Summary of principal points (posted at <https://www.republicreport.org/2020/devos-advances-trump-like-vendetta-against-college-accreditor/>)

Betsy DeVos’s Department of Education is pursuing punishment of a college accrediting agency — an action that looks like a Trump-like vendetta and a means of deflecting charges that the Department and a controversial college chain were caught conspiring to cover up abuses.

A new Department of Education staff [report](https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6981648/Final-Staff-Report.pdf) claims that the accreditor, Higher Learning Commission (HLC), failed to conform to its own rules in switching two campuses of the Art Institutes from accredited status to a probationary, unaccredited “candidate” status in early 2018. The report claims HLC didn’t give the schools sufficient notice that they would lose their accreditation, or adequately explain to the schools that they had a right to appeal.

But HLC has always maintained, and the evidence indicates, that it communicated its actions adequately to the schools’ new owner, Dream Center Education Holdings (DCEH), and that the schools accepted the terms.

The new report recommends that the Department bar HLC from accrediting new schools for a year. By the terms of the report, HLC can save its status as a recognized Department accreditor, empowered to serve as a gatekeeper for colleges’ eligibility for federal student grants and loans, only if it accepts that the Department was right and it was wrong about the dispute: HLC “must take action to rectify this issue and recognize the department’s interpretation of the events before the department’s concerns will be allayed.”

A Department report of this kind would normally be signed by a staffer working for the Department’s accreditation group, but the new one on HLC was instead signed by Annmarie Weisman, senior director for policy development, analysis, and accreditation services. [Weisman](https://www.republicreport.org/2018/profit-college-lawyer-suggests-devos-draft-matched-industry-wish-list/) has [proven loyal](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-department-bars-state-attorneys-general-from-key-panel/) in advancing the plans of DeVos and her top higher education aide, Diane Auer Jones. In the report, Weisman expressly refuses to comply with HLC’s request that it identify the Department officials who drafted the report. But experienced education reporter Eric Kelderman of The Chronicle of Higher Education [writes](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Ed-Department-Blames/249119) that the report “appears to have been compiled by political appointees rather than career staff.”

Jones, who has driven the Department’s handling of the Dream Center matter, embodies the revolving door corruption of the DeVos Department and indeed the whole Trump administration; before returning to the Department in 2018, she was a senior executive at one of the worst for-profit college chains, [Career Education Corp. (now Perdoceo)](https://www.republicreport.org/2020/trump-administration-slams-student-veterans-once-again/), and a consultant to other bad-acting for-profit colleges. From her powerful perch under DeVos, Jones has repeatedly [tailored](https://www.republicreport.org/2018/devos-aide-tailors-decisions-to-the-predatory-colleges-who-employed-her/) Department [decisions](https://www.republicreport.org/2020/devos-tries-everything-to-force-deceived-students-to-repay-loans/) to the wishes of the most awful predatory schools.

As Republic Report was the first to [report](https://www.republicreport.org/2018/inside-a-for-profit-college-conversion-lucrative-ties-troubling-actions/) back in 2018, the Illinois and Colorado Art Institutes campuses, newly-acquired along with other former assets of the company EDMC by the recently-formed Dream Center Education Holdings, failed to inform existing and prospective students that the schools had lost HLC accreditation, instead stating falsely on their websites that the schools “remain accredited.” [Conscientious employees at DCEH](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/one-whistleblower-triggered-dream-center-demise-devos-debacle/), who believed their company was unlawfully deceiving students, informed me of this misconduct.

As we also [reported](https://www.republicreport.org/2018/devos-aide-tailors-decisions-to-the-predatory-colleges-who-employed-her/) subsequently, a Dream Center source said that DeVos’s team had directed the schools to claim continued accreditation. Subsequent investigation. by the House Education and Labor Committee revealed that Diane Jones worked to [paper over the Dream Center’s deceptions](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-cancels-loans-for-students-her-department-helped-deceive/) by purporting to [retroactively re-accredit](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/23/us/politics/dream-center.html) the campuses and accuse HLC of misconduct.

