment, bright line indicators, and program-determined indicators to evaluate programs.

Competencies encompassed the knowledge, skills, and abilities or behaviors needed for professional success, as defined by the respective fields.

Bright line indicators were set by accreditors and commonly included graduation and retention rates, placement rates, and examination or licensure pass rates.

Program-determined indicators were either selected by the program or required by the accreditor, with outcomes established by the program, and similarly included graduation and retention rates, placement rates, and examination or licensure pass rates.

Accreditors employed a range of approaches to address programs that did not meet defined expectations for student outcomes.

ASPA member accreditors each had a distinct approach to outcomes standards, with ARC-PA providing its institutional example.

## **Quality Connections**

This session aligned with the integrity and accountability themes of the CHEA conference by presenting data on outcomes standards and their use by programmatic accreditors, alongside a real-world example from an ASPA member accreditor.

## **Research Context**

ASPA member accreditors were surveyed in December 2025 using a standard survey platform to collect and analyze responses and generate insights. Preliminary data and findings were presented at the CHEA conference in advance of a full ASPA report scheduled for release later in 2026.

## Takeaways

ASPA member accreditors accredited approximately 100 different professions and specialized disciplines, ranging from acupuncture to veterinary medicine, with roughly 60 percent focused on healthcare fields.

Programmatic accreditors relied on a blend of student achievement outcomes standards to evaluate program and institutional quality, including competency assessment, bright line indicators, and program-determined indicators.

Accreditors employed a variety of actions when programs and institutions failed to meet established outcomes standards.

# AI, Disruptive Technology, and Accreditation: A Strategic Approach

**Megan Fujita and Collina D. Cooke**

Artificial intelligence (AI) and other disruptive technologies are changing higher education from how students produce work, how faculty design learning, and how institutions demonstrate quality. This presentation focuses on how one programmatic accreditor, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), is responding through proactive policy development and strategic planning.

The presentation centers on three major points. First, AI changes what counts as evidence of learning. When writing, analysis, and even practice simulations can be generated quickly and convincingly, traditional indicators of student performance can become less reliable. This creates pressure on programs to clarify how they capture “competence” and success achievement of student outcomes. Rather than treating AI through the lens of potential misconduct, the session reframes it as a quality assurance challenge for educators and accreditors.

The session also highlights how accreditation can support responsible innovation. CSWE’s role is not to pursue every new technological tool, but to provide stable expectations and guardrails that protect educational quality and practitioner preparation, while allowing programs flexibility to respond to local contexts. That includes supporting programs as they develop clear guidance for AI use in coursework, curriculum design, field education, and assessment, without creating compliance burdens that are unrealistic or inconsistently applied.

Finally, CSWE's response is anchored in organizational strategy. CSWE's 2025-2030 strategic plan explicitly elevates AI and disruptive technologies as an organizational priority, reflecting the reality that technology will shape social work education and accreditation for years. As part of that strategy, this presentation will cover the work of the CSWE Commission on Educational Policy Task Force on AI and technology, including the Task Force's report and key recommendations. These recommendations are framed as practical guidance for programs and for CSWE's own policy direction and providing field-wide leadership to enable responsible innovation.

These three areas connect directly to quality assurance, accreditation, and institutional values. Quality assurance depends on credible, comparable evidence of student learning and program outcomes to ensure ethical practitioner preparation. Accreditation depends on clear and fair expectations across programs, especially when technology creates challenges or opportunities. From CSWE's perspective, social work's professional values of ethics, equity, and responsibility to the public, require that AI adoption be evaluated not only for efficiency, but also for risks such as bias, privacy harms, and erosion of professional standards. The session frames CSWE's approach as values-driven quality assurance through protecting integrity while helping programs navigate rapid digital change.

### **Key session takeaways include:**

- Accreditation-ready AI policies for program review. Leave with a practical accreditor's perspective on AI policy from an accreditor-perspective.
- Treat AI as governance. Position AI within organizational strategy including explicitly in strategic plans, policies, and decision structures, being proactive rather than reactive so responsibility is shared across leadership, faculty, and quality units.

