



## **The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Public Member Survey**

In summer 2022, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), working with higher education consultant Kathryn Dodge, fielded a survey to determine how public members are chosen, trained, and utilized by institutional and programmatic higher education accrediting organizations in the United States. The objective of the survey was to advance understanding of the recruitment, orientation/onboarding, and value of public members in postsecondary education accreditation.

The CHEA *Standards and Procedures for Recognition* require that CHEA-recognized accreditors have public members on their accrediting commissions. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE), as a condition of recognition of an accreditor, requires that there be one public member for every seven members of their accrediting commission. In an effort to support the accreditation community, this project assesses current practice regarding public members of both CHEA- and USDE-recognized accrediting organizations.

The survey was sent to the accrediting organizations recognized by CHEA, USDE or both, which included the universe (20 institutional and 65 programmatic accrediting organizations). The results of the survey were confidential (both the identity of the accrediting organizations and their responses), to encourage participation. A total of 25 of the 85 accreditors responded (29%).

Of the 85 accrediting organizations surveyed, five out of 20 (25 percent) institutional accreditors responded to the survey; 20 out of 65 (29 percent) programmatic accreditors responded to the survey. Results were compiled and themes identified to reach general conclusions.

Following is a summary of findings from the survey responses. While this is not comprehensive, it provides an overarching sense of current practice regarding recruitment, orientation/onboarding, and the value of public members in postsecondary education accreditation within recognized accrediting organizations in the United States.

### **Findings of the Survey**

**Accrediting Commission Consistency - Size, Terms of Service and Compensation: Generally, commissions consist of 11-18 total members serving three-year renewable terms, and little to no compensation outside of expense reimbursement is provided.**

The size of accrediting commissions varies significantly, as did the number of public members serving on each respective commission. Institutional accreditors are generally larger than programmatic accreditors, ranging from 10 to 77 members. Programmatic accreditors report membership as small as 8 and as large as 32. The majority of accreditors responding to the survey had commissions with between 11 and 18 members. **The number of public members in these accrediting organizations ranged from none to 11 for the largest commissions.**

While the terms of the public members varied from a low of two years all the way to unlimited, the majority of institutional and programmatic accreditors have three-year terms for all including members.

**A majority of the accrediting organizations meet face-to-face from two to four times per year.** At least 25 percent of the accrediting organizations responding to the survey also conducted virtual meetings (in addition to commission meetings) by teleconference (e.g., Zoom).

Regarding compensation or reimbursement for participation as a public member on an accrediting commission, **responses varied from no compensation to reimbursement for travel expenses to an honorarium for service.**

#### **Recruitment of Public Members: “Word of Mouth”**

The ways that public members for accrediting organizations are recruited varied, but **institutional and programmatic accreditors alike responded that “word of mouth” is the main means of recruitment.**

Institutional accreditors responding to the survey cited:

- Connections (both institutional and personal) with organizations that typically provide public members
- Recommendations from someone who knows individuals personally
- Conference attendees
- Advertisements (to cast as wide a net as possible)
- State recruitment of public members for at least one regional accrediting organization

Programmatic accreditors responding to the survey cited:

- Personal referrals
- Recommendations from accredited programs (often coming from their advisory council members)
- Recommendations from colleagues at other programmatic accreditors
- Board member referrals
- Recommendations from associations in particular fields

(Advertisements and conference attendees were seen by programmatic accreditors as having little value.)

#### **Attributes of Public Members: Outsiders with personal integrity who understand the purposes of accreditation**

**Public members are reported to bring balance to accrediting commissions by providing outside perspective and expertise. This value is realized by public members with a personal capacity to contribute in unfamiliar environments.** The strength of not being immersed in a field that is considered brings diversity of perspective and talent to accrediting organizations. It is deemed essential.

Institutional accrediting organizations cited a range of attributes that public members might bring to accrediting commissions:

- Personal characteristics, including integrity, common sense, fairness, and congeniality
- Experience in valuable areas, such as law, accounting, and corporate leadership

- An understanding of the needs of both higher education and the public
- An ability to evaluate and analyze
- A working knowledge of accreditation
- A commitment to quality improvement in postsecondary education

Programmatic accreditors also cited a range of attributes for public members, including:

- Knowledge of accreditation
- Knowledge of regulatory processes
- General interest in programmatic accreditor's field
- Personal attributes, including willingness to speak up, offering outside opinions, pragmatism and leadership, honesty, and strategic focus

A number of other attributes for public members of institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations were named. While no one individual would possess all these attributes, having several public members ensures a diversity of attributes, talents, and styles to enrich the work of accrediting commissions.

