

How does a school lose MEAC accreditation?

It can be a shock when a school loses its accreditation. Students, faculty, the public, and even sometimes administrative staff don't get to see all the steps that lead up to a decision to deny or withdraw accreditation, making it seem like it happened without warning.

The process and commitment to accreditation are about a school's continuous self-assessment and improvement. Denying or withdrawing the accreditation of a school is never an easy decision for the MEAC Board of Directors to make, even when it is the last option available and is appropriately warranted.

First comes noncompliance. A school is found to be not meeting the standards that are required of all MEAC accredited schools and/or the school is found to be not following MEAC's policies that all accredited schools are required to observe. The MEAC Board of Directors typically finds a school in noncompliance when the school has submitted documentation that does not show proof of compliance, they have openly admitted to a lack of compliance, or peer reviewers note the compliance issue during routine assessments such as during reaccreditation. The MEAC Board, staff, and all peer-reviewers use a standardized rubric for evaluating documentation and other evidence to determine compliance by the accredited school with MEAC's standards.

Next is the first in a series of steps to provide due process. A finding of noncompliance does not automatically result in the denial or withdrawal of accreditation. Depending on the severity of the noncompliance, there are several options that might be taken by the Board of Directors. With each option, the school is required to submit an explanation and advocate for themselves as to why they believe they are in compliance. The responsibility for demonstrating compliance is on the school.

The most common option for demonstrating compliance is the requirement of Compliance Reporting. This means the school is given a detailed report explaining the area(s) of noncompliance, as well as a specific period of time for making corrections to come into compliance. The school uses the allotted time provided to come into compliance and to submit a report demonstrating that have come into compliance. This period of time for corrections may be as short as 30 days or as long as 2 years, depending on the length of the program and the nature and extent of the noncompliance. (*MEAC Accreditation Handbook, Section G: Policies and Procedures, III.J.3*)

For more egregious circumstances of noncompliance or when there are not any corrections that can be made, there is an option known as a "Show Cause Directive". This means the school is given a detailed finding of the noncompliance and is given a specific period of time to submit an explanation of why accreditation shouldn't be denied, suspended, or withdrawn. (*MEAC Accreditation Handbook, Section G: Policies and Procedures, III.J.2*)

When a school is found to still be in noncompliance and/or is unable to show cause why accreditation shouldn't be denied, suspended, or withdrawn, then adverse action is taken. Adverse action is the denial, suspension, or withdrawal of accreditation or equivalent action. Accreditors that are recognized by the US Department of Education are required to take adverse action when a school is not in compliance. Adverse action works in several steps so when the accreditor makes the initial decision, it does not mean that the school immediately loses accreditation. *(MEAC Accreditation Handbook, Section G: Policies and Procedures, III.K)*

The school has continued due process through the option to appeal the initial decision. If the school disagrees with the findings and decision for adverse action, they can appeal the decision. The appeal process gives one last opportunity for the school to demonstrate compliance, submit documentation, and advocate for itself. Appeals are reviewed by a different group of people than the ones who conducted the earlier reviews and/or that made the initial decision. This helps ensure the appeal is conducted in an impartial manner. The appeal panel can agree with the initial findings and decision, can overturn the initial findings and decision, or can send the case back to the Board of Directors for further consideration. *(MEAC Accreditation Handbook, Section G: Policies and Procedures, III.L)*

It is only after all the steps are completed and the appeal process has been either waived or exhausted that the decision for adverse action is final. This means, the school will have had *at least* three distinct opportunities to advocate for itself. It is at this point that the public is notified of the adverse action by the accreditor. The school is also given details of the notification requirements it must follow.

A final decision of adverse action does not mean the accreditation is taken away immediately. The last thing accreditors want is to harm students. When a final decision is made, accreditors will require the school to create a teach-out plan (a plan for how the majority of enrolled students will be able to finish their program within a specific period of time) and/or teach-out agreements (an agreement between two or more schools to allow students to easily complete their studies at the other school(s)). These plans and agreements require approval by the accreditor to ensure that it allows for the fair and equitable treatment of students and that all parties involved have the capability and capacity to carry out the plan/agreement. Generally, accreditation of the school is maintained until the teach-out plan has been completed. When a teach-out plan is not sufficient and the full board denies the plan, accreditation is withdrawn and the school is responsible for enabling any remaining students to transfer to another school.

Every step in this long process requires the commitment and cooperation of the school and accreditor alike. *When a school resists the process, is not its own best advocate, or refuses to participate in any part of the process, it causes struggle and ultimately leads to harm to the students. It is vital during this time that a school engage in the proper notifications and communications with students so that they are best able to complete their studies. The students are caused the most harm when a school chooses to not openly, fully, and honestly communicate with their students about the situation.*

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Who makes accreditation decisions?

All accrediting agencies recognized by the US Department of Education, including MEAC, are governed by a board of directors made up of educators, administrators, practitioners, and members of the public. Just as with the practice of midwifery, the accreditation of midwifery education requires the education community to set a community standard and hold periodic and ongoing peer review, looking at individual school's compliance with these community standards. Based on the school's submissions of records the MEAC Board of Directors then votes on the level of adequacy within each standard, Not Met, Met-1, Met-2, Met-3 which allows for the accredited school's continual growth, integration of current evidence, periodic changes in the educational standards and changing midwifery competencies.

The peer review process of MEAC accredited schools, including the process described above, is time intensive and requires the full attention of MEAC's staff and the annual volunteer efforts of midwives, educators and school administrators. These dedicated individuals believe deeply in the value added to midwifery, the improved access to midwifery education via the accreditation process, and the protections afforded to the students who attend these schools. If you are interested in volunteering as a board member or peer-reviewer please contact MEAC at info@meacschools.org.