- Design assessment to capture learning in an AI environment. Engage in strategic, values-informed dialogue about assessment designs that still measure student competence credibly, shifting emphasis from tool detection to evidence of learning, performance, and outcomes that remain valid when AI is widely available.

# Global Partners, Local Impact: Strategic Collaboration for Advancing Higher Education Quality Globally

**Heather Perfetti and Honar Issa**

Across the world, higher education systems have sought new ways to ensure quality, accountability, and continuous improvement. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this effort was expedited through a groundbreaking international collaboration between the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and the Kurdistan Accrediting Association for Education (KAAE). This partnership exemplified how strategic global engagement could accelerate the development of emerging quality assurance systems while strengthening institutional excellence and public trust in education.

In this engaging session, MSCHE and KAAE explored the evolution of their partnership and the tangible progress made toward building KAAE's capacity as a credible, independent accrediting body. The collaboration began with a shared vision to align Kurdistan's higher education system with international standards while respecting the region's unique cultural and educational context. MSCHE's long-standing expertise in accreditation and institutional assessment provided a strong foundation for mentorship and technical guidance. Through workshops, consultations, and hands-on training, the two organizations built a framework for quality assurance that promoted both local ownership and global relevance.

Participants gained a deeper understanding of how this partnership developed from initial conversations about shared goals to the implementation of structured capacity-building initiatives. These efforts focused on critical areas such as developing accreditation standards and procedures, establishing peer review processes, and fostering a culture of evidence-based decision-making across institutions in Kurdistan. The session also highlighted how both organizations navigated the complexities of building a sustainable quality assurance system in a developing context, including challenges related to resources, training, and institutional readiness.

A central theme of the discussion was the power of strategic international collaboration. By engaging with a well-established accreditor like MSCHE, KAAE gained access to proven models and practices while adapting them to local needs. This approach demonstrated how partnerships rooted in mutual respect could strengthen emerging quality assurance agencies and foster regional and global credibility. Attendees learned how such collaborations could accelerate institutional learning, support professional development, and create systems that not only met international expectations but also drove local innovation.

The session also delved into capacity-building strategies that had been central to KAAE's development. These included the co-creation of training programs for reviewers and institutional leaders, the development of transparent evaluation criteria, and the promotion of accountability through continuous improvement frameworks. Together, KAAE and MSCHE laid the groundwork for a quality assurance ecosystem designed to sustain itself long after the initial collaboration concluded.

# Leading With Integrity: Ethical Decision-Making When the Stakes Are High

**Misty Resendez Woods and Lucie Depoo**

Higher education leaders are operating at a critical inflection point. Intensified public scrutiny, political pressure, enrollment volatility, workforce challenges, and evolving accreditation expectations have created an environment in which leaders are frequently required to make high-stakes decisions under constrained timelines and competing demands. In this context, ethical leadership is not a soft skill or aspirational value. It is a core quality assurance imperative. This session examines how leaders can navigate complexity and uncertainty while maintaining institutional integrity, public trust, and alignment with accreditation standards.

Grounded in system-level accreditation experience and cross-institutional leadership observation, this presentation explores ethical decision-making as a defining leadership competency in moments of institutional risk. Ethical failures in higher education rarely begin with malicious intent. More often, they emerge from unexamined pressure, misaligned incentives, or decisions made without a clear values-based framework. This session invites participants to move beyond reactive decision-making toward principled and transparent leadership that sustains quality even under duress.

Participants will engage with practical ethical decision-making frameworks that support leaders when values, compliance requirements, and operational realities collide. These frameworks are designed to help leaders assess risk, anticipate stakeholder impact, and evaluate long-term consequences, particularly when no option feels ideal.

Rather than positioning ethics as a constraint on responsiveness, the session reframes ethical clarity as a catalyst for institutional resilience, credibility, and continuous improvement.

A central focus of the session is the role of accreditation as both a safeguard and a guide for ethical leadership. Accreditation does more than assess outcomes. It reflects how institutions make decisions, allocate resources, engage in shared governance, and uphold their stated mission and values. When leaders intentionally use accreditation standards and principles as decision-making guides, they gain clarity, consistency, and credibility in moments when pressure threatens to override values. Through real-world case examples drawn from accreditation contexts, participants will examine how ethical leadership practices directly support quality assurance, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional accountability. These cases highlight common dilemmas involving financial pressure, enrollment management, governance tension, and public accountability, and they demonstrate how leaders can respond without compromising integrity or trust.

