

National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI)
Office of Postsecondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW, Room 2C-159,
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Chairman Kesier and Members of the Committee:

Re: 86 FR 6638

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the February 23 and 24, 2022 National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) meeting. Higher Learning Advocates (HLA) is a non-profit organization working to shift federal policy from higher education to higher learning—education and training beyond high school that leads to a degree, credential, or employment. With more students participating in higher education than ever before, we strive to strengthen the connection between federal policy and the needs of today’s students, employers, and communities.

Before the pandemic, several institutions of higher education (IHEs) started partnering with service providers, also known as online program management entities (OPMs), to bring academic programs online. Once the pandemic hit and schools around the country had to rapidly move to online learning, the only way many were able to make this rapid shift was through contracts with OPMs leading to significant growth in the number of OPM partnerships. It is estimated that between 2019 and 2020, OPM partnerships grew by 79 percent.¹

We recognize the need for OPM partnerships as institutions continue to evolve, innovate and respond to the ongoing challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with this growing shift in the delivery of higher education and the larger roles OPMs are playing, there is concern over issues such as quality, accountability, and the role nonaccredited entities play in delivering education in partnership with accredited IHEs. Essentially, there is much gray area around which rules apply to OPMs and which ones do not. Necessary guardrails and parameters must be established and clarified early on to protect student outcomes while still allowing institutions the freedom to pursue innovative partnerships that meet the changing needs of today’s students. The time to act is now.


As such, we ask NACIQI to utilize its oversight authority to work with the Department and accrediting agencies to help set the parameters and guidelines accreditors must use to review the partnerships between OPMs and IHEs. NACIQI could consider some of the following recommendations in the process:

1. Require accreditors to oversee and review new OPM contracts before they are finalized. Creating a clearly articulated policy and checklist for accreditors to use in the oversight of these contracts will help remove any potential ambiguity for those entering into the contracts and ensure programs are in line with appropriate accreditation standards;
2. Have accreditors ensure there are transparent practices when recruiting is outsourced, that the OPM is bound by the institution’s policy and code of conduct for recruiting students, require OPMs to disclose to students that they are not employees of the institution, and have all recruiting material articulate that the program is in partnership with the OPM; and,
3. Work with the Department and accreditors to create clear guidance on which services are considered “core” services of an accredited institution and what questions IHEs should ask before outsourcing a service.

¹ [Marcus, Jon, The Washington Post, “More colleges and universities outsource services to for-profit companies”, January 2021.](#)

As the utilization of OPMs continues to grow, the committee, the Department, and accrediting agencies will play a pivotal role in oversight to ensure the necessary standards of quality and outcomes expected from IHEs are maintained. Thank you for your attention to our views on these matters. Higher Learning Advocates stands ready to assist NACIQI on these matters and others related to high-quality learning for today's students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie Peller', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Julie Peller
Executive Director
Higher Learning Advocates