

**Council for
Higher Education
Accreditation**

**An Overview of
U.S. Accreditation**

Judith S. Eaton

CHEA

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation Mission Statement

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.

(1996)

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents degree-granting colleges and universities as well as institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

Accreditation

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ACCREDITATION IS A PROCESS OF EXTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. Accreditation in the United States is more than 100 years old, emerging from concerns to protect public health and safety and to serve the public interest.

In the U.S., accreditation is carried out by private, non-profit organizations designed for this specific purpose. External quality review of higher education is a non-governmental enterprise. In other countries, accreditation and quality assurance activities are typically carried out by government.

The United States accreditation structure is decentralized and complex, mirroring the decentralization and complexity of American higher education. The higher education enterprise is made up of approximately 6,500 accredited degree-granting and non-degree-granting institutions. These institutions may be public or private, two- or four-year, nonprofit or for-profit. They spend approximately \$230 billion per year, enroll more than 15 million credit students and employ approximately 2.7 million full- and part-time people.

Accreditors review colleges and universities in 50 states and a number of other countries. They review many thousands of programs in a range of professions and specialties including, law, medicine, business, nursing, social work and pharmacy, arts and journalism.

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There are three types of accreditors:

- **Regional accreditors:** Accredit public and private, nonprofit and for-profit, two- and four-year institutions. This is a comprehensive review of all institutional functions.
- **National accreditors:** Accredit public and private, nonprofit and for-profit institutions, frequently single-purpose institutions, including distance learning colleges and universities, private career institutions and faith-based colleges and universities.

Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities, and programs assure quality to students and the public.

- **Specialized and professional accreditors:** Accredit specific programs or schools including law schools, medical schools, engineering schools and programs, and health profession programs.

The Purposes of Accreditation

Accreditation serves the following purposes:

- **Assuring quality.** Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or program meets at least minimal standards for its faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programs provide evidence of fiscal stability.
- **Access to federal funds.** Accreditation is required for access to federal funds such as student aid and other federal programs. The federal government and accreditors sustain a cooperative relationship whereby government relies on accreditors to confirm the quality of institutions and programs in which students enroll using federal student aid funds. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution they are attending is accredited by a recognized accrediting organization. The United States awarded \$60 billion in student grants and loans in 1997–98.
- **Easing transfer.** Accreditation is important to students for a smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges, universities and programs. Receiving institutions take note of whether or not the credits a student wishes to transfer have been earned at an accredited institution. Although accreditation is but one among several factors taken into account by receiving institutions, it is viewed carefully and is considered an important indicator of quality.

- **Engendering employer confidence.** Accreditation status of an institution or program is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education.

How Accreditation Operates

Accreditation of institutions and programs take place on a cycle that may range from every few years to as many as ten years. Accreditation is ongoing—the initial earning of accreditation is not entry to indefinite accredited status. Periodic review is a fact of life for accredited institutions and programs. Self-accreditation is not an option.

An institution or program seeking accreditation must go through a number of steps stipulated by an accrediting organization. These steps involve a combination of several tasks: preparation of evidence of accomplishment by the institution or program, scrutiny of these materials and a site visit by faculty and administrative peers, and action to determine accreditation status by the accrediting organizations.

The five key features of accreditation are:

- **Self-study:** Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organizations' standards.
- **Peer review:** Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self-study is completed. Peers comprise the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments about accrediting status.
- **Site visit:** Accrediting organizations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or program. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit. Teams, in addition to the peers described above, may also include public members (non-academics who have an interest in higher education). All team members are volunteers and are generally not compensated.
- **Action (judgment) by accrediting organization:** Accrediting organizations have commissions that affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs,

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reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs, and deny accreditation to institutions and programs.

- **Ongoing external review:** Institutions and programs continue to be reviewed over time on cycles that range from every few years to ten years. They normally prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time.

Holding Accreditors Accountable

Accreditors are accountable to the institutions and programs they accredit. They are accountable to the public and government who have invested heavily in higher education and expect quality. Accreditors also undertake an organizational self-assessment on a routine basis and are required to have internal complaint procedures.

Accreditors undergo a periodic external review of their organizations known as “recognition.” Recognition is carried out either by another private organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, a national coordinating body for national, regional and specialized accreditation), or the United States Department of Education (USDE). Although accreditation is strictly a non-governmental activity, recognition is not.

As of 1998–99, nineteen (19) institutional accrediting organizations are or have been recognized by either CHEA or the USDE or both. These organizations accredit more than 6,500 institutions. Sixty-one (61) specialized accrediting organizations are or have been recognized and accredit more than 20,000 programs.

CHEA has five recognition standards by which it reviews accrediting organizations for recognition. The standards place primary emphasis on academic quality assurance and improvement for an institution or program. They require accreditors to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage purposeful change and needed improvement, employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision-making and continually reassess accreditation practices.

CHEA accreditors are normally reviewed on a ten-year cycle with a five-year interim report. The review is carried out by the CHEA Committee on Recognition, a group of institutional representatives, accreditors and public members who scrutinize accreditors for their eligibility for CHEA recognition and review accreditors based on an accreditor self-study. The review may also include a site visit. The Committee on Recognition makes recommendations to the CHEA governing board to affirm or deny recognition to an accreditor.

The USDE recognition standards place primary emphasis on whether an institution or program is of sufficient quality to qualify for federal funds for student financial aid and other federal programs. These standards require accreditors to maintain criteria or standards in specific areas: student achievement, curricula, faculty, facilities (includes equipment and supplies), fiscal and administrative capacity, student support services, recruiting and admissions practices, measures of the degree and objectives of degrees or credentials offered, record of student complaints and record of compliance with program responsibilities for student aid as required by the 1965 federal Higher Education Act (Title IV) as amended.

USDE recognition review normally takes place every five years. USDE staff conduct the review based on communication with the accreditor, a written report from the accreditor and, from time to time, a visit to the accreditor. USDE staff make recommendations to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), an appointed group of educators and public members, to recognize or not recognize an accrediting organization. The committee, in turn, recommends action to the U.S. Secretary of Education.

USDE and CHEA recognize many of the same accrediting organizations, but not all. Accreditors seek USDE or CHEA recognition for different reasons: USDE recognition is required for accreditors whose institutions or programs seek eligibility for federal student aid funds. CHEA recognition confers an academic legitimacy on accrediting organizations, helping to solidify the place of these organizations and their institutions and programs in the national higher education community.

See also: Department of Education

Further Reading

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (1999) *CHEA Almanac of External Quality Review 1999*, Washington, D.C.

United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. (1999, November). *Current List of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and State Agencies Recognized for the Approval of Public Postsecondary Vocational Education and Nurse Education and the Criteria for Recognition by the U.S. Secretary of Education*, Washington, D.C.

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