

# Civic engagement as a public good

*The role of quality assurance in nurturing active citizenship*

The International Network for Quality Assurance  
Agencies in Higher Education

Bucharest, Romania

12 June 2024

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The clash between what “should be” and what is produces massive normative dissonance.

-Daniel C. Levy, *A World of Private Higher Education*

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## Some assumptions

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- Change – impacts are underestimated
- Trust is fundamental
- Higher education exists in a fraught world
- Quality assurance is universal
- Quality is a contested space



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# Definitions

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- Civics
  - Rights and obligations of citizens
- Civic Engagement
  - Protect and change communities
- Public vs Private good
  - Excludability and rivalry





# Role of Quality Assurance

- Protect and change higher education
  - National interest, raise the bar
- Identify/create legitimate institutions
  - Private, nontraditional, new providers
- Ensure public and private goals/goods
  - Economic, Knowledge, Innovation

# Quality Assurance in the United States



- Institutionally based
- External: Non-governmental, voluntary – yet required
- Internal: Autonomy, mission driven
- The non-governmental part of the regulatory Triad
- “Accreditation on the Edge”
  - Mission, function, and demands

# Politics



**Karin Fischer**  @karinfischer · 20h



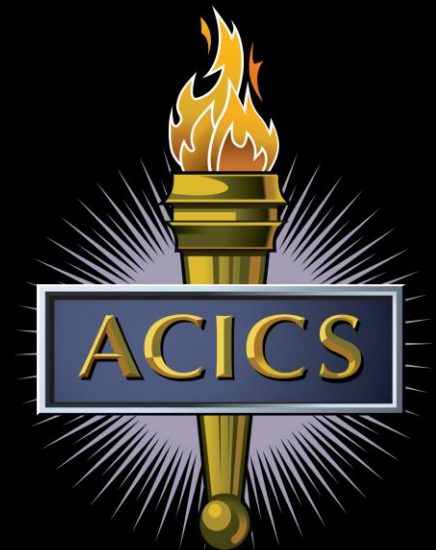
The past seven hours have been an exercise in trying to find new ways to write "political attack on higher education."





# Case: For-profit higher education

- Post WWII distinct accreditation agencies
- Regional prohibition challenged
  - Marjorie Webster Junior College (1966)
  - Office of Civil Rights scrutiny 1970s
  - ABA settlement 1995
- 2010s: ACICS recognition questioned
- Neutrality challenged by ED – renewed scrutiny



