



AAUW Comment Guide: U.S. Department of Education Accreditation Proposal Speak Out by September 21, 2026

The administration has described accreditation as a "secret weapon" for reshaping higher education. Accreditation controls access to federal student aid, including Pell Grants and federal student loans. If the rules governing accreditors change, colleges change quickly, because they cannot afford not to.

Accreditation standards have historically helped hold institutions accountable for inclusive practices. When those standards weaken or shift, it affects whether women and students from underrepresented groups have genuine access to higher education. The threat here is not abstract. It shows up in smaller program offerings, fewer student supports, less accountability for outcomes, and a narrowing of what institutions feel they can stand behind.

Comments opposing this rule are due by September 21, 2026, at 11:59 pm ET.

[Click here to submit your comment now.](#)

What Is Accreditation?

Accreditation is the quality review system that determines whether a college or program can participate in providing federal student aid. Accreditors are not government agencies. They are independent organizations, usually made up of educators and experts, that evaluate whether institutions meet baseline standards for educational quality, governance, and student outcomes.

Higher education institutions need to be approved by an accreditor to access federal student aid. The U.S. Department of Education must recognize the accreditor.

How We Got Here

On April 23, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14279, "[Reforming Accreditation to Strengthen Higher Education](#)." The Executive Order sought to prohibit accreditation standards on diversity, equity, and inclusion and require "intellectual diversity" among faculty — leveraging accreditation as a tool for political enforcement.

In April and May 2026, the Department of Education convened a federal rulemaking committee, the Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization (AIM) Committee, to implement the Executive Order. This kind of committee is how the federal government develops proposed regulations for programs connected to federal student aid. It brings



together stakeholders, including accreditors, institutions, students, and Department officials, to attempt to agree on draft rules before they are formally proposed.

On May 21, the AIM Committee reached agreement on a draft package, with the representatives for students and veterans abstaining from the vote. The Department of Education released proposed rules based on that draft package on August 20, 2026.

What the Department of Education Is Proposing

The Department of Education Organization Act, which created the agency in 1979, states that the Department does not have the power to exercise “any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system, over any accrediting agency or association, or over the selection or content of library resources, textbooks, or other instructional materials by any educational institution or school system, except to the extent authorized by law.”

The Department’s proposal goes beyond its statutory authority and would overhaul current accreditation standards. The proposed changes include:

- Requiring accreditors to evaluate faculty and staffing decisions.
- Requiring accreditors to measure specific student achievement outcomes.
- Extending research misconduct oversight to all accredited institutions, even those with no federally funded research.
- Setting federal expectations for academic freedom and intellectual diversity and requiring the measurement of campus perception of “the range of viewpoints and perspectives offered” by an institution as a criterion for accreditation.
- Requiring accreditors to complete a cost-benefit analysis by reviewing the institution’s budget, resource utilization and allocation, and, if existing, its business/strategic plan.

What’s At Stake

- **Eliminating equity standards would leave marginalized students more vulnerable.** Accreditors would be prohibited from requiring schools to track or demonstrate student outcomes related to access and equity, weakening transparency and accountability.
- **Women and low-income students’ futures could be jeopardized.** Women receive Pell Grants at higher rates and in larger average amounts than men, making



accreditation disruptions especially consequential for women from low-income households.

- **Schools could be forced to choose between their mission and their access to federal financial aid.** Women's colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) often have equity missions built directly into their accreditation frameworks. Rules targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion standards put those missions at risk.
- **Removing key safeguards against political interference threatens the freedom to teach and learn.** Rules framed as protecting "intellectual diversity" can be used to police what is taught, researched, and who is hired. Department of Education officials would also have more power to override accreditor decisions, politicizing an independent process.
- **Colleges could shut down programs out of fear, not fault.** If schools believe that certain practices, whether a women's center, a diversity office, an equity-focused curriculum, or demographic reporting, could attract scrutiny, many will quietly reduce or eliminate them before any formal action is ever taken.

What You Can Do

1. **Submit a personalized comment by September 21, 2026.** Personalize your comment so it is considered individually and requires a response from the Department. Comments that are too similar may be dismissed.
 - a. If you're a college/university student, share how restrictions on curriculum or student support would impact your ability to succeed at school.
 - b. If you're a college/university alum, share how political influence over your alma mater would change the courses, teaching, programs, and values that have helped shape you into who you are today, and limit opportunities for future students.
 - c. If you're a current or former educator, explain how this proposed rule could impact your students and restrict your freedom to teach or research.
 - d. If you're a community member, discuss the importance of independent curricula, teaching practices, and programs to increase access and support for women, low-income students, and students of color.

[Click here to submit your comment through AAUW's action page.](#) This is a public comment that will be published with your name. To submit a comment anonymously, [visit regulations.gov](#).



2. **Spread the word.** Share this guide with colleagues, community partners, and local nonprofits.
3. **Affirm our values.** For more than 140 years, AAUW has worked to remove barriers that limit women's economic security and success in education and the workplace. We believe that higher education is one of the most important pathways to economic security for women. Accreditation is part of the infrastructure that makes that pathway equitable. When it is redirected away from equity, women and underrepresented students pay the cost.

Stand with AAUW. Speak out. Submit your comment by September 21, 2026.

Have questions or need help? Reach out to advocacy@aauw.org.