The presentation also emphasizes transparency as a leadership practice that must be applied thoughtfully rather than universally. Participants will consider how to determine what transparency looks like when full disclosure is not possible, how to communicate ethically during periods of uncertainty, and how authentic communication strengthens trust with accreditors, faculty, staff, students, and governing bodies. Attention is given to shared governance as both an ethical obligation and a strategic asset when navigating high-stakes decisions. While the session is primarily practice focused, it is informed by established leadership and ethical decision-making models commonly used in higher education and organizational governance.

These models provide structure without rigidity, enabling leaders to respond decisively while remaining anchored to institutional values and accreditation expectations. Interactive elements, including scenario analysis and facilitated reflection, invite participants to apply concepts directly to challenges they are currently facing in their own roles.

The session concludes with a forward-looking discussion of ethical leadership as a defining characteristic of institutional excellence. In an era when public confidence in higher education is increasingly fragile, institutions that lead with integrity are better positioned to protect students, strengthen quality assurance processes, and sustain long-term mission alignment.

## **Key Takeaways for Participants**

1. Decision-making frameworks that support leaders in navigating ethical dilemmas when compliance, values, and operational pressures conflict.
2. Insight into how ethical leadership practices reinforce accreditation standards, quality assurance, and institutional credibility.
3. Strategies for leading with transparency and trust when certainty is limited and stakes are high.
4. Practical examples demonstrating how principled leadership strengthens resilience, shared governance, and continuous improvement.

*Dr. Misty Resendez Woods, Director of Accreditation, Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs*

*Dr. Lucie Depoo, Director of Accreditation, Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs*

# Quality Assurance and Upheaval: Is Your Institution Considering Changing Its Accreditor?

**Jonathan Gueverra and Brittany Snyder**

This presentation documents the journey of a Florida college as it navigated the path from its longstanding formerly regional accreditor to another formerly regional accreditor. The new accreditor is geographically outside of the college's region so physical distance and potential sociocultural challenges were forecasted. Additionally, under the old United States Department of Education (USDOE) rules, the institution was required to justify and obtain permission from USDOE before contacting the potential new accreditor. As a public institution, the college was also required to follow rules set by the state, including, but not limited to, submitting quarterly reports detailing its progress. This is the journey to a new accreditor.

## Key Points

Why seek a new institutional accreditor? How to prepare for the change in accreditation? What is the cost of changing the primary accreditor? How to navigate geopolitical and cultural differences? How to maintain existing primary accreditor relationships? What is the role of the state in your process? What is the role of the federal government in the process?

## Quality Connections

Initial accreditation and reaffirmation are major undertakings for any institution. Therefore, the decision to change one's primary accreditor cannot be taken lightly. Regardless, if the methodology of determining quality assurance is applied consistently, the outcomes should be similar even if the peer reviewers and the accrediting agency are different.

## Research Context

Since institutions are able to choose primary accreditors without concern for geography it is likely there will be some movement. Should the trend continue, there may be an opportunity to document the rationale for the changes, the outcomes for institutions (including Carnegie Classification), the time and cost of the processes, the changes in the membership size for accreditors and the impact these shifts are having on institutional quality assurance and student outcomes.

## Takeaways

Will/Can accreditation retain its prominence as a method for determining quality assurance? Given the "open market" created by the dismantling of regional accreditors, what is the likelihood that one accreditor will emerge as the dominate entity accrediting most institutions? Will this new model result in a monopoly, competitive market, oligopoly or some other market form? Institutions should not seek to change primary accreditors unless there is a significant and compelling reason for the change.

# TrustEd Ireland and International Learner Protection

**Mary Grennan**

This presentation reflected on the development and implementation of TrustEd Ireland, a national quality assurance scheme designed to protect the interests of international learners enrolled in higher education (HE) and English language education (ELE) programs in Ireland. While the session considered the scheme as a whole, it focused primarily on the higher education pathway. The presentation described the development of the scheme, its relationship to existing quality assurance arrangements in HE, the stakeholder consultation model used, and the management of diverse stakeholder expectations amid shifting external priorities related to international learner recruitment.

