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Higher Ed Accountability Stays Center Stage with Harris at the Top of the Ticket



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The Biden–Harris Administration has advanced the starting line for Democrats’ consumer protection–focused higher education reform agenda. From delivering targeted debt relief for harmed borrowers to rewriting major regulations that ensure students receive value from career training programs, President Biden and Vice President Harris have doggedly pursued student-centered higher ed policies, often at a breakneck pace.

Now, there’s no one in national politics better positioned to drive that agenda forward than Vice President Harris, who has deep awareness of the belly of the higher ed beast and is poised to elevate institutional accountability and student protections to new heights.

The vice president frequently talks about her record holding predatory for-profit colleges accountable—often touting it as a foil to Donald Trump. “I shut down for-profit scam colleges. He

ran one,” she says about an old campaign ad that resurfaced last week as she became the presumptive 2024 Democratic nominee. Fighting on behalf of harmed students is personal for Harris, who as California Attorney General in 2013 sued the for-profit chain Corinthian Colleges for breaking consumer protection laws by intentionally running false ads and misrepresenting job placement rates and program offerings to recruit vulnerable low-income students. A joint investigation by Harris’ office at the California Department of Justice and the US Department of Education brought forth damning evidence of the school’s misconduct and secured debt relief eligibility through the borrower defense to repayment process for defrauded Corinthian students in 2015—the same year the chain ultimately shuttered its doors and declared bankruptcy.

On June 1, 2022, the Biden-Harris Department of Education announced the largest-ever single federal student loan discharge: \$5.8 billion in total relief for 560,000 borrowers preyed on by Corinthian. Vice President Harris’ role in exposing Corinthian’s predatory behavior was front and center, and her remarks on the occasion detailed the countless hours that she and her team spent poring over internal documents from Corinthian staff and hearing devastating accounts from students and advocates who were swindled by the chain’s abusive practices. And she demonstrated how the long journey to justice for those students has influenced her understanding of the need for nuanced institutional accountability in higher ed, reflecting:

So, it’s one thing to say “there should be accountability,” but when we think about and define “accountability” based on bad actors and bad deeds, part of our system of justice tells us that, yes, there should be serious, swift, and severe consequence, but also we must look to those who were harmed and ask, “Are we doing enough to allow them the ability to recover from that harm?”

That balance, and crafting smart policy to reflect it, can be fraught. The Biden-Harris Administration has endeavored to draw logical and legally defensible lines in the sand across its broad regulatory agenda and notched several notable wins, including:

- A robust gainful employment rule, which will protect over 700,000 students each year from bottom-of-the-barrel career training programs that leave most graduates with unrepayable debt or earning less than someone with a high school diploma.
- A landmark financial value transparency framework that will provide students in any taxpayer-funded higher ed program with enhanced information about costs, debt, and typical earnings to help inform their college choices.
- Strengthened and streamlined legal pathways to debt relief for borrowers taken advantage of by predatory colleges, borrowers whose institutions closed suddenly, borrowers with total and permanent disabilities, and borrowers whose employment history renders them eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

Harris's experiences as a prosecutor, state AG, senator and vice president have given her a wealth of insight into higher ed's bad actors—but she has also been shaped by her experiences as an alumna of Howard University, an HBCU. Harris would be the first historically Black college or university graduate in the Oval Office, and she has visited and advocated for HBCUs throughout her career. The Biden-Harris Administration has invested over \$16 billion in HBCUs to date, a record-breaking sum that the Department of Education has described as a “whole of government investment” approach to supporting these institutions.

As president, Harris's intimate awareness of the tension between chronic underfunding of HBCUs and their important value proposition to students will position her well to both pursue greater funding for under-resourced institutions *and* advance a stronger system of accountability that contends with varied institutional resource levels and student outcomes to provide appropriate incentives and consequences and drive better results for all students.

With Vice President Harris at the top of the ticket, students and borrowers have a Democratic nominee who has seen firsthand the damage that comes from unscrupulous institutions making promises they can't deliver—and who is well-positioned to champion policies that hold all schools to account for their outcomes and safeguard students' and taxpayers' investment in our higher education system.