



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

MAY 19 2014

Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madam Leader:

Thank you for your letter dated May 9, 2014, regarding the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC) and City College of San Francisco (CCSF). I am pleased to respond.

In your letter, you stated that you would like clarification from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) regarding statements made by the ACCJC concerning CCSF. Specifically, you asked about the Department's role in the ACCJC's decision to terminate the accreditation of CCSF, and the ACCJC's authority to implement policies that could affect the continued accreditation of CCSF.

To address your first question, the decision to terminate CCSF's accreditation was made solely by the ACCJC. The Department's authority over accrediting agencies is through the recognition process, by which the Secretary reviews and recognizes accrediting agencies for the purposes of the Title IV Federal Student Aid programs. The recognition process is defined under § 496 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA), and in Department regulations in 34 C.F.R. Part 602, Subpart B (the "Criteria for Recognition" or "Criteria"). Recognized accrediting agencies are independent, voluntary membership organizations. The Department did not take part in, nor would it have the authority to take part in, decisions made by the ACCJC, or any accrediting agency.

Section 602.20 of the Criteria requires a recognized accrediting agency to initiate an adverse action immediately when the agency finds an institution out of compliance with any standard, or to provide a time period of no more than two years for the institution to return to compliance. This section also provides the opportunity for an agency to grant a "good cause" extension for an institution to return to compliance prior to taking an adverse action. The decision of when an institution becomes noncompliant; the responsibility for clearly communicating that determination to the institution; the determination of how much, if any, of the two-year period should be provided to enable the institution to return to compliance; and the decision of whether to provide a good cause extension and for how long, are all matters entrusted to the judgment of the recognized accrediting agency.

1990 K ST. N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20006
www.ed.gov

The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

To address your second question, the ACCJC has the authority to reconsider or rescind its termination decision so as to provide the institution with additional time to come into compliance within the two-year time frame, if such period has not run out, or to provide an extension for good cause. While the Department cannot comment on specific actions an accrediting agency may or may not take in the future, in general, an agency may, as permitted by its established policies and procedures, correct any errors it has made, respond to an improvement in institutional performance, and adopt or change its policies with regard to its oversight of the institutions it accredits. The Department would then review any changes made, and the process and procedures by which those changes were made, to ensure that the accrediting agency continues to be a reliable authority as to the quality of education or training provided by its accredited institutions.

I appreciate your support of higher education and your interest in the accreditation process. I hope you find the information provided in this letter helpful. I am happy to answer more questions if needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn B. Mahaffie", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lynn B. Mahaffie
Senior Director, Policy Coordination,
Development and Accreditation Service