Catholics pressure MU to revoke privileges for Planned Parenthood doctor

By Rudi Keller

Monday, August 31, 2015 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri has not promoted abortions by granting limited privileges to the doctor performing the procedures at Planned Parenthood’s Columbia clinic, a spokeswoman said Monday in response to charges from anti-abortion lawmakers and the Missouri Catholic Conference.

Missouri law bars the use of public resources for abortions — except to save the lives of mothers — and prohibits the use of public funds to promote abortion as an alternative to carrying a pregnancy to term. The university has not violated that law, MU spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken said.

“Consistent with state law, abortions are not performed at MU Health Care facilities, except when necessary to save the life of the mother,” Banken wrote.

Planned Parenthood, a longtime target of abortion foes, is under increased scrutiny nationally after the release of videos that producers claim show national officials discussing the commercial sale of fetal tissue for research. Analysis of the videos has raised questions about whether they were selectively edited. Planned Parenthood has said the payments involved are legally allowed to cover the cost of collecting and transporting donated tissue.

Missouri lawmakers have launched an investigation of Planned Parenthood, focusing on the videos as well as an abortion license the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services issued the Columbia clinic in July.

In a letter sent Friday to MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin, Missouri Catholic Conference Executive Director Mike Hoey asked that the university revoke the privileges. The Senate Interim Committee on the Sanctity of Life released emails showing that Colleen McNicholas, the St. Louis doctor performing abortions in Columbia, was recruited by MU Assistant Teaching Professor Kristin Metcalf-Wilson, Hoey wrote. Metcalf-Wilson worked to help McNicholas obtain “refer and follow privileges,”
Metcalf-Wilson is a Planned Parenthood nurse practitioner with a part-time faculty appointment. “The University of Missouri should get out of the abortion business!” Hoey wrote.

The “refer and follow” privilege, which allows McNicholas to refer patients to a “hospitalist” or other physician at MU Health and receive updates about their treatment, did not make her a faculty member or employee of the university, Banken said. It is consistent with the way MU Health Care would treat any physician working in the community and does not allow her to admit patients or write orders, prescribe treatments or perform surgery, Banken wrote.

The university might be able to say it is not violating the letter of the law, “but I think they are violating the spirit of the law,” Hoey said in an interview. “It is one thing to have free speech on campus, but it is another when you have university staff recruit an abortion doctor and then shepherd her privileges through the university hospital system. To me, that is promoting abortion.”

When he testified before the Senate committee last week, Loftin said he was “reviewing everything around this physician” and would make a decision in a few days. That decision was still pending, Banken said Monday. Loftin must arrange discussions with staff, Banken said.

There is “no firm timeline at this time” for completing the review, she said.

The Catholic Conference is willing to give Loftin time to complete the review, Hoey said. “The point is, acknowledge the mistake, revoke the privileges and get out of any connection to the abortion industry. It is not about scapegoating any individual or hanging the chancellor in effigy.”

**COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN**

Forum on Graduate Rights: To unionize or not?

EMMA VANDELINDER, 11 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — The Forum on Graduate Rights plans to decide next week whether to unionize or become a recognized student organization. Right now, it is seeking input from MU graduate student employees.

"As FGR makes plans for the future, we need to make some decisions about what kind of group we are and what sorts of tactics we want to employ," steering committee member Eric Scott wrote Monday in a post on the Forum on Graduate Rights Facebook page.
If the forum becomes an official student organization, it will work through the MU Organization Resource Group, which helps student organizations gain official recognition, educate leaders about university policies and get started financially.

"If FGR is to be more than just 'those people who did that rally one time,' it needs infrastructure — which could be provided by an entity such as ORG (the Organization Resource Group)," Scott said in the post.

Another option for the forum is to unionize, an idea that appears to have support on social media such as the forum's Facebook page. The organizing committee put forth a unanimous statement to the forum Sunday, stating that "unionization is the best hope for advancing the causes of graduate students," Scott said in an interview Monday.

With or without its parent group, the committee plans to unionize, Scott said.

The organizing committee has 10 standing members and is one of six subcommittees. Its task is to investigate union options and other organizing strategies for the forum.

If the forum decides not to unionize, the organizing committee will "amicably" break away, Scott said. There would still be communication and support between the Forum on Graduate Rights and the organizing committee, which would change its title, just as the forum has had communication with and support from the Graduate Student Association and the Graduate Professional Council for the past two weeks. The two would simply not share funding or materials.

The committee's decision was not a surprise. Early on after the creation of the Forum on Graduate Rights in mid-August, members considered the idea of a possible split between the parent group and the organizing committee over unionizing, Scott said. On Monday, he wrote in the Facebook post that many forum members supported unionization as a long-term goal.

