

# Inside Accreditation

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**CHEA** Council for  
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## ACCREDITATION AND THE FUTURE OF QUALITY

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How do we maintain quality in higher education in the middle of a pandemic?

We have had an initial, robust answer to this question during the past several months –

in spite of ongoing worries about student safety and institutional financial survival accompanied by ongoing uncertainty that makes realistic planning all but impossible. Thousands of colleges and universities made an enormous and admirable shift to remote learning this spring. And, our primary means of assuring and improving quality, the more than 80 recognized accrediting organizations throughout the country, were there to assist, support and provide leadership in this effort.

But, what about the future? The only thing certain right now about Fall 2020 is uncertainty – about enrollment, about types of instruction, about finances, about student safety. We don't know whether "college" will mean all-remote instruction, a return to campus instruction or some combination of the two. We don't know what grading systems will be used, what academic calendar may be used and what faculty will be available to teach. Yet, in all of this, quality has to be a central concern.

During April 2020, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) held two webinars with CHEA- and U.S. Department of Education (USDE)-recognized institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

And, in mid-April, CHEA conducted a [survey](#) of recognized accrediting organizations. Our focus was the future of quality and the role of accreditation.

Here are five takeaways from our webinar discussions and the survey about the role of accreditation in assuring quality as we move into Fall 2020. The takeaways are encouraging, not only for all of us in higher education, but for students and the public as well.

### THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE ENGAGEMENT

Accrediting organizations shared that they are engaged with all aspects of the operation of institutions and programs – including academic programming, student support, finance, governance and planning. They are asked to respond to all issues, questions and concerns raised by their members. Accreditors are being flexible in applying their standards and policies, with those organizations that are federally recognized working within the guidelines from USDE. This flexibility is being applied to major changes, from institution-wide moves to distance learning to scheduling for upcoming accreditation reviews to handling clinical and laboratory requirements. At the same time, institutions and programs are being held to standards – the essential means to assure quality. Focusing on all dimensions of institutional operation while being flexible yet maintaining standards this describes the commitment to comprehensiveness displayed by so many accrediting organizations.

## THE CENTRALITY OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

As one of the accreditors said during a CHEA webinar, “...primary emphasis on evidence of student competency and learning – this is how we are protecting quality yet are flexible.” All accreditors have expectations of student achievement and institutional performance. These are shaping the framework for sustaining quality within which they are working. Institutions and programs make their own decisions about, e.g., the academic calendar, the extent of remote learning or whether to use letter grades or pass/fail or no grades at all. The accreditors are there to support these decisions and assure that these decisions align with accreditation standards. They are there to suggest effective assessment tools and share effective practices in support of student learning outcomes.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS

Throughout the CHEA webinars and in the survey, we heard that accrediting organizations are more focused than ever on supporting and assisting institutions and programs. This went well beyond academic considerations such as teaching and learning. Organizations are constantly in touch with institutions and programs through, e.g., surveys, virtual meetings and chat rooms. Topics include what needs to be done for student safety, for sustaining equity and diversity, for assuring educational mobility through continued emphasis on transfer of credit and not abandoning these institution-to-institution pathways even in these difficult times. We heard about focus on the mental health of students, concern about students’ finances and needed assistance to faculty.

## THE COMMITMENT TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND MISSION

Throughout the webinar discussions and in the survey, accreditors, directly and indirectly, affirmed the importance of the independence of their institutions and programs and respect for mission. Accreditors were clear that a number of academic decisions rested with colleges and universities and not accrediting organizations. They stressed that the flexibility in practice that had been implemented was based on the importance of mission and independent academic leadership coming from institutions and programs – even in the midst of a pandemic.

## READINESS FOR THE FUTURE

We kept asking the accreditors about what has taken place this spring and how expectations from students and the public might change for the fall. Will students expect more from distance learning platforms, more from faculty engagement, more from counseling and advising? If so, can institutions and programs provide this? How will the accreditors be able to judge? The accreditors were clear that the changes that they had made and will continue to make mean, to them, that they are prepared moving forward – prepared to assure quality in the future.

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A recent [article](#) in *University World News* talks about the agile university and the many challenges facing higher education worldwide. And, after describing a number of these challenges, the article addresses quality: “The quality of the education matters most.” This is a wonderful mantra for U.S. accreditation and all of higher education as we focus on the future.

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