

Accreditation video for prospective students - "Specialized & Professional Accreditation: What Should I Know?" - Go to: <http://youtu.be/2zBdyBNwwmo>

*A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation: Standards, Outcomes, and Quality**

What is a standard?

Accreditation standards are statements that define and set expectations about fundamental essentials for educational quality. Institutional accreditation standards are written in terms of the institution as a whole; specialized accreditation standards are written in terms of specific programs in different disciplines and professions. Accreditation standards:

- Provide a framework for more detailed work at institutional, programmatic, and individual levels;

- Address educational issues *and* operational issues associated with developing educational results and with maintaining necessary academic protocols such as overall consistency in the meaning of academic degrees and credentials;

- Reflect the consensus of experts in the field and discipline and in higher education as the basis for accreditation decisions.

What are outcomes?

Outcomes are results. They may be expressed in terms such as:

- Educational achievement: development of student knowledge and skill in academic and/or professional or occupational content.

- Metric indicators: enrollment levels, graduation rates, loan repayment rates, etc.

- Procedural compliance: schedules, course sequences, rules, deadlines, etc.

- Reporting formats: charts, matrices, polls, analyses, interpretations, etc.

These four kinds of results - educational achievement, metric indicators, procedural compliance, and reporting formats - are not the same things. Although they can be related, one is not a substitute for any of the others. Knowledge of specific content is an essential part of making reliable judgments about educational results. Accreditation reviews include all four elements, but focus in-depth on student learning and achievement. Specialized accreditors focus intensively on the academic content of specific disciplines and professions based upon the standards.

What is quality?

Educational quality is linked to content in terms of individual knowledge, skills, and achievement. The educational quality of institutions or programs is judged in terms of the past, current, and projected capabilities to demonstrate that its results support the educational development of its students.

Accreditation means that institutional or program quality has been judged to be at an acceptable or higher level by expert professionals in a specific field of content with experience in higher education. These experts judge the extent to which:

Published accreditation standards are being met (and can continue to be met) by the institution or program;

Elements such as curriculum, evaluation methods, faculty, resources, and admission requirements are suited to overall mission and level of program offerings and objectives;

Students enrolling, if capable and diligent in their studies, can be expected to fulfill the knowledge and skills requirements for completion of their programs;

Tests, juries, and other evaluation mechanisms are in place to support learning and ensure that graduation or completion requirements are met.

How are standards, outcomes, and quality related?

Accreditation standards are statements that define and set expectations about fundamental essentials for educational quality. Outcomes or results can provide evidence that the standards have been met. Quality is the level of results.

In specialized accreditation, standards, outcomes, and quality are defined and evaluated differently depending on the unique nature, content, evaluations and methods of different disciplines and professions. For example, engineering and the arts are different, even though they are connected and influence each other. Whatever the discipline, public protection is a baseline, and the development of capable new professionals is a fundamental goal.

Standards do not mean standardization; they allow for flexibility and diversity as long as the standards are met. In this way, aspirational quality, creativity, and diversity are encouraged to flourish. The historic result has been continuous growth in the overall quality of professional education from which the public benefits.

The term “fundamental essentials” or “threshold standards” does not mean “low standards”; it means absolute requirements. Expectations stated in standards are consistent with the level, nature, and complexity of task. The absolute requirements to pass elementary school life science, high school biology, college organic chemistry, or to graduate from medical school, or to obtain board approval as a neurosurgeon are all threshold standards, but they are different. So are the thresholds for qualification as a neurosurgeon or eligibility for a Ph.D. or a national or international prize in chemistry.

All standards and laws that are actually applied to people and situations state threshold expectations. If they do not, they are not requirements or standards, but aspirations or recommendations.

The higher the level of education in a field, the higher the level of professional knowledge and skill required to make valid evaluations of educational quality and student achievement.

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A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation: Basic Elements of Accreditation Explained*

There are many entities involved with ensuring that the higher education system in the United States remains the best in the world. States and the federal government both play important roles – in coordination of higher education opportunities in the states and in assuring that state and federal funding for higher education is used appropriately – but the focus and expertise of accreditors is on the quality of institutions and programs. In conducting accreditation reviews, although accreditors may use different terms to explain what they do, there are steps in the process that are common to all. At the campus level, accreditation is a cyclical process. Each review takes many months. Accreditation ensures that institutions and programs are always involved in improvement of educational quality.

1 – **Evaluation request:** the institution or program makes a request to be evaluated by the applicable accrediting agency. Although for most disciplines or professions, there may be only one accreditor, in some areas there is more than one accrediting body.

2 – **Internal Review:** The institution or program formally assesses its current effectiveness including its strengths, as well as areas for potential improvement. This assessment is based on the accrediting agency's standards or criteria and the institution's or program's own specific goals that fulfill or extend compliance with agency standards. The document provided by the program or institution is often called a “self-study” or “self-evaluation.”

