

## *A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation*

### **Basic Elements of Accreditation Explained\***

There are many entities involved with ensuring that the higher education system in the United States remains the best in the world. States and the federal government both play important roles – in coordination of higher education opportunities in the states and in assuring that state and federal funding for higher education is used appropriately – but the focus and expertise of accreditors is on the quality of institutions and programs. In conducting accreditation reviews, although accreditors may use different terms to explain what they do, there are steps in the process that are common to all. At the campus level, accreditation is a cyclical process. Each review takes many months. Accreditation ensures that institutions and programs are always involved in improvement of educational quality.

1. **Evaluation Request** - the institution or program makes a request to be evaluated by the applicable accrediting agency. Although for most disciplines or professions, there may be only one accreditor, in some areas there is more than one accrediting body.
2. **Internal Review** - the institution or program formally assesses its current effectiveness including its strengths, as well as areas for potential improvement. This assessment is based on the accrediting agency's standards or criteria and the institution's or program's own specific goals that fulfill or extend compliance with agency standards. The document provided by the program or institution is often called a "self-study" or "self-evaluation."
3. **External Review** - the accreditation agency recruits peer reviewers to analyze the self-study document and to conduct an on-site evaluation to validate issues raised in the self-study. In specialized accreditation, these peer reviewers are senior academics and practitioners in the discipline. Institutional and specialized accreditation reviewers are highly qualified for their review assignments and are intensively trained in the agency's standards and to validate both the content of and the issues raised in the self-study.
4. **Public Comment** - accreditation agencies receive input from the general public during accreditation activities through a variety of means, which may include third party comments, public interest panels, and/or having public members serve on review teams or on the decision-making body. Agencies also consider public comments and formal complaints about institutions or programs as part of the evaluation process.
5. **Report** - the evaluation team and the accreditation agency present the findings of the review, which included review of the institution's self-evaluation and the on-site visit. The findings are presented in a thorough written report. As with other aspects of the accreditation process, the written report is sent to the institution for comment and possible action prior to the final agency review.

6. **Agency Review and Accreditation Decision** - the accreditation agency's decision-making body (e.g., Council, Commission, or Board of Directors) reviews the self-study, the evaluation team's report about the institution or program, along with comments from the institution or program in response to that report to make a decision about the accreditation status of the institution or program. Decisions about accredited status include any conditions, recommendations or required reporting to which the institution or program must adhere in order to maintain accreditation status. Due process is provided to programs following the agencies procedures. As such, the results of the review are presented to the program and/or institution in writing. This letter contains the official accreditation action and at times, a separate clearly-marked section providing recommendations for improvement that are not standards compliance issues and thus may be separate from the accreditation action.
7. **Implementation** - in cases where non-compliance with standards is found or questioned, the program and/or institution is required to demonstrate compliance within a specified time period, normally not to exceed one year. In that case, the institution/program is notified that its accredited status is in jeopardy. For example, probationary status is made public. The accrediting agency may also request reports on work in progress that has a relationship with continuing standards compliance as programs develop and grow.
8. **Ongoing Review** - the accrediting agency reviews reports from the institution or program on a regular basis throughout the term of accreditation to ensure that the institution and its programs maintain compliance with standards and continue to improve. Reports may include annual data, substantive change notices, and interim or progress reporting. The agency reviews these reports and takes corrective action, when necessary. Complaints to the accrediting body are reviewed as part of the continuous review of the program quality.
9. **Fair Process** - all aspects of accreditation are guided by published procedures. These procedures include systems of checks and balances, requirements for documentation of standards compliance, means for institutional response to evaluation results at various stages, and policies indicating that accreditation is based on the standards only. The goal is a "rule of law" environment for peer review that promotes accuracy, fairness and integrity for all involved.
10. **Attention to the Public Interest** - accreditation addresses the public's interest in being assured that institutions and programs meet professionally determined standards of academic and operational integrity and quality. Accreditation reviews address specific issues, such as the accuracy of published statements, current and projected financial viability, procedural effectiveness and fairness, and health and safety. Whenever fraudulent practices are discovered, procedures are instituted to require prompt correction. And, under provisions of the Higher Education Act, the Secretary of Education is informed immediately. An institution's or program's failure to make corrections in a timely fashion leads to revocation of accreditation.

\*This briefing paper is posted on the ASPA website.