"We're advocating for a better position for graduate rights within the university, and there are a variety of ways that we can do that, all of which I think have some merits to them," Scott said in
an interview. He said that for legal reasons, the forum cannot be both a recognized student organization and unionized.

The Forum on Graduate Rights was created in response to MU's decision to withdraw health care subsidies for graduate student employees. Although the subsidies were reinstated, the group is pressing forward with other concerns: affordable housing, on-campus child care and tuition waivers.

Anahita Zare, the group's outreach chairwoman, said the forum has been approached by unions both in a show of support and offering their services. She would not name the unions.

The forum posed the question of whether to unionize or become a student organization on Facebook to get the opinion of the graduate student employees who have been active voices since the forum began. The Facebook group has more than 1,600 members — not all of whom are necessarily participating or supporting the group but who are interested in it — and the page has been an active site for discussion on graduate rights.

"We want to be sure that we're representing what (graduate student employees') actual will is," Scott said in the interview. "So that's why we're opening it up to them. We're not particularly seeking comments from people outside of our constituency."

The Forum on Graduate Rights will make the decision at its steering committee meeting next week, Scott said.

“... We’ve been trying to ask as many questions as we can to flush out what (unionizing) means and what it looks like," Zare said. "So that’s something we’re investigating, but it hasn’t quite formed yet."

**Other recent forum actions**

Six members were added to the forum's steering committee: Kristofferson Culmer is now chairman of the steering committee; Linh Ngo is the international graduate employee
representative; Nathan Beckett is the professional school representative; and Rachel Straughn Navarro, Alex Smith and Joseph Moore are all at-large members, who are exclusively working for the steering committee and are not involved with any other subcommittee.

The Forum on Graduate Rights and its various subcommittees are still trying to carry forward the momentum of last week’s support in plans for the future, Scott said.

The first two weeks, or "phase one" of the fight for graduate rights as he put it, culminated in the Wednesday rally and walkout, which showed how dedicated graduate students and supporters are to fighting for graduate rights.

Members of the forum are proposing that supporters wear red on future Wednesdays to continue the support shown at the rally and walkout, he said.

The forum is also still gathering signatures around campus for supporters of graduate rights at MU.

"Part of what we're doing right now is just figuring out what is (the Forum on Graduate Rights') purpose in the grand scheme of things, and what are the long-term kind of goals that we're pursuing as we go forward." Scott said.

Some express confusion about MU Alert system

COLUMBIA, Mo. - **It started Thursday night when some students received an MU Alert text message saying there was an active threat near campus.** But the text had no information about the threat and no location.

The location was added a short time later, and the location was changed shortly after the first location was released. ABC 17 News learned Thursday night not all MU students received the alert.

After shots were fired near campus Friday night, another alert was sent out.

The location of the suspect vehicle in the shooting was later changed after the alert was sent.

ABC 17 News reached out to the University of Missouri police department, but was told to contact the MU News Bureau for questions about the MU Alert system.

An MU spokesman said he was unavailable for an on-camera interview, but sent ABC 17 News an email with MU Alert tips for students.

According to that email, if an MU student did not receive a text alert, they need to check to make sure information, including their cell phone number, is correctly entered on their myZou page.

Secondly, officials said to make sure the "opt-in" option is selected.

If that doesn't work, students are encouraged to call the help desk at 573-882-5000.

The University said they've had issues with certain cell service providers in the past. If that's believed to be the case, the University said it will work with students.

ABC 17 News still hasn't been told how or why the information that was put out last week was later changed.

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**Editorial: Mike Middleton**

A quiet hero  
By Henry J. Waters III  
Monday, August 31, 2015 at 2:00 pm
On Friday afternoon friends of University of Missouri Deputy Chancellor Mike Middleton met to celebrate his career. After a time on the MU campus more valuable than most of us knew, Mike is retiring.

He graduated from law school determined to advance the cause of justice for ethnic minorities. He had grown up in Mississippi, where he came to understand their plight. He decided the field of law offered an opportunity for him to do some good. After graduation, he worked on civil rights issues in the federal government then returned to become the first black faculty member at MU’s School of Law.

Former MU Chancellor Richard Wallace told a story at Mike’s party illustrating the Middleton method. When Wallace was about to make a “very bad” personnel decision, Mike persistently advised otherwise, finally persuading the chancellor to change his mind. Today Wallace says Mike caused him to avoid a terrible mistake. The experience no doubt had a bearing on the chancellor’s later decision to tap Middleton as his right-hand man.

Seeing an opportunity as deputy to further important causes on campus, Middleton said “yes.” In quiet ways most of us never saw, during the Wallace and then the Chancellor Brady Deaton years, Middleton consistently turned the key.

