

Episode 59: Institutional Accreditation and Graduate Education - Part 1

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experience as graduate dean and research mentor as well as my network of students, colleagues and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

I had a long and in-depth episode all prepared on the impact of proposed higher education accreditation changes on graduate education. You were going to hear about how the accreditation process actually works and how most research-based graduate programs are dependent upon accreditation in a few but important ways. But I opted for this more succinct version so you get the point before you swipe or click. Let's get to it.

Two important things are happening as of April 2026 as a result of [Executive Order 14279](#) pejoratively titled "Reforming Accreditation to Strengthen Higher Education" which was issued almost exactly one year ago to the day of this episode release.

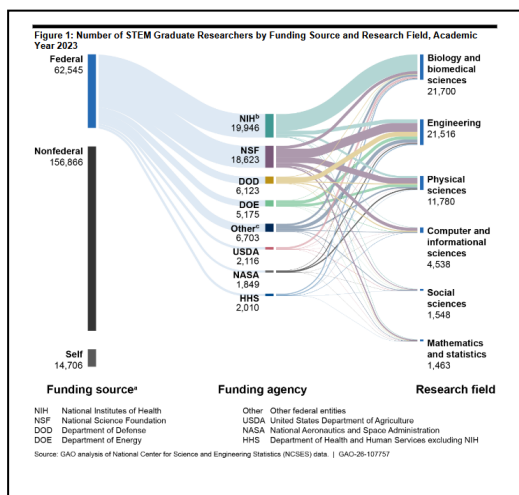
First, the Department of Education – should it continue to exist – will be soon authorizing many more new organizations to accredit institution of higher learning. They just [issued a summary of draft regulations](#) outlining their two-part plan to increase the number of new accrediting agencies and to mandate that institutions use program-level data without reference to race, ethnicity, or sex in their accreditation documentation. I'll get to the second part about program-level data later, but the push for new accrediting bodies has already begun. Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Tennessee have enacted legislation to allow their states' institutions to seek accreditation through the newly-formed [Commission for Public Higher Education](#) (CPHE), and others like [Louisiana are soon to follow](#). This is just the beginning of the accreditation process overhaul.

Second, the General Services Administration (GSA) has [proposed changes to the requirements for the Systems for Award Management](#). In a nutshell, institutions that receive federal funding would be forced to comply with executive orders – not just laws but also executive orders regardless of their legal status – including those related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and immigration. So, basically your institution would have to agree that DEI is illegal and that you agree to turn over student-level data in order to get their student loan or research grant monies.

These two efforts spawned from EO 14279 coupled with changes at the state level in some states that are meant to facilitate federal policy create a daunting barrier to the accreditation process for institutions that do not conform to the monocultural aspirations this administration has for higher education. This administration is saying that if you don't comply with this Executive Order and the GSA requirements for receiving federal dollars, or any other EOs, letters, or Truth Social rants they issue in the future, that they are going to either take away your accreditation, withhold your federal dollars, or both.

A lot of this has more direct impact on undergraduate general education requirements and graduate professional programs like the JD, MD, and nursing. General education requirements are where the government will start inserting itself into the classroom through the new accrediting bodies and their

requirements for accreditation. More directly, undergrads and professional students are the ones who rely heavily on federal aid to advance their careers. As I outlined in [Episode 38](#) those funds are subject to severe reductions and restrictions going forward. But there will be impacts to graduate education for the research-based degrees like the MS and PhD as well, primarily through the federal funding mechanism. For example, the [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) just issued a report on graduate researcher compensation](#). Fully one-third of STEM graduate researchers were funded through federal dollars in 2023. The percentage is even higher for STEM postdocs – 50%. If that money goes away – as it is doing through budget cuts - so do the graduate researchers. And there is a trickle-down effect to disciplines outside of or in collaboration with STEM. As I outlined in Episodes [33](#) and [35](#), institutions are cutting or suspending admissions to graduate programs across the board – including the humanities and fine arts – to offset the loss of STEM research dollars. There’s more to come, too, as institutions like [Syracuse](#) and [Indiana](#) are announcing the elimination of even more advanced degree programs. Stay tuned for more on program cuts in an upcoming episode. But I haven’t even touched on the ramifications of international students exercising their First Amendment rights to free speech on college campuses. Wait and see what the new accrediting bodies have to say about that. The [diminution of graduate education](#) marches on.



The justification for these proposed changes to accreditation and federal funding is always accountability for taxpayer dollars. But these changes go well beyond that. There was always accountability through both the accreditation process and audits of federal grant programs and student loans. This is about maximizing leverage to get institutions to bend to a narrow ideology. And that leverage ultimately will be realized through legal action. Expect the accreditation process to be moved to the Department of Justice regardless of whether the Department of Education continues to exist or not. That means the nation’s primary law enforcement agency will be the gatekeeper for higher education quality.

These changes do not receive the mainstream media press coverage that other higher-profile autocratic initiatives get, but they are just as profound and far-reaching. And in many ways it will take longer to re-establish a credible accreditation process once these new bodies are fully ensconced. They will accredit not only public institutions in key parts of the country, but will accredit a wide collection of online, for-profit, and foreign institutions – anybody who wants to be accredited by a U.S.-based agency. Maybe there will be unintended good that comes from opening up the accreditation process. After all, it’s not perfect, and higher ed could use some ways to innovate. But the impact will likely be negative and long-lasting. Not only will institutions have to self-fund an increasing percentage of their graduate programs, but they will have to either find ways to pay for them or eliminate them entirely. All of this runs contrary to building an effective workforce and meeting employer needs at the dawn of AI.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts are available in the transcripts at grad-post.com. There, you'll find additional information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Every degree counts, but its worth will now depend on whether your institution agrees to include prescribed political ideologies in its mission statement.

Links

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/reforming-accreditation-to-strengthen-higher-education/>

<https://www.ed.gov/media/document/2026-aim-neg-reg-summary-and-discussion-of-initial-draft-regulations-113620.pdf>

<https://cphe.org/>

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/college-accreditation-louisiana-could-soon-150300356.html>

<https://www.regulations.gov/document/GSA-GSA-2026-0001-0001/comment>

<https://spotifycreators-web.app.link/e/3Z7X2x2gj2b>

https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-26-107757.pdf?utm_source=News+Network+-+2022+Revised+Edition&utm_campaign=0c778054c3-

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<https://news.syr.edu/academic-portfolio-review-update-2/>

<https://www.highereddive.com/news/indiana-public-colleges-to-cut-or-merge-about-580-programs-due-to-state-law/816540/>

<https://spotifycreators-web.app.link/e/PBi5ZLWfj2b>