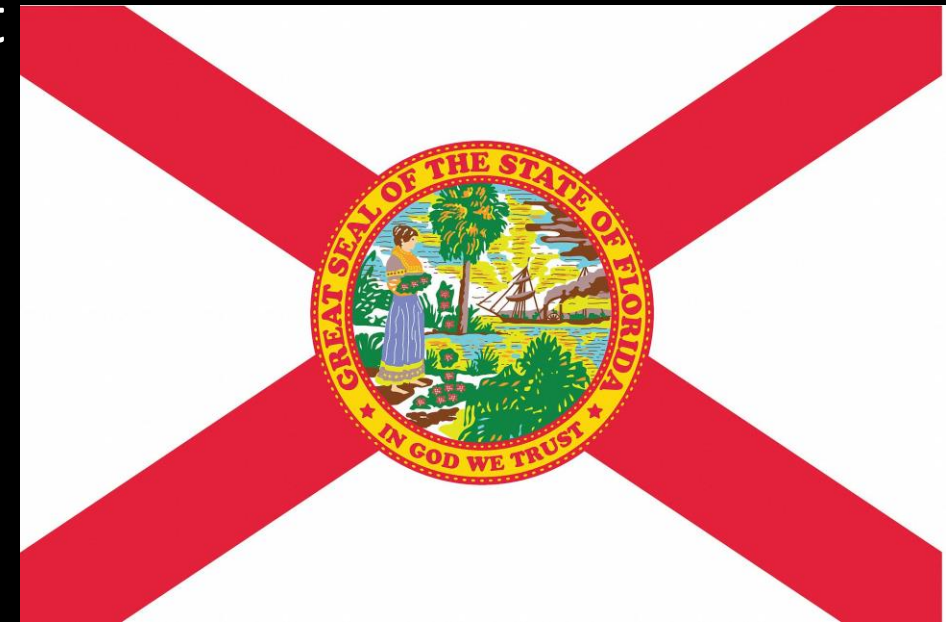
# Case: Diversity



- 1970s and 80s: race-based policies
- Middle States multiculturalism debate: Diversity is part of institutional integrity
- Baruch College 1990 “deferred”
- 1991 ED “deferred” MSCHE recognition [Lamar Alexander, Secretary]
- Campaign to rally membership failed, MSCHE backed down
- CHEA Established diversity criteria expectations in 2021
  - Standard 3. Accreditation Structure and Organization

# Case: Florida

- Executive branch increasingly involved in state institutions
- SACS accreditation raised questions under “independence” criteria
- State responded by rejecting SACS authority over the state
  - Required IHEs to change accreditors
- Sen. Ben Sasse (New UFlorida pres) comment on the accreditation “cartel”
- Universities followed state requirements
- Florida lawsuit on constitutionality



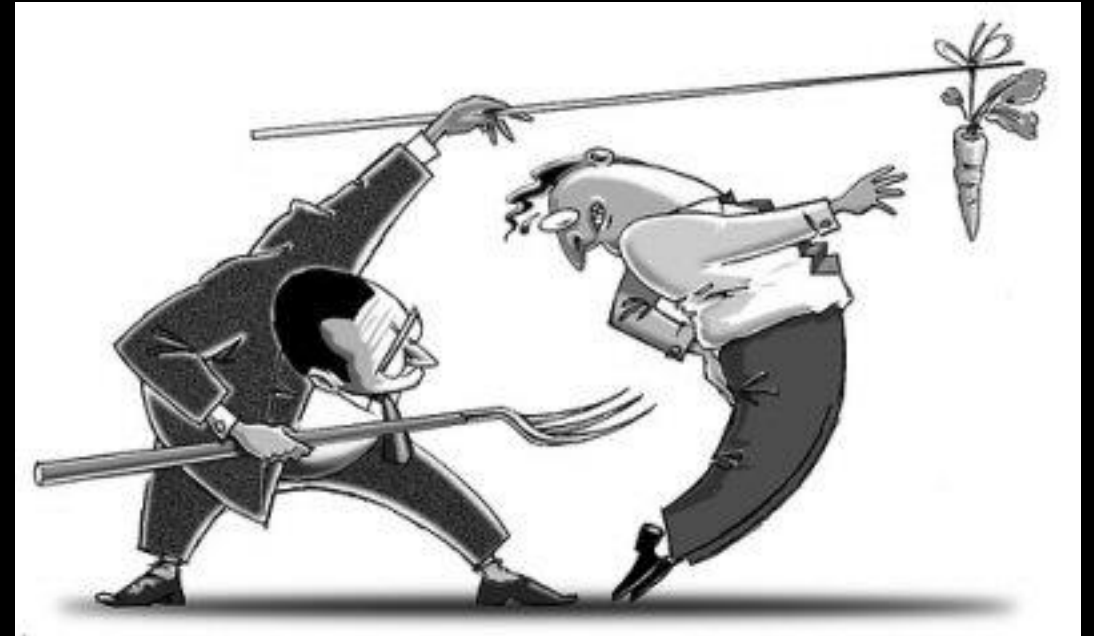
# Case: Campus protests

- Encampments, occupations
- Non-violent, but threatening
- Politicized, nationalized
- Resignations and dismissals
- Raises questions of governance for quality assurance
- Outcome?

