

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1572

As Reported by House Committee On:
Postsecondary Education & Workforce

Title: An act relating to modifying higher education accreditation standards.

Brief Description: Modifying higher education accreditation standards.

Sponsors: Representatives Pollet, Entenman, Reed and Nance.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Postsecondary Education & Workforce: 2/12/25, 2/19/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Modifies criteria for exemption from authorization for nonprofit out-of-state institutions operating in Washington.
- Requires the Washington Student Achievement Council to recognize certain accrediting agencies.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION & WORKFORCE

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Paul, Chair; Nance, Vice Chair; Entenman, Leavitt, Pollet, Reed, Salahuddin, Thomas and Timmons.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 5 members: Representatives McEntire, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Graham, Keaton, Rude and Schmidt.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Ybarra, Ranking Minority Member; Ley and Mendoza.

Staff: Saranda Ross (786-7068).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

To operate in Washington, degree-granting institutions must obtain authorization from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) or be deemed exempt from authorization. Washington's public institutions of higher education and certain religious institutions are exempt from authorization, while private and out-of-state institutions need authorization or exemption.

The WSAC defines "operate" as engaging in activities related to offering courses, granting degrees, maintaining a presence, or recruiting students in Washington. This includes providing academic credit or distance learning from within the state, granting degrees for credits earned inside or outside Washington, maintaining a Washington-based contact point, collecting prospective student data if the institution has a state presence, and specifically targeting Washington residents in recruitment efforts, except for multi-institutional fairs.

To receive authorization to operate in Washington, a degree-granting institution must: (1) be accredited; (2) have applied for accreditation and such application is pending before the accrediting agency; (3) have been granted a waiver by the WSAC waiving the requirement of accreditation; or (4) have been granted an exemption by the WSAC from the accreditation requirements.

To receive exemption from authorization, a degree-granting institution must be accredited by an accrediting association recognized by the WSAC and meet the WSAC's minimum exemption standards. An institution, branch, extension, or facility of an out-of-state institution wishing to operate in Washington must also be separately accredited by such an accrediting association.

Private organizations accredit institutions and their programs. Accreditation is a means of self-regulation and peer review by educational and professional communities.

Accreditation is voluntary and may cover specific programs or an entire institution. The WSAC has discretion to determine which accrediting associations it recognizes and to establish minimum exemption standards. Exemptions and waivers are periodically reviewed by the WSAC.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The requirement that an institution, branch, extension, or facility of an out-of-state institution wishing to operate in Washington must be separately accredited is eliminated. Instead, to obtain exemption from authorization, such an institution, branch, extension, or facility must be affiliated with a nonprofit out-of-state institution and must:

- have continuously offered degree programs in Washington for 10 years or more;
- have been continuously authorized to offer degree programs in its home state for 20 years or more;

- have been continuously accredited as a degree-granting institution for 10 years or more by an accrediting association recognized by the WSAC, and maintain such accreditation status;
- maintain eligibility to participate in Title IV financial aid programs;
- be recognized for its extensive academic research and innovation, doctoral programs, and advanced facilities and resources; and
- maintain ongoing compliance with the requirements for authorization.

If such an institution fails to maintain compliance with the requirements for authorization, the WSAC may deny an application for exemption, or suspend or withdraw an existing exemption.

Beginning December 1, 2026, the WSAC must recognize accrediting agencies that maintain rigorous standards for institutional eligibility, including requirements related to institutional effectiveness, student learning, assessment, governance, academic independence, administrative and fiscal responsibility, and transparency. Recognition may be independent from the recognition or approval of accrediting agencies by other entities, including the United States Department of Education (DOE) and may not rely solely on reciprocity agreements between states that do not hold similar minimum standards.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill restricts exemption eligibility to an institution, branch, extension, or facility affiliated with a nonprofit institution in another state, rather than any institution. The substitute bill also eliminates exemption criteria requiring such an institution to be accredited by an accrediting association recognized by the DOE, allowing the WSAC sole authority to recognize accreditors.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill contains multiple effective dates. Please see the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The WSAC authorizes institutions of higher education (IHEs) to operate in Washington and relies on independent accreditors to ensure that these IHEs will deliver on the minimum competencies for degrees and that IHEs have adequate faculty and resources to meet student needs, among other necessities. Washington and the DOE determine if an independent accreditor is authorized. This bill looks at two problems. The first is that statute requires accreditors to be recognized by both the DOE and the WSAC. However,

the DOE has fallen significantly in terms of recognizing shortfalls of accreditors, and there may not even be a DOE a year from now. Thus, it is important for Washington to have the ability to choose either the DOE or the WSAC for determining whether an accreditor is recognized. The second problem is that statute prevents authorization for Northeastern University's Seattle campus by requiring the Seattle campus to be independently accredited. However, this creates a catch-22 because the accreditor for Northeastern only accredits the entire institution, including branch campuses. This bill creates very rigorous standards that if met by an out-of-state institution, allows authorization by the WSAC.

Northeastern University's Seattle campus serves over 1,200 students annually in high-quality, in-demand graduate programs. This bill updates the Degree Granting Institutions Act (Act) to align with modern accreditation standards and removes outdated, duplicative requirements for exemption. This bill strengthens exemption criteria to ensure that only high-quality, nonprofit research institutions that are recognized for their academic programs, intensive research programs, and facilities qualify for exemption. This bill also maintains oversight by the WSAC, protecting students from predatory, substandard, and fraudulent and deceptive practices. Streamlining this process will help high quality schools remain competitive in key industries.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The Act authorizes 90 institutions to operate in Washington. The Act is a complex state statute that establishes the minimum standards for degree granting institutions in the state. In 2020 the Council of Presidents and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges reviewed the Act and discovered a number of areas in need of correction. Any changes to this Act should be made to the entire Act to be sure there are no unintended challenges or consequences that may negatively impact Washington's public IHEs and the students they serve. IHEs and agencies within higher education impacted by the Act should work with the Legislature to create a comprehensive update to the Act to ensure any changes are intentional to the overall impact to quality degree access through a student-centered lens. This bill might unintentionally open the gates to other IHEs that might not have the accreditation that Northeastern University does.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Gerry Pollet, prime sponsor; and David Thurman, Northeastern University, Seattle Campus.

(Other) Melissa Beard, Council of Presidents; and Joyce Hammer, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.