The session then examined the implementation of the TrustEd Ireland scheme during 2024–25, including the management of the application and assessment processes and key lessons learned during this initial period.

The presentation also looked beyond implementation to explore the potential benefits of TrustEd Ireland for education providers, national qualifications and quality assurance systems, the broader Irish education and training system, state bodies involved in the promotion of international education, and international learners themselves.

TrustEd Ireland was launched in September 2024 with several core objectives: to ensure a quality-assured learning experience for international students; to protect international learners from pre-enrolment through graduation and beyond; to safeguard and promote Ireland as a study-abroad destination in support of national international education policy; and to align with state immigration policy.

To achieve these objectives, TrustEd Ireland was developed as part of a broader suite of legislative learner-protection measures designed to safeguard the experiences of all learners in further and higher education and training, including international learners.

The presentation highlighted the importance of consultation with key stakeholders—including education providers, representative bodies, and government departments—during the design of the scheme. A central implementation challenge involved managing the parallel assessment of a diverse group of HE providers while maintaining fairness and consistency. The session discussed how challenges associated with engagement across diverse institutional contexts were addressed.

TrustEd Ireland was designed to complement and build upon existing quality assurance infrastructures in higher education, while introducing a statutory quality assurance framework for English language education. The HE and ELE sectors were shown to be at different stages of quality assurance maturity, a distinction reflected in the differing emphases within the scheme while maintaining shared core principles. Prior to the introduction of TrustEd Ireland, the ELE sector had not been subject to statutory regulation and had not formally engaged with national quality assurance arrangements.

This changed with the introduction of the scheme. ELE providers seeking TrustEd Ireland authorization were therefore required to establish quality assurance procedures under national legislation by meeting new statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines and complying with the ELE Code of Practice.

Higher education providers seeking authorization to use the TrustEd Ireland mark were required to already have established quality assurance procedures in place. These procedures were further strengthened through compliance with the new HE Code of Practice, which incorporated six quality assurance principles specific to international education, including ethical marketing and recruitment practices and the provision of accurate and transparent information about programs and qualifications.

TrustEd Ireland was presented as a distinctive quality assurance model, combining statutory quality assurance, regulation, and international learner protection with national international education and immigration strategies.

Key takeaways from the presentation included considerations for establishing international learner protection systems; the role of consultation models in shaping policy and procedural decision-making during the development of national schemes; strategies for implementing a national quality assurance framework across an entire sector with diverse HE institutions; approaches to embedding international learner protection within quality assurance systems; and opportunities to strengthen learner protection beyond initial implementation and authorization.

# Stay or Switch? What Shapes the Choice of Institutional Accreditor

**Cecilia Bibbò and Susan D. Phillips**

This presentation examined how U.S. higher education institutions made decisions about retaining or changing their institutional accreditors in the context of the 2020 federal policy that expanded accreditor choice. The topic was situated within ongoing national discussions at both the federal and state levels concerning the future of accreditation and the shifting dynamics of quality assurance. These conversations unfolded as institutions navigated a new accreditation policy environment and reassessed how accreditation supported their missions and long-term improvement goals.

The presenters shared preliminary findings from a national study that explored the factors shaping institutions' decisions to remain with their current accreditor or consider switching. Given the limited empirical research documenting how institutions navigated accreditation decisions, the findings shed light on the motivations, perceived benefits, and barriers that influenced institutional strategies in this evolving policy context.

The study was based on a nationwide survey of U.S. higher education institutions accredited by U.S. Department of Education-recognized institutional accreditors and participating in Title IV programs. The survey included approximately 25 multiple-choice items and two optional open-ended questions. Preliminary results from 360 respondents indicated that actual movement among institutional accreditors remained limited.

Initial evidence pointed to a combination of factors that contributed to this overall stability, including longstanding accreditor relationships, the complexity of the decision-making process, and uncertainty about the potential consequences of switching. These findings illuminated the complex interplay of strategic, organizational, and regulatory considerations that shaped institutional accreditation decisions and underscored the importance of understanding institutional perspectives when considering future accreditation policy.