That’s the way Mike always has worked. Most of us in the white “establishment” community saw him as an affable get-along guy moving easily in polite society, offending nobody with pushy rhetoric or other assertive behavior. But as we learn from others who could see Mike’s work closer up, he never took a day off trying to help improve the atmosphere on campus for everyone. With his position in Jesse Hall, he was able to do a lot. With his style, everybody wanted to help.

On Friday we met his very accomplished family. We mingled with an array of friends, impressive for its diversity. Many of us were there to demonstrate a degree of respect for Mike Middleton that we hardly understood until we got this tutorial late in his career.

Of course, people like this eventually retire, darn it. He says he will hang around, putting his oar in the water now and then. With his quiet propeller, he can move the boat in the right direction more surely than the watch-me actors will do with all their thrashing.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Rob McDaniels named director of MU Career Center

ELAINA STEINGARD, 17 hrs ago
COLUMBIA — Longtime MU Career Center staffer Rob McDaniels will take over the center's direction Tuesday.

"The Career Center was originally set up, I think, to help students figure out what they wanted to do, how to choose a degree and what they wanted to do with that degree," McDaniels said.

McDaniels, who has served as the MU Career Center's associate director since 2007, graduated from MU in 1978 with a master's degree in counseling.

He worked in several roles at Columbia College before joining the MU Career Center staff in 1987. McDaniels then served as the director of MU's Job Development Programs from 1987 to 1993 and the director of Student Career Services from 1993 to 2000.

"Rob has been a valuable member of the Career Center and our campus for many years," said Jim Spain, vice provost for undergraduate studies, according to a university news release. "Along with his experience, Rob brings a great deal of passion to his work."

McDaniels said he looks forward to addressing the MU Career Center's present challenges, planning for the future and making a difference in students' lives.

"One major role of the Career Center is to help students figure out what they want to major in and once they make that decision, how to get to the end point of that, which includes everything from getting through their degree program, to getting part time jobs and internships and looking for positions after they graduate," he said.

McDaniels will replace Joe Johnston, who founded the MU Career Center — then called the Career Planning and Placement Center — in 1974. Johnston is retiring after 50 years at MU.

"The career center wants to connect with the strategic plan of the university," said McDaniels. "We are helping the university as a whole meet the needs of students."
KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The Animal Health Corridor that stretches 300 miles in Kansas and Missouri has attracted more than 300 companies in 10 years to do research and develop animal health products, supporters said.

Nearly 1,000 people are expected to gather in Kansas City for an anniversary dinner Monday night and an investor showcase Tuesday for the corridor, which goes from Manhattan, Kansas, to Columbia, Missouri, The Kansas City Star reported (http://bit.ly/1ieOj61).

The corridor has become "the Silicon Valley for animal health research and development," said Sam Al-Murrani, interim CEO of Prommune Inc., a startup working on swine and avian flu vaccines that is relocating to Overland Park, Kansas, from Omaha, Nebraska.

The companies work on projects and products as varied as controlling odor in litter boxes, earlier identification of sick cattle and developing treatments, drugs and diagnostics for animals. The companies represent 75 percent of the worldwide sales of animal health products and diagnostics — about $19 billion, according to the 2014 Animal Health Corridor Asset Survey by Axxiom Consulting.

Several of the businesses are partnered with universities and research institutions in the corridor, which includes MRI Global, the Stowers Institute and veterinary schools at Kansas State University and the University of Missouri and one-person startups.
"The strength of the corridor is keeping graduates here who want to stay in animal health," Al-Murrani said.

Seventeen animal health companies are slated to present business plans and technologies to potential investors for the dinner and forum.

Supporters acknowledge the success could fade if they can't keep skilled workers and increase interest in science, particularly animal health.

"We need a science-literate population," said Ian Spinks, president and general manager of with Bayer Healthcare's Animal Health Division, North America, in Shawnee, Kansas. "We need interest in the vet schools to continue to grow. We need to grow the skill sets necessary for these science jobs."

To that end, the Animal Health Corridor will introduce initiatives Monday to raise animal science awareness among pre-college students and to help agriculture-oriented associations foster interest in animal health careers.

Some corridor participants also said the recent gutting of the Kansas Biosciences Authority, a state-sponsored venture capital fund, was a setback. Created in 2004, the KBA spurred bioscience development in Kansas and helped Kansas land the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility. But chronic underfunding by the state led the KBA to lay off much of its staff this year and stop making new investments.

Al-Murrani said, "we're back to square one when it comes to funding in Kansas. You survive on your wits and try to make the right impression with investors."
Donors give $500,000 for Lafferre Hall renovations

Monday, August 31, 2015 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri College of Engineering has received $500,000 from two donors for renovations to Lafferre Hall.

