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CSAC Hearing: Is Accreditation Enough to Ensure Online Education Quality?

Sacramento, CA -- As college students increasingly embrace online courses, measuring the effectiveness of distance learning is becoming a critical necessity to protect students, taxpayers who subsidize higher education, and future employers looking for skilled graduates. But are the current gatekeepers of education quality, a complex system of institutionally funded accreditation agencies across the nation, up to the job?

The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) will continue its examination of the policy implications of distance learning on the \$1.5 billion Cal Grant program during a hearing on Thursday, April 26, 2012.

In his opening statement, CSAC Chair Barry Keene ties the quality of education directly to CSAC's mandate to see that Cal Grants are used in a cost-effective manner.

"If the explosion of online learning, and the quality challenges it presents, is not our business, whose business is it? Is it the business only of those institutions to police themselves – to conduct their own oversight of themselves? We need to know what oversight exists...We do not ourselves seek to measure the quality of education delivered to students. But in line with our statutory charge, we need to ask about the reliability of those who do purport to measure that quality."

In February, CSAC conducted a daylong hearing on both the effectiveness and shortcomings of various models in delivering online courses. During the April 26 meeting, CSAC will hear testimony from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the accrediting agency for the majority of Cal Grant-certified institutions that California students attend.

"The February hearing made it very clear that online education is not suitable for all students, and that the quality of programs varies greatly," Keene said. "Taxpayers are trusting us to make sure student aid dollars are used cost-effectively. And employers are relying on the college degree that a job applicant presents to them as evidence of solid achievement."

The invited speakers are expected to talk about the role accreditation plays in providing oversight for distance learning. They include:

- Ralph Wolff, President, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)
- Barbara Beno, President, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, WASC

The CSAC hearing is designed to spotlight the issues for the public, provide informed advice to lawmakers, and lay the foundation for any needed regulatory measures for the protection of Cal Grants.

The hearing will be conducted at the CalPERS Building, 400 P Street, Room 1190, beginning at 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, April 26, 2012.

The California Student Aid Commission is the principal state agency responsible for administering financial aid programs for students attending public and private universities, colleges, and vocational schools in California. The Commission distributed over \$1.3 billion to California's college students during the 2010-11 academic year through its Cal Grant, specialized and loan forgiveness programs. The Commission also administers financial aid awareness and outreach programs, such as Cal-SOAP and Cash for College, in collaboration with business, private industry and community-based organizations.