

## Trump's Latest Executive Orders Target Accreditation, Foreign Gifts

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Trump signed seven education-related executive orders in the Oval Office on April 23.

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President Donald Trump took aim at college accreditors in [an executive order](#) signed Wednesday that targets two accrediting agencies for investigation and suggests others could lose federal recognition altogether.

The order was one of seven issued Wednesday as Trump nears the end of his first 100 days. Others directed the Education Department to enforce the law requiring colleges to [disclose some foreign gifts](#) and contracts, aimed to [support historically Black colleges and universities](#), and outlined several policy changes for K-12 schools. With the accreditation order and the others, Trump and White House officials argued they were refocusing the education system on meritocracy.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon, who was in the Oval Office for the signing, opened her follow-up [statement](#) by praising the accreditation order and saying it would “bring long-overdue change” and “create a competitive marketplace.”

“America’s higher education accreditation system is broken,” she wrote. “Instead of pushing schools to adopt a divisive DEI ideology, accreditors should be focused on helping schools improve graduation rates and graduates’ performance in the labor market.”

Some of the immediate public reactions from higher ed groups criticized the accreditation order, describing it as yet another attempt to put more power in the hands of the president and threaten academic freedom.

The Council of Higher Education Accreditation said Trump’s directive would “affect the value and independence of accreditation,” while the American Association of University Professors said it would “remov[e] educational decision making from educators and reshap[e] higher education to fit an authoritarian political agenda.”

## Overhauling Accreditation

[Rumored](#) for [weeks](#), the accreditation order was perhaps the most anticipated one of those signed Wednesday, and it will likely have widespread ramifications as Trump seeks to scrutinize and reform the system.

Historically, accreditors have operated under the radar with little public attention, but in recent years conservatives have focused on the agencies and their role in holding colleges accountable. (The accreditors do hold a lot of power, because universities must be accredited by a federally recognized agency in order to access federal student aid.)

During his presidential campaign, Trump himself [called](#) accreditation reform his “secret weapon” and accused accreditors of failing “to ensure that schools are not ripping off students and taxpayers.”

The order calls for McMahon to suspend or terminate an accreditor’s federal recognition in order to hold it accountable if it violates federal civil rights law, according to [a White House fact sheet](#). The executive order specifically says that requiring institutions “to engage in unlawful discrimination in accreditation-related activity under the guise of ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ initiatives” would be considered a violation of the law.

The order also singles out the American Bar Association, which accredits law schools, and the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, which accredits medical schools, and directs cabinet secretaries to investigate them. (The American Bar Association [suspended DEI standards](#) for its members in February, as did some other accreditors.)

Beyond that, McMahon is tasked to “realign accreditation with student-focused principles.” That could include recognizing new accreditors, prioritizing intellectual diversity among faculty and requiring “high-quality, high-value academic programs,” though the fact sheet doesn’t say how that would be measured.

White House staff secretary Will Scharf said during the event that accreditors have relied on “woke ideology” instead of merit and performance to accredit universities. He didn’t provide evidence for his claims, but the fact sheet cites the national six-year undergraduate graduation rate, which is at 64 percent, as one example of how accreditors have “failed to ensure quality.”

“The basic idea is to force accreditation to be focused on the merit and the actual results that these universities are providing, as opposed to how woke these universities have gotten,” Scharf said.

The Trump administration also wants to streamline the process to recognize accreditors and for institutions to change agencies. Some states that have [required](#) their public colleges to change accreditors [have claimed](#) that the Biden administration made the process too cumbersome.

Scharf said the order charges the Education Department “to really look holistically at this accreditation mess and hopefully make it much better.”

Trump didn’t say much about the order or what actions he hopes to see McMahon take next.

## Enforcement of Foreign Gifts

The president is not the first government official this year who has sought to limit foreign influence on American colleges and universities.

The House recently passed a bill, known as the DETERRENT ACT, which would amend Section 117 of the Higher Education Act to lower the threshold for what foreign gifts must be reported from \$250,000 to \$50,000. It also would require the disclosure of all gifts from countries of “concern,” like China and Russia, regardless of amount. The legislation advanced to the Senate in late March following a 241–169 vote.

Rep. Tim Walberg, a Michigan Republican and chair of the committee that introduced the bill, praised Trump’s action Wednesday, saying it “underscores” a Republican commitment to “promoting transparency.”

“Foreign entities, like the Chinese Communist Party, anonymously funnel billions of dollars into America’s higher education institutions—exploiting these ties to steal research, indoctrinate students, and transform our schools into beachheads in a new age of information warfare,” Walberg [wrote in a statement](#) shortly after Trump’s order was signed. “I am glad the Trump administration understands the grave importance of this threat, and I look forward to working with President Trump to protect our students and safeguard the integrity of America’s higher education system.”

Colleges’ compliance with Section 117 has been a key issue for Republicans over the years. House lawmakers [repeatedly criticized](#) the Biden administration’s efforts to enforce the law, but former education secretary Miguel Cardona defended his agency’s actions. They also tried to pass the DETERRENT Act last session, but it was blocked by Democrats in the Senate.

The executive order is broader than the DETERRENT Act and does little to distinguish itself aside from directing McMahon to work with the attorney general and heads of other departments where appropriate and

to reverse or rescind any of Biden's actions that "permit higher education institutions to maintain improper secrecy."

## More Support for HBCUs

Another order creates within the White House an initiative focused on historically Black colleges and universities and [revokes](#) a Biden executive order titled "White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity Through Historically Black Colleges and Universities."

During his first term, Trump [moved](#) an HBCU initiative at the Education Department to the White House as a largely symbolic gesture to show his support for Black colleges. That initiative continued under Joe Biden, though it was returned to the Education Department. Biden also created initiatives focused on Hispanic-serving institutions and tribal colleges. Trump [ended](#) those newly created initiatives during his first week in office.

The executive order also established the President's Board of Advisors on HBCUs at the Education Department, which appears to already exist. The panel last met in January, according to a *Federal Register* [notice](#).

Scharf said the order would ensure that HBCUs are "able to do their job as effectively and as efficiently as possible."



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