Burns & McDonnell, a Kansas City-based engineering and construction firm, donated $400,000 to the engineering college. The other $100,000 came from alumnus Ray Kowalik and his wife, Jill. They were recognized during a ceremony Friday at Lafferre Hall.

The state issued $38.5 million in bond proceeds for renovations of the sections of the building constructed in 1935 and 1944. The Missouri Board of Public Buildings in February approved sale of the bonds to finance the project, and a groundbreaking ceremony was held in April.

The project is expected to be complete by December 2016.

The donations will help fund an area dedicated to student collaborations inside a newly renovated area on the north side of the building, said Robert Schwartz, interim dean of the MU College of Engineering.

Different Conclusions on Sex Assaults

September 1, 2015

By

Jake New
About 5 percent of students -- more than 1,000 students in total -- at the University of Kentucky experienced a sexual assault in the past year, according to the results of a new survey that researchers say could provide one of the most expansive looks yet at gender violence at an individual college.

Where many other campus surveys rely on responses from a sample of a few thousand students, Kentucky’s survey was sent to every student and the results include data from more than 24,300 respondents, or more than 80 percent of Kentucky’s students. “This is what we must do as we undertake our sacred trust to care for the health and well-being of our students,” Eli Capilouto, Kentucky’s president, said in a statement. “Because we surveyed the entire student population, we have a clearer understanding of our strengths and areas where we need to improve.”

Though all students were required to take the survey, about 5,000 did not participate in time for this preliminary round of data (the survey will be conducted annually for at least four more years). Still, the number of respondents to the Kentucky survey dwarfs that of similar efforts, such as the recent survey at the University of Michigan that was sent to 3,000 students, or about 7 percent of students. The University of Texas System recently started conducting a large survey about campus sexual assault, as well. Like Michigan’s, the study will select a sample size of students, but it will pull its respondents from every campus across the statewide system.

The results of the Michigan survey, released in June, found that about 11 percent of students experienced a sexual assault in the past year. About 22 percent of female undergraduate students and 7.6 percent of male undergraduate students said they had experienced a sexual assault in that time frame.

The report based on the Kentucky survey that was provided to Inside Higher Ed last week does not break the numbers down by gender, though the university said it will eventually release that data. Kentucky also used a narrower definition of sexual assault than Michigan’s and similar surveys that include unwanted kissing or sexual touching, and thus often show a higher percentage of students -- about one in five -- who say they have been assaulted.

“There are research studies that for very good reasons will broaden that definition because they want to understand the vast range of negative experiences students can have,” Diane Follingstad, executive director of Kentucky's Center on Violence Against Women, said. “That’s why we’re trying to very carefully show not only that these are our numbers, but here’s how we got them, exactly. It’s very important knowing what’s being assessed.”

The Kentucky survey asked students about “unwanted sexual experiences,” and defined that as completed or attempted intercourse, oral or anal sex, and used federal guidelines for defining physical force, threat of force and incapacitation. Kentucky’s findings were similar to other surveys that have defined sexual assault in this way, including studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Harvard School of Public Health.
The Kentucky survey found that 4.9 percent of students experienced an assault in the last year. That's 1,052 students who said they were assaulted, a far larger number than the 144 cases reported to university officials or the counseling center. More than 60 percent of the assaults occurred off campus and 27 percent occurred in university housing. About 6 percent occurred in what was designated as "UK affiliated off-campus" housing, which includes fraternity and sorority houses. Nearly three-quarters of students who were assaulted said the assault was committed by a fellow Kentucky student.

"We looked at that data a little more and most of the off-campus assaults appear to be happening in student houses or apartments," Follingstad said. "It seems to be where people are living is where these things are happening. While many of them are not on campus, the vast majority are still committed by UK students."

The survey also asked students about other kinds of intimate partner violence. Out of students who said they were in a relationship, 7.3 percent reported being physically abused and 17.2 percent reported “serious psychological abuse” from a partner. Nearly one-quarter of students said they had been sexually harassed in the past year. The harassment included receiving unwanted sexual comments, messages, images, gestures and touching. More than 6 percent of students said they had been stalked.

In addition, students were asked about their perceptions of safety on campus and how the university responds to sexual assault. Nearly all students said they felt safe on campus during the day, and more than three-quarters said they felt safe at night. About 94 percent of students said they felt the university cares about their safety.

More than half of students said that sexual violence was a problem on campus. Generally, students said they had a positive perception of how the university handles sexual assault allegations, but half of the respondents said they worried about retaliation from other students if they were to report an assault.

A quarter of the surveyed Kentucky students were not aware that the university has both mandated reporters and confidential sources, or who on campus falls into each category. Almost 40 percent of students did not know that Kentucky officials must investigate claims of sexual assault or that the campus offered accommodations to victims, such as changing their dorm room assignment or moving them into a different class.