Despite Jones’ attempts to keep it afloat, DCEH [eventually collapsed](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/whos-who-in-devos-dream-center-college-collapse/) under the weight of its [deceptions, blatant conflicts of interest, and mismanagement](https://www.republicreport.org/2018/devos-dystopia-more-art-institutes-and-woz-u-staff-speak/). Jones then moved to transfer most of the surviving campuses to another [deceptive for-profit company](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-backed-deal-would-allow-secretive-non-profit-to-enrich-related-for-profit/).

Students who were harmed by paying to attend a school they thought was accredited but wasn’t sued DCEH and the Department. Eventually the Department, facing pressures from Congress, [agreed](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-cancels-loans-for-students-her-department-helped-deceive/) to cancel some of the loans and restore grant eligibility for about 1500 former students.

But in [announcing](https://www.republicreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/DeVos-Cancels-Ai-Loans.pdf) that action, DeVos, [like Jones before her](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-department-denies-directing-dream-center-to-deceive/), blamed HLC, not the Dream Center or the Department itself for the debacle.

Now the Department has taken that deflection approach to the next level.

The new report drills down on alleged ambiguities in HLC’s communications with DCEH, but any possible lack of clarity by HLC in the process would not have prevented DCEH, run by an experienced team and represented by experienced lawyers, from clarifying HLC’s position and DCEH’s appeal rights, rather than lying about its accreditation status to students. A federal judge already has [noted](https://www.republicreport.org/2020/judge-rejects-dream-center-claim-of-blamelessness-in-art-institutes-deceptions/) that DCEH made “an allegedly nefarious decision” not appeal HLC’s suspension of accreditation, perhaps to avoid calling attention to the accreditor action. And its own dissatisfaction with HLC’s actions did not justify the DeVos Department assisting in a scheme to further and ratify DCEH’s deceptions and misconduct.

The DeVos staff report now faces review, but the process looks dubious.

First stop is the Department’s National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity ([NACIQI](https://sites.ed.gov/naciqi/)), an outside review panel whose independence [Jones openly tore away](https://www.republicreport.org/2020/devos-fills-sole-student-slot-on-outside-advisory-panel-with-a-former-aide/) at its last meeting, and which is chaired by powerful for-profit college owner [Arthur Keiser](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/business/some-private-colleges-turn-a-tidy-profit-by-going-nonprofit.html?_r=0), whose own schools have paid to settle law enforcement probes charging deception, and who was recently [sued](https://www.republicreport.org/2020/college-owner-who-heads-devos-panel-is-sued-by-mother-for-alleged-fraud-and-theft/) by his business partner mother for fraud and theft. NACIQI is set to debate HLC’s fate [at the end of this month](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/06/25/2020-13723/national-advisory-committee-on-institutional-quality-and-integrity).

After NACIQI review, the proposed sanctions against HLC are to be resolved by a designated Senior Department Official (SDO). The Department report notes that Diane Jones “has generally served as the SDO during her tenure at the Department,” but that, for reasons not stated, “she has decided not to participate in the Department’s current review of this matter.” Instead, the decision will be made by DeVos’s number two, deputy secretary Mitchell Zais.

That’s not reassuring at all. Zais himself was caught blatantly disregarding his duties in [pressuring](https://static.politico.com/72/da/b2e125094564ac72b9b5b3096c66/acics-letter-01.03.2018.pdf) the Department’s acting inspector general, Sandra Bruce, to curb an investigation of Jones’s restoration of another accreditor, [ACICS](https://www.republicreport.org/2019/devos-effort-to-save-college-accreditor-acics-is-on-shaky-ground/), which had been notoriously asleep at the switch as for-profit colleges under its charge repeatedly abused students and taxpayers. Zais then [acted to replace Bruce](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/19/besty-devos-investigation-1186521) with a Department of Education lawyer, before that firing was reversed.

DeVos and Jones seem to have learned well from Trump how to deflect attention when you are caught engaging in abuses. Lie. Cover up. Deflect. Attack the whistleblowers, and stack the deck against them.

This ugly, corrupt administration cannot end soon enough. The harms DeVos and Jones have done to struggling students and American taxpayers, in order to benefit corrupt special interests, will not be undone easily.

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