

COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

FACT SHEET #5

Accrediting Organizations in the United States: How Do They Operate to Assure Quality?

April 2006

Accreditation is the primary means by which the quality of higher education institutions and programs is assured in the United States. Accreditation is a form of self-regulation in which colleges, universities and programs have come together to develop standards, policies and procedures for self-examination and judgment by peers. In 2005, approximately 7,000 institutions and 18,000 programs held accredited status.

Accreditation is carried out through private, nonprofit organizations. Some review entire institutions (regional, faith-based and private career accreditors) and others review programs such as law, medicine or business (programmatic accreditors). These organizations undertake this responsibility in quite similar ways, each requiring a self-study by the institution or program under review, a review by peers (including a site visit in most cases) and a judgment about accredited status. These judgments are based on standards of quality developed by the accrediting organization in consultation with the higher education community.

Approximately 80 accrediting organizations in the United States are themselves reviewed for quality. They routinely undergo scrutiny (a process called "recognition") either by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or by the federal government through the United States Department of Education (USDE) or both. A complete list of CHEA- and USDE-recognized accrediting organizations may be found on the CHEA Website at www.chea.org under "Databases and Directories."

Accrediting organizations make information available to the public primarily through print documents and Websites. In addition to these documents and Websites, lists of accrediting organizations may be found on the CHEA Website, the USDE Website at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html> and the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) Website at www.aspa-usa.org.

The locations indicated above and the Websites of individual accrediting organizations provide answers to four important questions:

- What institutions and programs are accredited?
- What are the standards and policies used by these organizations to make judgments about the quality of an institution or program?
- What additional information about institutions, programs or accrediting organizations is available?
- How are accrediting organizations structured, financed, staffed and governed?

WHAT INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS ARE ACCREDITED?

Accrediting organizations routinely answer this question by:

- Maintaining an updated list of the institutions and programs that are accredited;
- Describing the length of time of an accreditation of an institution or program;
- Providing information about whether an accredited institution or program is under any sanctions and a description of these sanctions;
- Maintaining a summary of recent actions taken by accrediting organizations, usually provided after meetings of decision-making bodies; and
- For some organizations, offering aggregate data or profiles of the institutions or programs that are accredited.

WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS AND POLICIES USED BY THESE ORGANIZATIONS TO MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT QUALITY?

The requirements for accreditation may be found in the standards and policies of accrediting organizations.

Standards

- While each accrediting organization establishes its own standards by which institutions and programs are accredited, these standards all address similar areas, such as expected student achievement, curriculum, faculty, services and academic support for students and financial capacity.

- Standards are developed or changed through a process of public consultation involving, e.g., faculty, administrators, students, practitioners in specific fields, governing boards and members of the public. This process often involves an invitation to the public through, e.g., newspapers or general mailings.

Policies

- Each accrediting organization lays out a framework of expectations and practices that govern the conduct of accreditation review. These policies may include areas such as conflict of interest and release of information.
- Accrediting organizations also provide opportunities to express disagreement with or concern about their decisions or the actions of the institutions or programs they accredit. Examples include:
 - *Appeals*: Accrediting organizations have mechanisms by which an institution or program that is dissatisfied with a review may express its dissatisfaction and seek redress.
 - *Complaints*: Accrediting organizations describe the terms and conditions under which a complaint can be lodged against an institution or program that is accredited.
- Policies are developed or changed through a process of public consultation similar to that which is used for development or changes in accreditation standards.

WHAT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION DO ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS MAKE AVAILABLE?

- Under certain circumstances, and with permission from institutions or programs, self-study reports and team visit reports offering description and analysis of institutions and programs that are reviewed;
- Dates of upcoming accreditation visits;
- Members of an organization's accrediting decision-making body;
- Staff members of accrediting organizations;
- Finances of accrediting organizations;
- Peer evaluators: the volunteers who work with the accrediting organization and carry out accreditation review.

HOW DO ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS OPERATE?

- *Organization*. Accrediting organizations are private, nonprofit bodies legally incorporated to carry out accreditation activity or they are subsidiaries of other private, nonprofit organizations. Each accrediting organization has bylaws or a constitution that describes the legal framework for its operation.
- *Staffing*. Full- and part-time paid staff members are employed by the organization to carry out day-to-day activities, including coordination of accreditation reviews, meetings, conferences and publications.
- *Accreditation Review*.
 - *Self-study*. Institutions or programs seeking accreditation typically prepare a self-study—an examination of whether their operation meets the standards of the accrediting organization.
 - *Team Visit and Report*. Higher education faculty and administrators, practitioners in specific fields and members of the public make up “teams” that visit an institution or program to determine whether or not the standards of the accrediting organization are being met.
- *Accreditation Decision-Making and Governance*. Higher education faculty and administrators, practitioners in specific fields and members of the public are elected or appointed to an accreditation decision-making body. This body determines whether or not an institution receives accreditation. This body also functions as the governing entity for the organization under its bylaws or constitution.
- *Funding*. The accrediting organization receives its funding from annual dues of its members, support from sponsoring associations, fees paid by institutions or programs for an accreditation visit, conferences and meetings and, in some instances, grants from external sources.



The April 2006 *Accrediting Organizations in the United States: How Do They Operate to Assure Quality?* (Fact Sheet #5) updates and expands the May 2003 Fact Sheet #5.

A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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