**The Value of Public Members: Protecting the public interest through integrity of process, impartiality and fidelity to standards.**

**Public members are viewed as central to the work of institutional and programmatic accrediting commissions.** They vote and, for the most part, carry out the same responsibilities as other commissioners. Outside perspectives, additional expertise, the capacity to assure alignment of strategy with mission, and enabling accreditation to be “in the public eye,” make public members essential to the accreditation process.

Core responsibilities of public members are similar for institutional and programmatic accreditors. They include:

- Attending meetings
- Reviewing materials submitted by programs seeking initial or renewed accreditation (Note: some programmatic accreditors stated their public members do not review files but participate in voting, after commission discussion)
- Engaging in the orientation and training for new accrediting commission members
- Participating in committee work as needed

A number of programmatic accreditors cited the value of public members serving as consumer advocates and protecting the public interest, while institutional accreditors were more likely to cite impartiality and fidelity to standards.

**Contributions of Public Members: Perspective.**

**Public member contributions to accrediting organizations are varied, though all contributions cited advanced the quality of the work of institutional and programmatic accrediting commissions.**

Institutional accrediting organizations noted that their public members:

- Serve as advocates for students

- Ensure better alignment of the organization's mission and strategic plan
- Bring fresh perspectives on mission
- Bring expertise to the accrediting commission in areas ranging from financial acumen to editing and information technology

Programmatic accrediting organizations noted that their public members:

- Become an integral part of the team, through training and immersion in the subject area
- Bring a different perspective on higher education and program offerings
- Help monitor the consistency of accreditation decisions
- Offer expertise in areas such as data analysis
- May be helpful in recruiting their replacements

**Orientation and Onboarding of Public Members: An essential process that requires commitment.**

**Institutional and programmatic accreditors alike noted that, given the complexity of accreditation, training to build understanding of context, processes and relationships is essential for public members' contributions to be realized.**

Institutional accrediting organizations cited the importance of public member understanding:

- Standards and procedures used for accreditation review and decision-making
- Accreditation decision-making requires good judgment, is more an art than a science
- Experienced board members mentor public members during the orientation and onboarding process
- Cohesive boards are built on mutual respect and collegiality
- Programmatic accrediting organizations cited the importance of public member understanding: Accreditors' mission, ongoing projects, and technical information about the communication process before commission meetings
- Standards and procedures used for accreditation review and decision-making
- Importance of relationships with experienced commission member
- Complexity of the onboarding process

It was noted by many that it takes a couple of years for public members to be completely versed in the operations and relationships between staff, volunteers, and programs of the accrediting organization

**Summary and Conclusions**

As noted, the above is not a comprehensive report of the findings from the survey of institutional and programmatic accreditors regarding public members on their accrediting commissions. Nor did every institutional or programmatic accreditor recognized by CHEA, USDE, or both, respond to the survey. However, based on the responses received, the following is a summary of findings:

- Public members are central to the work of institutional and programmatic accreditation.
- A majority of recognized accrediting organizations have public members on their accrediting commissions.
- The main means of recruitment is "word of mouth."

- Training to build understanding of context, processes, and relationships, is essential for contributions public members to be realized.
- Public members bring balance, an outside perspective, and subject matter expertise, as well as personal characteristics that enable them to contribute in unfamiliar environments.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings above, among them:

- Recruitment is an ongoing process, involving a wide range of institutional and organizational contacts, to provide a steady stream of new public members via “word of mouth” notification.
- Given the complexity of accreditation and the need for public members to understand accreditors’ standards and procedures, a sufficient orientation and onboarding process is, by necessity, in-depth and likely time-consuming. Institutional and programmatic accreditors alike are challenged to educate new public members and incorporate them into accreditation decision-making.
- Public members contribute perspective, represent public interests bring impartiality, good judgement, and fidelity to application of standards and benefit accreditation commissions from an organizational perspective.
- Recruiting public members is a significant challenge, and accreditors spend much time meeting the federal requirement for public members on their accrediting commissions.
- With the majority of institutional and programmatic accreditors reported that the length of term for public and other commission members is three years, clearly new public members are needed on a regular basis, potentially posing a challenge for some accrediting organizations.

Public members are a vital part of a well-functioning accreditation commission. For institutional and programmatic accreditors alike, the ability to recruit, orient, and onboard public members is a challenge that likely will only grow in importance and complexity in the years ahead. We are hopeful this project advances understanding and is found useful for the accreditation community.