

**A College Watchdog Finally Barked, So The Colleges Got A New Dog  
  
Drama in California shows the risks of relying on accreditors to crack down on troubled colleges.**

[**Molly Hensley-Clancy**](http://www.buzzfeed.com/mollyhensleyclancy?language=en) BuzzFeed News Reporter posted on Nov. 19, 2015, at 7:13 a.m.

In its battle against poor-performing colleges, the Obama administration has dubbed their accreditors the “watchdogs that rarely bite.” Despite operating as gatekeepers that decide who is and isn’t a legitimate college — and who is entitled to federal student loan dollars — accreditors [**almost never take serious action**](http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-watchdogs-of-college-education-rarely-bite-1434594602) against troubled schools.

Now, the accreditor behind the most visible attempt in recent years to crack down on a college is being sidelined by the education industry it is meant to monitor.

In 2013, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges moved to threaten the credentials of California’s largest public college, the City College of San Francisco. The accreditor said the college had serious problems with financial stability and governance that had gone unaddressed for years. If City College didn’t fix those problems in a year, it said, the school’s students would no longer be able to receive federal financial aid dollars — essentially guaranteeing it would have to shut down.

This week, leaders of California community colleges voted to oust ACCJC, months after a report by a state task force said the organization was too punitive and had “lost credibility with the system,” focusing too much on regulatory compliance rather than school quality. Faced with a watchdog that bites, the schools have chosen to get a new dog.

In the high-profile shutdown of the for-profit Corinthian Colleges, part of the blame has been placed on the schools’ accreditor, ACICS, which had year after year given the stamp of approval to Corinthian’s schools. After Corinthian collapsed, ACICS’ director was [**grilled**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkKmjyuoKyY) in front of a Senate committee about why the agency had renewed Corinthian’s accreditation while it was being sued by three separate state attorneys general and a federal agency for lying to its students.

The drama playing out in California is an example of the risks of relying on accreditors as the sole gatekeepers of federal funding — and of trusting that they will take action against failing schools. Accreditors are membership organizations made up of the colleges they are tasked with overseeing; this means they are funded with membership fees from the very schools whose credentials they have the power, at least theoretically, to revoke.

And if colleges aren’t happy with how that oversight is working, they can withdraw their membership and find a new accreditor, as the California schools voted to do this week.

“Accreditors weren’t structured to be the watchdog,” said Russell Poulin, the director of policy and analysis at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. “They were started as an organization to work collegially to improve one another. But the Department of Education has been essentially outsourcing oversight to these agencies.”

City College of San Francisco, which enrolls some 80,000 students, fought back tooth and nail when ACCJC threatened its accreditation, filing a lawsuit that accused the accreditor of a flawed and biased process. It largely lost the suit, but ACCJC granted the school a two-year extension to fix its problems.

Now, along with all of California’s community colleges, City College of San Francisco will get a new accreditor.

“It points out the reasons that the accreditors rarely bite,” said Amy Laitinen, the director for higher education at the New America Foundation. “It’s much too politically fraught. Accreditors are risk averse, and the City College of San Francisco example shows why.”

“It’s the ‘too big to fail’ mentality,” Laitinen said of the backlash against the closing of City College.

Critics of ACCJC have said the accreditor has its own serious problems — that it was too rigid and focused on forcing colleges to comply with small governance and financial rules, rather than making sure that schools provided a quality education to students.

That is a symptom of another systemic problem with accreditors: thanks to a Congressional mandate, the Education Department is not allowed to ask them to consider any measures of institutional quality in their evaluations of colleges. Earlier this month, when it announced measures to repair the accreditation system, the Education Department could only compel increased transparency from accreditors — not higher standards or more frequent action.

“Congress has completely tied their hands on this,” Laitinen said.

[**On Monday, according to the San Francisco Chronicle**](http://www.sfgate.com/education/article/California-s-controversial-college-accreditor-6636562.php), the chairman of ACCJC made a last-minute plea to California education officials to reconsider the decision. He promised that the accreditor would do a better job of focusing on quality. But he also warned them: “If you think you’re getting away from regulatory compliance, I think you’re mistaken.”

[**Check out more articles on BuzzFeed.com!**](http://buzzfeed.com/)

**Molly Hensley-Clancy is a business reporter for BuzzFeed News in New York. In 2015, Hensley-Clancy won an award from the** [Edwin Gould Foundation](http://bit.ly/1Ch59qM) **for her reporting on the business of education. Contact Molly Hensley-Clancy at** [molly.hensley-clancy@buzzfeed.com](mailto:molly.hensley-clancy@buzzfeed.com).

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mollyhensleyclancy/a-college-watchdog-finally-barked-so-the-colleges-got-a-new#.qcqvJZqN1>