3 – **External Review:** The accreditation agency recruits peer reviewers to analyze the self-study document and to conduct an on-site evaluation to validate issues raised in the self-study. In specialized accreditation, these peer reviewers are senior academics and practitioners in the discipline. Institutional and specialized accreditation reviewers are highly qualified for their review assignments and are intensively trained in the agency's standards and to validate both the content of and the issues raised in the self-study.

4 – **Public Comment:** Accreditation agencies receive input from the general public during accreditation activities through a variety of means, which may include third party comments, public interest panels, and/or having public members serve on review teams or on the decision-making body. Agencies also consider public comments and formal complaints about institutions or programs as part of the evaluation process.

5 – **Report:** The evaluation team and the accreditation agency present the findings of the review, which included review of the institution's self-evaluation and the on-site visit. The findings are presented in a thorough written report. As with other aspects of the

accreditation process, the written report is sent to the institution for comment and possible action prior to the final agency review.

6 – **Agency Review and Accreditation Decision**: The accreditation agency's decision-making body (e.g., Council, Commission, or Board of Directors) reviews the self study, the evaluation team's report about the institution or program, along with comments from the institution or program in response to that report to make a decision about the accreditation status of the institution or program. Decisions about accredited status include any conditions, recommendations or required reporting to which the institution or program must adhere in order to maintain accreditation status. Due process is provided to programs following the agencies procedures. As such, the results of the review are presented to the program and/or institution in writing. This letter contains the official accreditation action and at times, a separate clearly-marked section providing recommendations for improvement that are not standards compliance issues and thus may be separate from the accreditation action.

7 – **Implementation**: In cases where non-compliance with standards is found or questioned, the program and/or institution is required to demonstrate compliance within a specified time period, normally not to exceed one year. In that case, the institution/program is notified that its accredited status is in jeopardy. For example, probationary status is made public. The accrediting agency may also request reports on work in progress that has a relationship with continuing standards compliance as programs develop and grow.

8 – **Ongoing Review**: The accrediting agency reviews reports from the institution or program on a regular basis throughout the term of accreditation to ensure that the institution and its programs maintain compliance with standards and continue to improve. Reports may include annual data, substantive change notices, and interim or progress reporting. The agency reviews these reports and takes corrective action, when necessary. Complaints to the accrediting body are reviewed as part of the continuous review of the program quality.

9 – **Fair Process**: All aspects of accreditation are guided by published procedures. These procedures include systems of checks and balances, requirements for documentation of standards compliance, means for institutional response to evaluation results at various stages, and policies indicating that accreditation is based on the standards only. The goal is a "rule of law" environment for peer review that promotes accuracy, fairness and integrity for all involved.

10 – **Attention to the Public Interest**: Accreditation addresses the public's interest in being assured that institutions and programs meet professionally determined standards of academic and operational integrity and quality. Accreditation reviews address specific issues, such as the accuracy of published statements, current and projected financial viability, procedural effectiveness and fairness, and health and safety. Whenever fraudulent practices are discovered, procedures are instituted to require prompt correction. And, under provisions of the Higher Education Act, the Secretary of Education is informed immediately. An institution's or program's failure to make corrections in a timely fashion leads to revocation of accreditation.

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*A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation: Peer Review**

Peer Review is a major ingredient in the incredible advance of the United States in all fields of endeavor over the past two centuries. Using peers who are experts in a field of inquiry to serve as reviewers is a tradition in academic culture. Scientific journals use peer reviewers to determine the importance and substance of articles for publication; grant agencies use peer reviewers to decide what research to fund; faculty members are promoted using peer review; and institutions review their programs using expert peers in that discipline. Applications of peer review are successful because of the expertise, commitment, and integrity of professionals interested in serving students and the public through the work of their field.

Peer review is not unique to the academic world. Peer review is also found in the concept of ethics committees and other self-governing mechanisms in the private and governmental sectors. For example, no one wants to fly in an airplane that has not been checked by expert mechanics and pilots, and no one would willingly undergo surgery from a physician whose skills had not been certified by a board of expert practitioners. When the future and livelihood of our children and family members are at stake, shouldn't we make sure that the quality of their education has also been checked by experts?

Peer review ensures that whether it's the airline industry or medical practice, that experience and expertise are used to make judgments about safety and quality. In education, peer review by experts occurs in many ways; one of the most effective is through the process called "accreditation." Peer review teams in accreditation are made up of experts in higher education and in specific subject areas, practitioners, and others who must follow well-defined and published standards, policies and procedures of the accrediting organization.

How does peer review in accreditation work to ensure fairness and objectivity?

The peer review process in accreditation contains interlocking systems of checks and balances and with clear separation of responsibilities and powers. These include policies and procedures that promote objectivity in applying standards to institutions and programs. The procedures work against conflicts of interest among individuals involved in the accreditation process and those at the institutions and programs under review. Additionally, members of the public with no affiliation to the institution or program, or professional expertise in the discipline or profession participate in groups that approve standards and policies and that make accreditation decisions.

- ▶ Formal written policies and procedures are developed and used to assure objectivity and to avoid any conflicts of interest or bias among peer reviewers, decision makers, staff, and academic institutions and programs.