Michigan’s survey reached a similar conclusion: too few students are aware that their institution has policies about and resources dedicated to campus sexual assault.

“When I talk to campus police or Title IX officers, they say that ‘we do tell students about this and we give them this info,’” Follingstad said. “It’s talked about when they first arrive at UK, but there’s something about the way they’re getting the information that’s just not registering. We may need to find better ways to communicate, perhaps improving the way it’s presented on our websites. There’s something happening that’s saying we might need better modes of communicating this to students.”
For some Americans, a degree is no cushion against wealth loss

Aug. 31, 2015 • By David Nicklaus

Despite all the grousing about debt and rising tuition, a college degree remains a good investment.

The problem is, according to a new study, it doesn’t have the same payoff for everybody. When William Emmons and Bryan Noeth of the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank delved into two decades of data, they found that African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans didn’t receive the same wealth-accumulating benefits from college that whites and Asian-Americans got.

During the Great Recession, college-educated black and Hispanic households actually suffered a greater loss of wealth than blacks and Hispanics who lacked a degree. That’s a surprising result, because the higher earnings that come with a degree should help cushion people against shocks.

In white and Asian families, that certainly was the case. Median net worth for college-graduate white households fell 16 percent between 2007 and 2013, compared with a 33 percent loss for nongraduates.

College-educated blacks, though, saw their net worth plunge by 60 percent, and college-educated Hispanics took a 72 percent loss. Among households without a degree, the loss of wealth was 37 percent for African-Americans and 41 percent for Hispanics.

Why didn’t education have the same shock-absorber effect for those families that it had for whites and Asian-Americans?

Emmons, an economist at the St. Louis Fed, says blacks and Hispanics suffered larger losses during the recession for two reasons: They had more debt, and more of their wealth was tied up in housing.

The recession was tough on people who stretched their finances to buy a house, and that included a disproportionate number of upwardly mobile African-American and Hispanic families. They learned the hard way that a house with a big mortgage was no sure-fire ticket to riches.

There’s more to the story than that, however. Emmons points out that between 1992 and 2013, a period that included two long economic expansions as well as two recessions, college-educated blacks and Hispanics saw their incomes stagnate.

In inflation-adjusted terms, a black household with a degree earned 12 percent less in 2013 than in 1992. College-educated Hispanics earned 10 percent less, while white degree-holders’ incomes rose 18 percent.

“The median black or Hispanic family was not able to accumulate wealth over the long term because their incomes were not rising,” Emmons says.
That points to some deeper problems in the job market, including discrimination. Other scholars have tested equal-opportunity claims by sending two sets of résumés to employers, identical except for the names. The ones from Jamal and Lakisha got fewer responses than the ones from Greg and Emily. That’s probably just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ways that employers intentionally or unintentionally discriminate.

African-Americans and Hispanics also are underrepresented in growing fields such as computer science, and they’re less likely than whites to pursue master’s or doctoral degrees.

“There’s been an increased premium on advanced degrees, and that alone would point in the direction of whites and Asians having higher starting salaries,” Emmons says.

In any discussion of college, we need to emphasize that a degree does add value. For people of every ethnic background, graduates earn between two and three times as much as nongraduates.

Emmons, though, admits that he was surprised by the differences among groups. “It was much starker than I expected to find,” he said. “Higher education is not working the same for everybody.”

That’s a big problem. As we debate how to make college more affordable, we also need to discuss ways to spread its benefits more widely.

No Love, But No Alternative

September 1, 2015

By Doug Lederman

NO MU MENTION

As recently as three years ago, it seemed unlikely that the existing system of accreditation would survive the next renewal of the Higher Education Act in anything remotely resembling its current form.

From across the political spectrum (right and left) and from various segments of higher education itself (particularly community colleges in California and elite universities across the country), many asserted that the system of peer-reviewed quality control was irretrievably broken and in need of replacement.
In some ways little has changed today. Accreditors still have enemies aplenty, and the twin (and in many ways conflicting) critiques that accreditors go too easy on poorly performing institutions (as asserted by foes of for-profit colleges and in a recent takedown in The Wall Street Journal) and that accreditation is a barrier to innovation (an argument made by President Obama and candidates on the 2016 presidential campaign trail) are not going away.

For all the protestations about accreditation’s limitations, though, a new consensus has emerged, even from tough critics of the system like Kevin Carey of New America Foundation, who sums up the view this way: “No one really likes accreditation but no one knows what else to do.”

