

# GATEKEEPING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

## A framework for federal oversight and improvement of higher education

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**E**very year, the federal government distributes over \$120 billion in financial assistance for students attending higher education. Yet we need more targeted and effective policies to ensure these funds provide students with the opportunity to receive a quality education that can provide returns for individuals and society as a whole.

This framework outlines a set of principles for rethinking the federal government's system for ensuring quality in the nation's higher education system and providing students with the skills, knowledge, and credentials needed to fully participate in our economy and society. By focusing on what a federal role should strive to achieve, this framework provides a vehicle for evaluating whether potential federal changes would result in improved outcomes for students, taxpayers, and institutions.

While designed to help improve the quality of dialogue and deliberation about policy proposals, this framework is not itself intended as a short-term solution, nor is it intended as an endorsement of any specific policy proposal. By operating at the level of grounded principles, this framework is best understood as an evaluative tool and as a resource for focusing and informing critical conversations.

### OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

- Although states and accreditation agencies also play an important role in assuring quality and providing oversight of higher education, these principles focus only on the federal role and how it relates to federal financial aid.
- Federal policy should drive toward improved outcomes for all students. Toward that singular goal, however, the federal government should consider the needs of the three main participants in federal financial aid: students, taxpayers, and institutions in supporting a quality higher education system.
- The framework proposes that the Federal role includes two separate dimensions: **(1) a gatekeeping** function to ensure the protection of investments (setting the minimum floor of acceptability and holding institutions accountable to stay above that floor) and **(2) a continuous improvement** function that creates incentives for improving the quality of educational and other student outcomes at participating institutions of higher education, including measures of access, affordability, equity, and campus climate. While complementary, the gatekeeping and continuous improvement roles require their own measures and strategies.
- Measures to address gatekeeping and continuous improvement cannot be one-size fits all, and need to be attenuated on factors including: level of measurement (institutional or programmatic), institutional selectivity and level, and stated institutional or programmatic goals and time horizons.
- Gatekeeping and continuous improvement efforts must carefully consider the possibility of unintended consequences, particularly ensuring that institutions do not deny access to traditionally underserved student populations.

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This framework has been designed to help critical stakeholders in conversations and development about the federal role in creating a quality assurance and accountability system. For more information about this framework and ways you can use it in your work, please contact Julie Peller, Higher Learning Advocates ([jpeller@higherlearningadvocates.org](mailto:jpeller@higherlearningadvocates.org)) or Ben Miller, Center for American Progress ([blmiller@americanprogress.org](mailto:blmiller@americanprogress.org)).

## STUDENTS

The student is the ultimate consumer of higher education. They are the ones investing time that cannot be recouped if an educational pathway does not pay off. Students, therefore, need specific assurances that their participation in the higher education system will yield a meaningful return.

### GATEKEEPING

Students should expect that completion from a program or institution that accepts their federal financial aid will leave them better off after leaving school than when entering, help them gain access to professions that reward having a college credential, and lead to earnings that are appropriate for their field and level of experience. Further, students should expect a supportive and safe learning environment.

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Students receiving federal financial aid should expect that institutions and programs they attend strive to improve student outcomes, in particular to increase the value to the student in relation to the institution's and program's mission. Students should also receive appropriate protections in case improvement efforts are not successful.

## TAXPAYERS

The federal financial aid programs are an expenditure of taxpayer resources, which come with expectations that funds will be well spent and result in outcomes that align with the goals and purposes of these investments. Taxpayers expect that their investment in federal financial aid programs will produce an educated citizenry to further economic and social well-being and be a competitive nation, ensure learning beyond high school is a ladder to socioeconomic success and well-being for individuals, and close long standing gaps in access and success for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

### GATEKEEPING

Taxpayers should expect that investment in the federal financial aid programs will not support fraudulent or non-financially viable institutions and educational options that do not provide a meaningful return on investment for students or serve the public good, that programs and their costs will be managed and appropriately budgeted, and students will be protected from discrimination.

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Taxpayers should expect that the federal financial aid programs will create a postsecondary education system that ensures a student's background will not hinder their ability to access and complete a high-quality learning option beyond the high school level. This requires boosting overall rates of access and success and also closing longstanding gaps between groups of students.

## INSTITUTIONS

Institutions of higher education need to operate in an environment where they can deliver a high-quality learning, skills, and knowledge to students. As such, they need adequate protections and guardrails based on shared goals while allowing for diversity of mission and student population. Federal policy must provide clear and reasonable expectations and appropriate resources to institutions in order to improve their ability to provide quality of opportunity.

### GATEKEEPING

Institutions should expect that the overall reputation of higher education will be protected by judging schools on transparent measures that are valid, balance simplicity and nuance, and provide a fair assessment of their performance and that have clear thresholds.

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Institutions that demonstrate a commitment to improvement through their educational and financial priorities and support from school leadership and the surrounding community should expect sufficient and time-limited supports and assistance to improve their outcomes. Support and assistance can take many forms depending on the type of institution, including resources, technical assistance, community expertise, and time to demonstrate improvement.