Although the study focused on the United States, the dynamics it highlighted, including accreditor selection, institutional alignment, and regulatory oversight, resonated across countries and regions. As such, the U.S. experience offered insights relevant to broader international discussions about how accreditation environments evolve and how institutions navigate accreditor choice.

# Beyond Compliance: Leveraging Student Success Data for Public Trust and Continuous Improvement

**Mac Powell and Melynie Schiel**

As expectations for accountability, transparency, and demonstrable value intensify across higher education, accreditors and institutions face growing pressure to communicate outcomes clearly while preserving mission, context, and a commitment to continuous improvement. This session examined how the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges' (ACCJC) Data Storytelling and Transparency Project reframed required reporting as a catalyst for learning, shared understanding, and quality enhancement.

The project began with an explicit recognition that transparency was not neutral. Outcome data, particularly completion and earnings measures, could be easily misinterpreted for open-access, two-year institutions if presented without explanation. In November 2024, ACCJC published *Navigating the Value Landscape for Accreditation*, a paper that transparently documented its deliberation over how “value” and return on investment (ROI) might be measured responsibly in an accreditation context. Rather than adopting a metric prematurely, ACCJC articulated criteria for a reasonable, mission-sensitive approach and acknowledged the limitations and risks inherent in value measures.

From there, ACCJC pursued a deliberately parallel development strategy.

Transparency and storytelling, institutional dashboards, and ROI deliberation were developed concurrently and tested through seven regional convenings with member institutions. These convenings functioned as working sessions, not trainings. Cross-functional college teams examined draft dashboards derived from data submitted through an existing process, took a first look at the Rubric for Effective Institutional Outcome Transparency (developed with input from member staff and faculty), and engaged in structured discussions about how outcome information resonated with students, policymakers, and the public. Storytelling was framed as a quality practice, emphasizing responsible explanation of institutional data rather than spin.

After this period of joint exploration and practice, ACCJC publicly launched its institutional dashboards and ROI metric on August 7, 2025. The ROI metric was introduced as one additional lens for understanding economic value, not as a ranking or sanctioning tool. Shortly thereafter, ACCJC published the full ROI methodology, documenting data sources, assumptions, and limitations. Publishing the methodology alongside the metric represented a second act of transparency, reinforcing accountability and inviting scrutiny.

Qualitative responses from colleges suggested increasing alignment around transparency as an ongoing practice rather than a reporting task. Institutions frequently referenced improved public access to data, greater internal use of dashboards for planning and program review, increased attention to disaggregation and equity, and a desire for continued capacity-building and peer learning.

Participants left the session with four key insights: (1) transparency is most effective when evidence and interpretation are intentionally distinct;

(2) rubrics can transform compliance reporting into reflective, improvement-oriented practice; (3) storytelling is a core quality practice when data can be misread without context; and (4) value metrics require humility, guardrails, and openness. Together, these lessons offered a practical way for accreditors and institutions to advance transparency while strengthening quality assurance and public trust.

# Microcredentials as a Game Changer: A New Model for the QA and Accreditation of Microcredentials

**Olgun Cicek**

Microcredentials have rapidly emerged as one of the most disruptive forces reshaping global higher education, offering flexible, targeted, and industry-aligned learning pathways that respond to evolving workforce demands.

Building on international frameworks, including the European Approach to Micro-credentials and global best practices, the paper proposes a comprehensive model for the quality assurance (QA) and accreditation of microcredentials. The model integrates core principles of transparency, learner-centred design, outcome-based assessment, stackability, and cross-border recognition. It also addresses the challenges faced by quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions in ensuring comparability with traditional qualifications while maintaining the agility that makes microcredentials valuable.

By presenting practical tools, guidelines, and a structured QA–accreditation framework, the paper aims to support policymakers, accreditation bodies, and institutions in designing robust, credible, and internationally recognisable microcredentials which has the potential to redefine global learning ecosystems, strengthen employability, and advance lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world.