That’s hardly a ringing endorsement. But accreditors now perform so many functions -- historical ones like helping institutions improve themselves, plus an ever-growing array of regulatory demands imposed on them by Congress and the Education Department -- that jettisoning them would almost certainly require the federal government to take on a much stronger role in higher education, which most observers see as a distasteful outcome.

What that means is that as politicians and policy makers seek solutions to what they see as the underperformance of American higher education, they are likely to try to supplement and challenge the existing accreditation system -- layering in other ways of trying to measure quality and value in higher education -- rather than replace it.

**What Is Accreditation?**

Any discussion of accreditation probably requires a quick primer, as accreditation is neither well understood by most people nor simple.

Most generally, accreditation is a process by which groups of postsecondary institutions agree to judge and monitor themselves using a set of commonly agreed-upon standards. There are essentially two types of accreditors: those that judge whole institutions (the regional and national accreditors), and those that judge programs or schools (programmatic or specialized accreditors).

The latter group includes coalitions of education or law schools, say, and earning this type of accreditation typically does not qualify students at those schools or programs for federal financial aid programs. Although the work of these accreditors produces some complaints, mostly about burden on institutions and conflict of interest, it is not the main focus of this article.

Most of the public and policy discussion about accreditation revolves around institutional accreditors, of which there are two types: seven regional accreditors and seven national ones. On balance, the regional accreditors are older, having been established in the 19th and early 20th centuries by regional collections of public and private nonprofit colleges. The agencies’ initial focus was on improving articulation between secondary schools and colleges, but they quickly began to focus on the institutions’ quality more broadly. The national agencies began to spring up in the early 20th century, often created by institutions that felt shut out by the regional agencies.
The indisputable transformative moment in the history of accreditation was in 1952, when the federal government and the accreditors struck a deal in which the government made the regional agencies a key arbiter of whether individual colleges and universities should be eligible to have their students receive federal student aid. (The federal government itself, through the U.S. Education Department's reviews of individual institutions, and state governments are the other part of the three-headed quality assurance process known as the triad.)

The alliance between the feds and the institutional accreditors essentially made the agencies federal subcontractors, imposing a set of requirements on them in exchange for the authority they wielded. That arrangement both elevated the agencies' importance and turned them, uncomfortably, into a kind of quasi government entity that typically satisfies neither the colleges and universities that are their members nor the government whose approval they must win. "They are damned if they do and damned if they don't," says Peter Ewell, vice president at the National Center for Education Management Systems.

**A Decade of Scrutiny**

The tension over accreditors has flared occasionally through the years (here's a piece from 1996 called "Accreditation at a Crossroads," about one such conflagration), but the current period of scrutiny -- perhaps the most intense ever -- has its roots a decade ago, when the commission impaneled by then Education Secretary Margaret Spellings made the case that accreditors held the key to fixing the many problems the panel identified as besetting higher education at the time.

Then, as now, there were multiple complaints that largely conflicted with one another. Accreditors vigorously protected the status quo, the panel asserted, making it difficult for new entrants that might shake up higher education to earn approval and, hence, access to federal student aid. (Of course the commission members making the case then were leaders of Kaplan University and Western Governors University, both of which had earned accreditation -- reflecting the reality that accreditors are not always the innovation squelchers they are accused of being.)

The Spellings panel's report also made the case that accreditation process was too burdensome and too opaque.

And, most pointedly for the commission, the agencies spent far too much time focused on processes and "input measures" like faculty credentials and library holdings, and precious little on "performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning," which it said should be at the core of their assessment of quality.

The Education Department under Spellings undertook an aggressive campaign (by trying to impose new rules on accreditors and toughening its process for recognizing their authority to approve colleges for federal aid) to compel the agencies to pay more attention to student learning and to adopt minimum levels of acceptable performance for institutions.

The pressure from the Bush administration prodded accreditors, in turn, to put significantly more pressure on the colleges they reviewed to ensure that they were paying attention to how much their students learned. In other words, it had some of the intended effects, and is just one example of accreditors changing what they do.
But the administration's campaign to directly compel accreditors to adopt new standards on student learning was stopped in its tracks by lawmakers such as U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican and former secretary of education -- not so much because they adored accreditation, but because they believed the executive branch was using regulatory vehicles to encroach on Congress's authority. This was less a fight over a principle than a turf battle.

**The Current Critique**
Spellings and Bush couldn't leave office fast enough for most college and university officials, and accreditors surely celebrated, too.

But if they thought the emphasis on outcomes and accountability would leave town with Spellings, they have certainly been disappointed. President Obama has been more supportive of higher education in his spending priorities and his view of its centrality to the economy and society, but his administration has been just as aggressive as its predecessor (if not more so) in using its powers to try to reshape higher education. The emphases have changed only modestly with the turn of administration. The Spellings commission's core concerns -- access, affordability, quality, accountability and innovation -- remain central today, although the 2008 economic downturn and its aftereffects have largely shifted the discussion about higher education outcomes from one aimed at student learning to a more economy-driven focus on job prospects and student debt.

