

September 28, 2026

RE: [A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards](#) (08/03/2026)

On August 3, 2026, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon issued [A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards](#), asking every postsecondary institution to publish a public statement of principles answering questions related to seven topics: admissions transparency, free speech, intellectual pluralism, affordability and return on investment, academic rigor in the age of AI, protection of academic programs from foreign influence, and alignment of institutional priorities with national and workforce needs.

AACRAO shares the Department's interest in strengthening public confidence in higher education and agrees that colleges and universities must continually demonstrate their value to learners, communities, and the nation. At the same time, the challenges facing higher education cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader policy and economic environment in which institutions operate. Over several decades, a greater share of the cost of public higher education has shifted to learners and families, contributing to concerns about affordability and the value of a college education. Strengthening public confidence will therefore require shared responsibility among institutions, states, and the federal government to ensure that higher education remains accessible, affordable, and responsive to the needs of learners and the nation.

AACRAO members do this work every day: they are the stewards of academic records, the architects of admissions processes, and the professionals who translate institutional policy into consistent, sound practice for learners and families. To the extent that this Call to Action encourages institutions to be transparent with the learners they serve about how they operate, that goal is one AACRAO supports. At the same time, we want to flag concerns that institutions should weigh as they consider a response, particularly relating to the critical issues raised: transparency in admissions, affordability, and demonstrating the value of credentials through strong workforce connections. Across these three areas, our concern follows the same pattern: broad, uniform public statements risk producing disclosures that look like accountability but don't reflect the different missions, student populations, and financial realities of individual institutions.

It is also important to recognize that the Secretary's Call to Action is an invitation for institutional reflection and public dialogue, not a new federal compliance requirement. Although the Secretary calls on colleges and universities to publish statements addressing the seven questions, the letter does not establish a regulatory mandate, condition access to federal funding on participation, or prescribe consequences for institutions that choose not to respond. Institutions therefore retain the discretion to determine whether to and the extent of their engagement with the Call to Action should be in light of their individual missions, governance structures, and existing policies and practices. For institutions that elect to respond, AACRAO

encourages leaders to view it as an opportunity to highlight work already underway, identify areas for continued improvement, and communicate their commitments to learners and the public rather than as a new federal reporting or compliance obligation.

Transparency in admissions

AACRAO supports admissions practices that are transparent and legally sound. Our concern is that an additional, institution-by-institution round of public "statements of principle" on admissions criteria, developed without common definitions of key terms like "merit," could produce inconsistent disclosures that confuse learners rather than clarify, and could create new compliance exposure for offices that are already following the law. Institutions considering how to respond should think carefully about how any public statement interacts with existing reporting obligations and should follow the guidance of their legal counsel.

AACRAO has long promoted transparent, ethical, learner-centered admissions practices. Our [professional principles](#) call on institutions to provide prospective learners and families with accurate information about admissions criteria, transfer-credit policies, costs, financial aid, and educational offerings. We believe learners should be able to understand the policies and criteria that shape admissions decisions, while institutions retain the ability to design admissions processes consistent with their institutional missions and the learners they serve. The same caution about premature, template-driven disclosure applies with even more force to the next area institutions are being asked to address publicly: affordability.

Affordability

As with admissions, transparency alone will not solve the underlying problem. Cost remains one of top barriers for many learners and families, and AACRAO has long supported efforts to make pricing and outcomes more transparent and easier to understand. However, affordability is shaped as much by state disinvestment, the adequacy of federal grant aid, and program design as by any single institution's cost-containment choices. A public commitment to affordability that is not paired with sustained investment in need-based aid risks asking institutions to solve a problem that is only partly within their control. We encourage institutions to be candid in their statements about which levers are truly theirs to pull and to provide context about where state and federal policy may create barriers.

AACRAO has consistently recognized affordability as fundamental to both access and public confidence in higher education. AACRAO helped develop the [Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles](#), which provide institutions with a framework for examining how they communicate college costs and value, structure financial aid and scholarships, and build enrollment practices that learners and families can understand and trust. The principles emphasize access and affordability, tuition and cost transparency, sustainable financial aid, and the value and return on a learner's educational investment. AACRAO's broader [learning-mobility work](#) similarly seeks to reduce unnecessary barriers, including lost credit transfer and failure to recognize prior learning, that can increase the time and cost required for learners to complete a credential. A similar mismatch between a uniform standard and institutional reality shows up in how "workforce value" is being asked to be defined and reported.

Connecting programs to workforce

The same concern about one-size-fits-all metrics that runs through admissions and affordability applies here as well. AACRAO members' daily work includes linking academic credentials to labor-market value. We support institutions being clear about the outcomes their programs produce. Our concern is that a narrow, one-size-fits-all definition of "workforce value," applied to every discipline and institutional type, could misrepresent or undervalue the humanities, foundational research, and the broader civic and intellectual purposes of a degree, even as the Secretary's letter itself opens by recognizing the broader role of higher education. Institutions should be able to describe workforce alignment in terms that fit their own missions rather than a single national template.

AACRAO is also working to strengthen connections between higher education and the workforce while preserving the broader educational mission of colleges and universities. Through our Learning Mobility [LER \(Learning and Educational Records\) Accelerator work](#), AACRAO is helping institutions develop more transparent and interoperable ways to document the knowledge, skills, competencies, and credentials learners acquire through education, employment, and other experiences. The LER Accelerator has brought together national associations and institutions to establish shared principles and implement learner-centered credentialing approaches that allow individuals to communicate their achievements more effectively to employers and use them in pursuing further education and career opportunities. These efforts reflect our belief that higher education should equip learners not only to enter the workforce, but also carry the value of their learning with them throughout their lives.

Many AACRAO members and their institutions are already doing substantial work in each of the areas raised by Secretary McMahon's letter. If your institution responds to this Call to Action, we encourage you to highlight that existing work rather than start from scratch, and to be candid about where progress depends on partners beyond the campus. We also encourage you to share the work you already conduct with your campus leadership so that they are fully aware of how you already are addressing these issues.

We will continue to monitor how institutions respond to this Call to Action and what, if anything, the Department does with those responses. As always, we appreciate the work our members do to serve learners well in a shifting policy environment, and we will keep you informed as this develops.

Sincerely,



Melanie Gottlieb
Executive Director, AACRAO