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### ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES: HOW THEY OPERATE TO ASSURE QUALITY

Accreditation, the primary process ensuring the quality of higher education institutions and programs in the United States, is a form of peer assessment. It's a process where colleges, universities, and programs, including you, come together to develop standards, policies, and procedures for self-examination and peer judgment. In 2024, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) oversees 64 U.S. institutional and programmatic accreditors, more than 1800 U.S. higher education institutional members, and more than 10,000 accredited programs.

Accreditation across the United States is conducted through private, nonprofit organizations. Some accrediting organizations review entire institutions, while others, such as programmatic accreditors, review programs in specific professional fields (e.g., law, medicine, or business). These organizations undertake this accreditation responsibility in similar ways, each requiring a self-study by the institution or program under review, a review, and a judgment by a peer review team about accreditation status – in most cases, this includes a site visit – 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 89 accrediting organizations in the United States are subject to regular review for quality. They routinely undergo scrutiny—a process called recognition—either by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the federal government through the United States Department of Education (USDE), or both. This recognition process ensures that these organizations continue to meet the standards of quality set by the higher education community.

A complete list of CHEA- and USDE-recognized accrediting organizations can be found on the CHEA website at [CHEA- and USDE-Recognized Accrediting Organizations](#).

Accrediting organizations ensure transparency by making 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 under [CHEA-Recognized Accreditation Organizations](#), the [USDE website](#), and the [Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors website](#). 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?

Policies are developed or changed through a public consultation process, similar to those used to develop or change accreditation standards.

### **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 term length of accreditation of an institution or program;
- Providing information about if an accredited institution or program is under any sanctions and a description of the sanction(s);
- 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 accredited institutions or programs.

### **What are the Standards and Policies These Organizations Use 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 for accrediting institutions and programs, these standards address similar areas, such as expected student achievement, curriculum, faculty, services, academic support for students and financial capacity.

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

#### **Policies**

Each accrediting organization lays out a framework of expectations and practices that govern the conduct of accreditation reviews. These policies may include areas such as conflict of interest and information release. 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, such as the [CHEA Arbitration Program](#), by which an institution or program dissatisfied with a review may express its dissatisfaction and seek arbitration.
- Complaints: Accrediting organizations describe the terms and conditions under which a complaint can be lodged against an accredited institution or program.

Policies are developed or changed through a public consultation process like that used to develop or change accreditation standards.

### **What Additional Information Do Accredited Organizations Make Available?**

Under certain circumstances and with permission from institutions or programs, self-study reports and team visit reports offer descriptions and analyses of the reviewed institutions and programs.

- 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 conduct accreditation reviews.

### **How Do Accrediting Organizations Operate?**

#### *Organization*

Accrediting organizations are private, nonprofit bodies legally incorporated to conduct accreditation activity or are subsidiaries of other private, nonprofit organizations. Each accrediting organization has bylaws or a constitution describing its operation's legal framework.

#### *Staffing*

The organizations employ paid staff to conduct day-to-day activities, including coordinating 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 accrediting organization's standards.
- 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 the accrediting organization's standards 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 if an institution receives accreditation and functions as the governing entity for the organization under its bylaws or constitution.
- **Funding.** The accrediting organization receives its funding from its members' annual dues, 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.

### **CHEA Mission:**

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation serves its members, students and society through advocacy for the value and independence of accreditation, recognition of accrediting organizations and commitment to quality in higher education.

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