And many of the problems in higher ed have continued to be laid at the feet of accreditors.
To the extent that consumer advocates and liberal politicians attribute much of the student debt problem to for-profit colleges, they have accused accreditors of doing too little to rein them in. The watershed moment on that front came in 2011, when a Senate hearing purportedly about the excesses of for-profit Bridgepoint Education became (when the company's CEO took a pass on attending) a referendum on the failings of accreditors like the Higher Learning Commission, which had approved the takeover of a small Iowa college from which the fast-growing for-profit company took off.
As well-funded philanthropies like the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have persuaded policy makers that higher education is inadequately preparing sufficient numbers of Americans for work and life, they have encouraged the view that accreditors stifle innovative practices (like competency-based learning) and potential alternative providers (coding academies and noninstitutional providers like StraighterLine) that might bolster postsecondary education and training. (Various voices within the U.S. Education Department promulgate both points of view -- accreditors as barriers to innovation, and accreditors as lax enforcers of poor institutions -- at the same time, often confounding officials at the accrediting agencies.) Education Secretary Arne Duncan in 2010 directed his advisory committee on quality assurance to take a broad look at accreditation's effectiveness in the run-up to the next renewal of the Higher Education Act, which was scheduled for 2013. (And yes, it's 2015 and it still hasn't happened.) The panel held several meetings at which a broad array of alternatives were put forward, with Anne Neal, one of its members and president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, advocating for breaking the link between the accreditors and federal financial aid, ending their role as federal quality assurers and letting them focus instead on their original mission of institutional improvement.
Documents supporting President Obama's 2013 State of the Union speech -- perhaps the first ever to mention accreditation -- said he would "call on Congress to consider value, affordability and student outcomes in making determinations about which colleges and universities receive access to federal student aid, either by incorporating measures of value and affordability into the existing accreditation system or by establishing a new, alternative system of accreditation that would provide pathways for higher education models and colleges to receive federal student aid based on performance and results."

Two presidential candidates, Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and Democrat Hillary Clinton, have talked about accreditation on the campaign trail, with Rubio famously referring to the system as a "cartel" that he wanted to "bust."

It is not as if accreditors are taking heat only from politicians and others outside the academy; many college leaders complain that the agencies penalize them too often or impose too many burdens on them.

California's community colleges have been at odds for years with the regional accreditors who oversee them, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, with the state's community college system going so far as to call last week for them to part ways. And officials at some of the country's most elite universities, led by Princeton University, have publicly said that the accreditation system has little to offer institutions like theirs, which they have characterized as needing relatively limited oversight. (The recent academic integrity scandal at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has led more than a few people to question whether elite institutions are truly immune from the need for quality assurance.)

"What's been interesting to me is that so many different people are unhappy about" accreditation, says Ben Miller, an analyst at the Center for American Progress who formerly worked at the Education Department. "You've got people on the left unhappy from a consumer standpoint, the whole 'standing in the way of innovation' argument from the right and the most powerful colleges in the middle, largely annoyed. That's quite a feat to pull off."

**The Search for Something Better**

So with all those perceived flaws in accreditation, surely the country can come up with a better approach, right?

Not necessarily, says Lamar Alexander, who heads the Senate's higher education panel. "I have had a hard time thinking about another way to do this," the Tennessee senator said at a June hearing about accreditation. "If accreditors don't do it, I can assure you the Congress can't, and the Department of Education I don't believe has the capacity or the knowhow. It could hire 1,000 bureaucrats to run around the country reviewing 6,000 colleges, but you can imagine what that would look like."

Like many observers, Alexander largely dismisses the idea of replacing accreditation not out of deep warmth for the job accreditors do, but for lack of an alternative. The agencies are now held responsible for monitoring so many things -- and lawmakers stand ready to add items to their lists, such as colleges' sexual assault policies and
student debt burdens -- that multiple someone elses would likely have to be created to fill the shoes of the accreditors.

And virtually any true replacement for accreditors' gatekeeping function for federal student aid would either require the federal government to spend a lot more money than it now does in supporting the work of the accreditors (virtually zero) or have the Education Department take on the role itself, immersing the federal agency much more directly in judging the performance of colleges and universities than it already is. (Another replacement favored by U.S. Senator Mike Lee, a Utah Republican, would let the states serve as accreditors for federal financial aid purposes as well as licensing bodies. But the states' own record of quality assurance in higher education is spotty, which was partly what prompted the Obama administration to recently try to toughen state authorization procedures.)