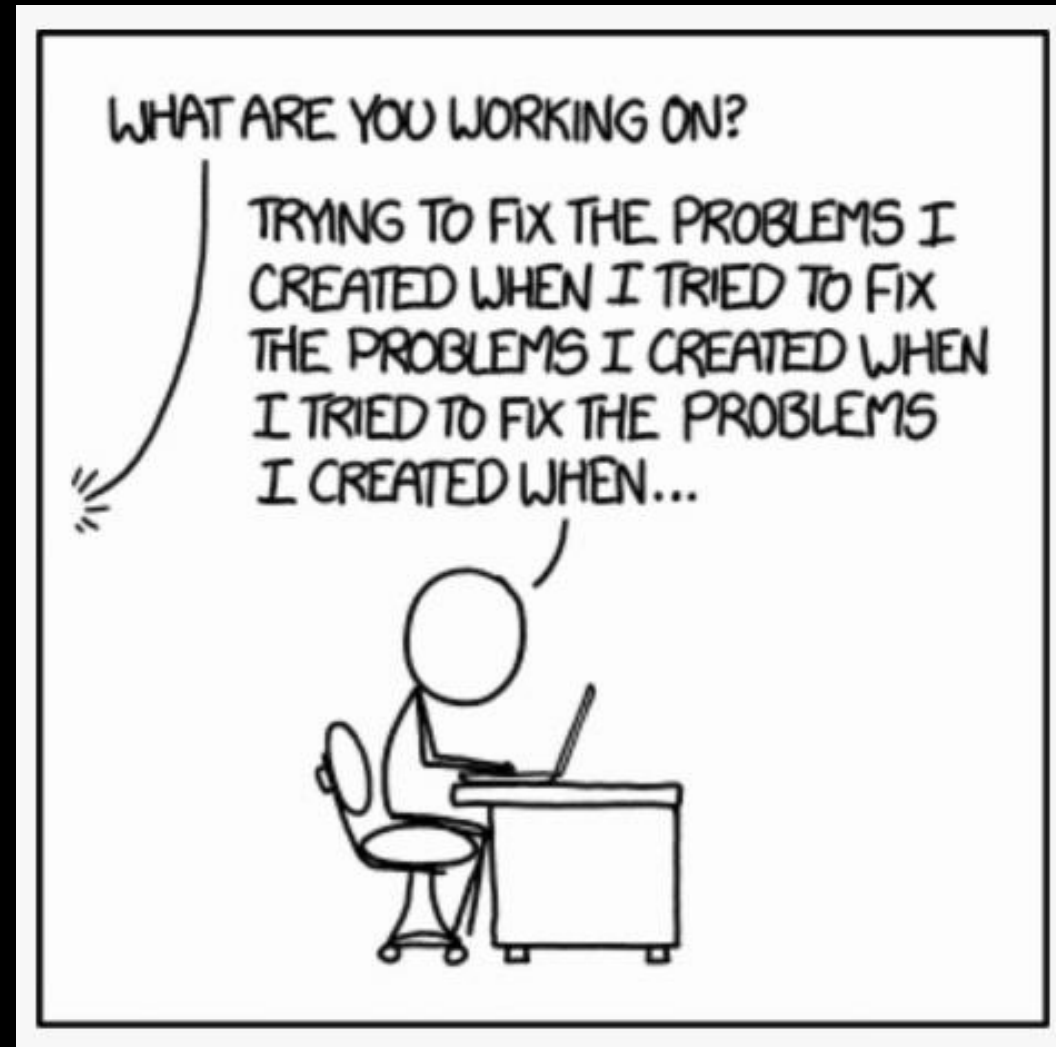


# Consequences

- QA becomes Quasi-Regulatory
  - From critic to officer
  - Autonomy and independence
- Stability and innovation
- Expertise and academic freedom
- Essentializing education



# The challenge of wicked problems



How to promote a mission to educate citizens who can productively engage in the betterment of society when priorities change, societal problems are contested, and the relevancy of higher education is questioned?

# Solutions → Re-negotiations

- Define and argue for civic engagement as a public good
- Serve as a buffer for students, staff, and leadership
- Prepare to be challenged (and lose)
- Don't rely on legitimacy alone
- Assess benefits vs risk to society surrounding change and stasis
- Prediction without advocacy







**KEEP  
CALM  
AND TRUST  
QUALITY  
ASSURANCE**

# Questions?

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