

SHOULD MY INSTITUTION HIRE A CONSULTANT?

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Accrediting organizations do not require institutions and programs to hire consultants to assist with the completion of accreditation documents. The decision is purely an institutional or programmatic one determined by finances, existing in-house accreditation expertise, and other factors. While consultants can provide expertise and perspective institutions and programs lack, it is important for institutions and programs to establish a balanced partnership with them. Institutions and programs should rely on consultants for insight and guidance rather than depend on them as temporary employees who do most of the work. An educational organization that leverages a consultant appropriately can secure a partner in the accreditation process who can help produce quality accreditation documents, and engage in on-going assessment of institutional and program effectiveness and quality assurance.

BENEFITS

Consultants with a strong record of accreditation experience can be a beneficial resource when an organization lacks in-house expertise. A consultant may be essential if, for example, the stakeholders responsible for managing accreditation processes have no accreditation experience or have transitioned out of the institution. Some institutions experienced this challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic when seasoned accreditation professionals retired, and in-house talent had to be rebuilt.

Additionally, a consultant can be helpful if an institution is navigating accreditation sanctions, such as probation, that could ultimately impact its reputation and continued ability to operate. Usually, consultants have fewer emotional and historical attachments to the institution, which can be advantageous if an accrediting organization cites programs or processes as non-compliant, and the stakeholders who created them are reluctant to make changes. In these situations, an experienced consultant can realign the institution or program with accreditation standards while honoring the organizational mission. If kept on retainer, the consultant can help the institution see beyond the present accreditation deadline toward future steps the institution can take to foster a culture of institutional and program effectiveness that is focused on improving the quality of the educational experience and future accreditation documents.

If an institution or program does not anticipate issues of non-compliance, it can partner with a consultant to review accreditation reports or conduct a mock on-site evaluation after the accreditation reports have been completed in-house. This arrangement allows the educational organization to assume responsibility for its accreditation reports and engage appropriate stakeholders in the accreditation process to encourage professional development and commitment in the organization. Then, the educational organization utilizes the consultant as a reviewer who helps refine accreditation documents and suggests areas for continued quality improvement.

DRAWBACKS

When considering a consultant, it is important to determine the financial commitment. The cost of hiring a consultant depends on the type and quantity of work, the longevity of the contract, and other factors. Institutions and programs can spend thousands of dollars on a consultant, which is a significant investment if finances are limited. Before outsourcing accreditation work, an institution should consider its in-house talent so that it does not pay for services its employees, who are already invested in the institution or program and understand institutional culture and processes, can provide.

Institutions that use consultants to outsource accreditation work (as opposed to partnering with the consultant) may suffer consequences down the road because the institution relinquishes some control over its accreditation review. Outsourcing accreditation work could communicate to institutional and programmatic stakeholders that accreditation is not a priority, and consequentially, lead to a decrease in stakeholder investment in accreditation work. If the consultant has accreditation experience but has not worked with the accrediting organization in question, the consultant may not have enough knowledge of specialized standards to guide an institution or program successfully through accreditation processes. If the consultant communicates with the accrediting organization rather than the institution or program, information could be lost in translation. The consultant may misinterpret standards or provide poor feedback based on an incorrect understanding of the accrediting organization's recommendations, increasing the risk of non-compliance.

Overall, outsourcing accreditation work can decrease the institutional and programmatic knowledge and skills of stakeholders responsible for accreditation work if they have limited engagement with the consultant. This arrangement can lead to poor long-term outcomes for institutions and programs that rely on consultants to “make it through” accreditation review cycles. Once the right boxes are checked and accreditation outcomes are positive, the institutional or programmatic culture returns to the way it was before the accreditation review began, demonstrating a poor commitment to continuous improvement and creating a never-ending cycle of reliance on outside expertise instead of developing faculty and staff.

ALTERNATIVES

Institutions and programs that conclude a consultant is not the best path, have alternatives. Institutions and programs should not ignore their accrediting organizations. There is a common myth that asking an accrediting organization for help alerts it that an institution or program should be placed on unofficial watch for future scrutiny. In reality, accrediting organizations welcome questions from institutions and programs, which pay for their expertise. Additionally, some institutions and programs collaborate with their peers to review accreditation reports. Many peers are accreditation reviewers already—institutions may find a future consultant among them.

When considering a consultant, it is important for institutions and programs to evaluate their in-house accreditation expertise first. If the organizations identify significant gaps in their stakeholders' qualifications or are concerned they will be unable to address potential areas of non-compliance, they should work with a consultant. Still, the institution must ensure accreditation reports accurately represent the organization, and that institutional and programmatic stakeholders are involved in the process. In this way, the institution or program assumes primary responsibility for the accreditation documents produced, can include its employees for professional development purposes, and ensure that institutional and programmatic quality and effectiveness are primary components of accreditation review processes.

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