That, in some ways, is what the Obama administration just tried to do in its failed effort to create a federal rating system. That effort -- promoted personally by President Obama, driven in part by his frustration at his own family's student loan debt -- collapsed of its own weight this summer, and the department is preparing instead to release a system aimed at giving consumers better information about colleges' performance, without judgments.

**What Comes Next?**
If replacing accreditation with something else -- "blowing it up" -- isn't viable, is the status quo likely?

Not exactly.

While that effort fell short, it points the way to what most observers see as the likeliest scenario going forward: multiple efforts to find other ways to hold institutions accountable, which may supplement both accreditation and the government's other existing quality assurance tools and, possibly, force the accreditors to better compete and change.

The Education Department is deep in discussions about creating an experimental program that would provide federal aid eligibility -- as an alternative to accreditation -- to partnerships between accredited colleges and alternative providers, such as job skills boot camps, coding academies and MOOC providers. That could lay the groundwork for a true alternative accrediting agency that would grant federal approval to the kinds of emergent education and training providers that Rubio and even President Obama have said are dismissed or dissuaded by traditional accreditors.

Carey, of New America, cites that as one kind of "additional architecture" that could be layered onto the existing system of federal, state and accreditor oversight to strengthen the entire accountability system -- and ultimately diminish the relevance of traditional accreditation. That gradual approach of creating alternatives to deal with new segments or new problems "gets you around having a big fight that's hard to win," Carey says.

"I do think there is still a strong desire for alternatives, but nobody's been able to concretely articulate what that might be," says Miller of the Center for American Progress. "It's clear we do not have the processes, structures, entities to replace the
accreditation system tomorrow, and we probably won't in two years. But if you extend that time frame, and encourage experimentation in the space, the outlook changes a little bit."

Neither Carey nor Miller says he is a fan of accreditation, but supporters of the enterprise see similar scenarios as possible. Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, which represents colleges on accreditation issues, believes that the increasing push by federal officials (of both parties) to "tie accreditation status more closely and explicitly to evidence of institutional performance" will, in one way or another, put pressure on accreditors to move in that direction.

That pressure could come in the form of direct federal attempts to create a "different path" to federal aid based on performance indicators (as the Obama administration has done with its gainful employment regime, and tried to do with its ratings system), or less drastically, to just demand that accreditors adopt more "bright line" indicators of performance.

"But one way or the other," she says, "I think the accreditors' role is going to change, in ways that take us away from some of our current practices."

It wouldn't be the first time. In fact, the history of accreditation is that it has changed, as even most of its critics will admit.

The change has not usually come fast enough to satisfy those bashing them, but there is a track record: the increased attention about learning outcomes in the Spellings era, the crackdown on purchases of accreditation by for-profit companies in the late 2000s, the greater transparency exhibited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges senior commission, and the recent collaboration by the seven regional accreditors in crafting statements on common language and competency-based education.

"They really are being responsive to some of these public concerns," says Ewell of NCHEMS.

"The spotlight that has been on the integrity of higher education generally has prompted at least some of the accreditors to be more rigorous," says Robert Shireman, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and, as a top higher ed official in the Obama administration's first term, a tough critic of accreditors' ability to prevent abuses. "But we've seen the story before -- when the attention and spotlight are gone, will we see a weakening of the oversight?"

Ralph Wolff, who as president of the Western accreditor's senior college commission from 1996 to 2013 pursued significant changes, said he and his (now former) accrediting colleagues have "not fundamentally changed" or responded aggressively enough. "Accrediting agencies should be more transparent and far more proactive on the completion agenda," he says. The issue raised by the Education Department in its rating system and The Wall Street Journal articles on institutions that graduate few students demand more action.

For their part, leaders of the accrediting agencies have no illusions about the situation they're in. At a meeting last week of the Council for Regional Accrediting Commissions,
officials of the agencies repeatedly expressed frustration at the conflicting messages they receive ("get tougher," "back off or we'll sue," "stop blocking innovation") from their various masters -- Congress, the Education Department, their college and university members.

But they also discussed the additional ways they might work together, a partial response to the oft-made assertion that having colleges accredited regionally in an era when geographic boundaries matter less and less makes little sense.

Most of the agencies' leaders pushed back against the idea of having one common set of standards for all of them, mostly because the process of debating and drafting the standards within a region every few years "helps to develop a feeling of ownership and buy-in" from each accreditor's member colleges, says Barbara Brittingham, president of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges higher education commission.

But whether it's working more closely together or making other changes that respond to the growing demands and pressures on them, "we have to change, and we are," says Mary Ellen Petrisko, who succeeded Wolff as president of the WASC senior college commission. "We need to be really careful dismissing anything out of hand, or being defensive. When you're defensive, you're closed, and that's dangerous."