- ▶ The standards-setting process also contains checks and balances systems. Accreditation standards are developed in collaboration with many groups that not only include educators, practitioners of specific disciplines and members of the public, but may also include students, employers, state regulators, and others.
- ▶ Quid pro quos are specifically prohibited in published rules guiding the work of accrediting organizations. Peers, staff and public members of boards and accrediting commissions are covered by these rules. The policies are enforced mutually and compliance is monitored by the institutions, and by commissions and boards. The nature of the review process in terms of checks and balances virtually eliminates any opportunity for collusion. Staff has a special opportunity to ensure that rules are kept.
- ▶ Accreditation peer reviewers are thoroughly educated and trained in the accrediting organization's standards and procedures. Briefings and advanced training are expected, especially for those visiting institutions.
- ▶ Peer reviewers are generally volunteers who are normally not paid anything for their work, and if they are, the payment is small, far below usual academic consulting fees. Reviewers spend significant personal time to read and evaluate extensive documentation, visit institutions, and cooperate with other peer visitors to produce a report. They volunteer to fulfill professional responsibility to higher education in general or to the development of expertise in their specific field.
- ▶ Most specialized accreditation peer reviewers undergo extensive training in the processes and procedures of accreditation in their specific discipline.

Peer review is essential to producing evaluations that are trusted by experts in the same field. The more advanced the level of work in any field, the more this is true. There are many different disciplines and professions. Without its basis in peer review, accreditation would have no credibility in the academy or the professions. In this regard, expert knowledge, skill, and judgment matters.

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A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation:

*The Two Basic Types of Educational Accreditation – A Comparison of Institutional and Programmatic/Specialized Accreditation **

	Institutional Accreditation	Programmatic Accreditation
<i>Type of accrediting body</i>	<p>Regional accreditors</p> <p>National accreditors</p> <p>(Some) specialized accreditors, typically free-standing institutions (e.g. Nursing, Rabbinical)</p>	<p>Specialized accreditors</p>
<i>Unit of analysis</i>	<p>Institution as a whole. The review provides an analysis of how the parts of the institution contribute to the achievement of the institution's objectives. The review addresses academic and organizational structures, systems, and expectations on an institution-wide basis.</p>	<p>Specialized or programmatic accreditation generally applies disciplinary and professional standards to a unit smaller than the whole institution, such as programs, departments, or schools that are subsets of an institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university or as small as a program within a specific discipline or professional field. Thus, this includes accreditation of programs required for professional licensure (e.g., dentistry, physical therapy) as well as specialized focused studies (e.g., music, art)</p> <p>Many specialized or programmatic units are within an institution of higher education that is accredited by a regional or national institutional accrediting commission. But some specialized accreditors may also accredit free-standing single-purpose professional schools or institutions.</p>

<i>Primary focus is on:</i>	Broad overview indicators of quality that can be used across multiple disciplines and degree levels. These include such issues as the overall capacity of institution; general educational quality and educational foundations; and general metrics that may include indices of graduation and attrition.	Depth of quality assurance – discipline-specific. Specialized accrediting bodies focus on measures of student learning or competence that are fundamental to the discipline. The manner used to assess and review student learning is consistent with the specific discipline. Specialized accrediting bodies may also include general performance indicators similar to those of institutional accreditors.
<i>Standards are:</i>	Institution-wide that have been developed in consultations with multiple constituencies	In-depth for a focused area of study that have been developed in consultation with experts in the specific field and with other constituencies
<i>Reviewers are:</i>	Primarily academics who represent the breadth of education at the levels provided by the institution and experts in institutional management	A mix of practitioners and academics who represent peers (i.e., those with expert knowledge) in the specialized area being reviewed
<i>Review ensures that:</i>	Key structural elements and financial sustainability of the institution support the mission and that required institutional policies and procedures are in place	The program(s) of study meet(s) content standards and has adequate, qualified faculty and other resources which enable the program to meet the discipline-specific accreditation standards in a way that is consistent with the mission of the larger institution. Defers to institutional accreditors for broader institutional concerns, as well as policies and procedures that extend beyond the specific program of study to impact the whole institution.
<i>Adverse actions:</i>	(Against the institution) Are tracked and monitored by the programmatic accrediting bodies that accredit programs within the institution.	(Against a program) Are reviewed as information by the institutional accrediting body that accredits the institution as a whole.

Recognition of Accrediting Bodies:

Institutional and specialized/programmatic accrediting bodies that provide links to federal funding are eligible for recognition by the USDE. Accrediting bodies seeking USDE recognition need to identify whether or not their accreditation is required for access to Title IV or other federal funds (a function commonly referred to as being a gatekeeper). Most institutional accrediting bodies are Title IV gatekeepers. Accrediting bodies that accredit at the institutional or programmatic level may serve as gatekeepers for other federal funds. Accrediting bodies not functioning in a gatekeeper role or that are not linked to funded federal programs are not eligible for USDE recognition.

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