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New Report Outlines Path Forward on Interstate Distance Education Oversight

Oakland (CA) — Three million Americans now go to college entirely online, including 1.3 million enrolled at a school online in a state other than where they live. This represents an important new choice for students, but also a new challenge for states seeking to ensure the quality of the education provided to residents. [Going the Distance: Consumer Protection for Students Who Attend College Online](#), a report released today by The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS), outlines how states can collaborate to expand college opportunity without putting students at risk of unmanageable debt from poor-quality online colleges.

“Online education can be an important option for some students, but some online colleges have left students with large debts and not much else,” said vice president **Debbie Cochran**. “For students, states are the primary line of defense against colleges that don’t deliver on their promises. Now, as the federal government dials back its oversight of distance education, state oversight is more necessary than ever.”

With thousands of colleges now offering distance education, states have sought ways to partner with each other to streamline the approval and oversight of distance education. Interstate agreements – where a school’s home state agrees to assume responsibility for oversight on behalf of other states whose students enroll at that school – can be important tools in streamlining oversight and promoting educational opportunity. However, out-of-state students need the specific terms of the agreement to be strong enough to protect them.

While most schools offering distance education are public colleges, nearly half of all online students attending a school across state lines attend for-profit colleges. Many of the colleges enrolling the most out-of-state distance education students have been the subject of federal and state investigations for misleading or otherwise harming students. Poorly designed state agreements may unintentionally make it harder to uncover wrongdoing and for each state to protect its own residents.

[Today’s report](#), coauthored by Cochran and policy analyst Angela Perry, outlines eight principles for interstate oversight of distance education. It then assesses the two most prominent attempts to regulate distance education: the 2016 regulation issued by the U.S. Department of Education and an interstate reciprocity agreement run by a private group, the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA). The U.S. Department of Education recently announced its plans to delay implementation of its regulation to revisit the issue. With the 2016 federal rule now on hold, states have the opportunity to rethink the way that the existing system works, and this report creates a framework for pursuing those opportunities.

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An independent, nonprofit organization, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) works to make higher education more available and affordable for people of all backgrounds. Our Project on Student Debt works to increase public understanding of rising student debt and the implications for our families, economy, and society. For more information see www.ticas.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/TICAS_org.