# What Congress's "Do No Harm" Standard Could Mean for Accreditors and Colleges

**Jordan Matsudaira and Clare McCann**

In Summer 2025, Congress passed a new law, termed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) (P.L. 119-21), that will reshape the higher education landscape, including by incorporating new, outcomes-based accountability standards into the Higher Education Act. As those new standards come online, they will demand careful navigation of data, policy, and law, not just by colleges and the Department of Education, but also by the accrediting agencies that oversee those institutions.

In the session, former Department of Education staff who worked on accreditation issues, policy expert Clare McCann and legal expert Emily Merolli, explored the possibilities and limitations of the Department's ability to incorporate student outcomes into the federal recognition process, and how accrediting agencies could, and should, respond to the new accountability landscape in their own policies and standards. They provided a window into what the new landscape of accountability policy could look like, and how accrediting agencies might fit into it.

Those issues included the ways in which accrediting agencies should measure post-college labor market outcomes like earnings, as well as related important measures of student success; how those measures could be incorporated into accreditors' processes and reviews; and how the U.S. Department of Education should review accrediting agencies' responses to the OBBBA legislation

and their consideration of measures of the financial value of higher education programs. The session brought to light both the measurement and data challenges that accrediting agencies will face, and the legal issues they will confront, throughout this process.

Accrediting agencies should not just sit on the sidelines in light of a fundamentally new approach to postsecondary accountability; and institutions should be prepared for an increased focus on post-college earnings. The session examined what the new OBBBA accountability standard would mean in practice, the stakes for institutions and accreditors, and how colleges and accreditors might respond with integrity while balancing compliance, evidence, and the evolving expectations of Congress and the Administration.

*Jordan Matsudaira, Professor, American University and Director, Postsecondary Education & Economics Research (PEER) Center*

*Clare McCann, Managing Director, Policy and Operations, Postsecondary Education & Economics Research (PEER) Center*  
*Emily Merolli, Partner, Sligo Law Group*

# Verifying You Are Human: Accreditation's Integrity Test in the Age of AI

**Tahira Hoke, Ahmed Al-Yamani, Heba Khoshaim, Mubarak Alkhatnai and Olgun Cicek**

This session opened with a keynote address by Dr. Ahmed Al-Yamani, President of Prince Sultan University, titled “Accreditation at the Crossroads: AI, Policy Shifts, and Student Futures.” Drawing on more than 25 years of leadership in higher education, Dr. Yamani examined how accreditation is evolving amid policy shifts, artificial intelligence, and increasing global expectations. He emphasized the role of accreditation not merely as compliance, but as a leadership mechanism for aligning academic quality with student success, workforce needs, and societal impact.

Following the keynote, three rounds of panel discussions expanded the conversation. The first round, Integrity and Accountability in Accreditation, explored how institutions and accrediting bodies demonstrate the value and return on investment of accreditation under external pressures. The discussion highlighted the growing importance of transparency, evidence, and student learning outcomes in maintaining credibility and public trust.

The second round, Innovation and the Future of Quality Assurance, focused on the opportunities and risks associated with artificial intelligence in accreditation processes. Panelists discussed the potential of AI to enhance evaluation, efficiency, and predictive analytics, while also underscoring ethical concerns such as bias, transparency, and the need for strong governance frameworks and human oversight.

The third round, Student Success, Equity, and the Purpose of Higher Education, centered on learner outcomes, affordability, employability, and the rise of micro-credentials. The discussion examined whether accreditation systems can adapt to recognize emerging credentials while ensuring equity, rigor, and global recognition.

Together, the keynote and panel discussions reaffirmed the role of accreditation in advancing institutional excellence, innovation, and equitable student outcomes. The session concluded by offering practical insights for higher education leaders seeking to balance accountability with innovation in an increasingly complex global landscape.

*Dr. Ahmed Al-Yamani, President, Prince Sultan University*

*Dr. Heba Khoshaim, Vice-President for Student Life & Associate Professor, College of Humanities and Sciences, Prince Sultan University*

*Dr. Olgun Cicek, Senior Researcher, University of Ljubljana*

*Professor Mubarak Alkhatnai, Professor and Dean, Development and Quality, King Saud University*

*Dr. Tahira Hoke (Panel Moderator), Aide to the President, Vice Dean of Quality Assurance and Development; Director of Evaluation and Academic Accreditation, Prince Sultan University*

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