
Role and Value of Accreditation

Accreditation is an activity long accepted in the United States, but generally unknown in most other countries because other countries rely on governmental supervision and control of educational institutions. The record of accomplishment and outstanding success in the education of Americans can be traced in large part to the reluctance of the United States to impose governmental restrictions on institutions of postsecondary education, and to the success of the voluntary American system of accreditation in promoting quality without inhibiting innovation. The high proportion of Americans benefiting from higher education, the reputation of universities in the United States for both fundamental and applied research, and the wide-spread availability of professional services in the United States all testify to postsecondary education of high quality, and to the success of the accreditation system which the institutions and professions of the United States have devised to promote that quality.

I

Accreditation is a status granted to an educational institution or a program that has been found to meet or exceed stated criteria of educational quality. In the United States accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and programs, and is conferred by non-governmental bodies.

Accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or program, and to assist in the improvement of the institution or program. Accreditation, which applies to institutions or programs, is to be distinguished from certification and licensure which apply to individuals.

The bodies conducting institutional accreditation are national or regional in scope, and comprise the institutions that have achieved and maintain accreditation. A specialized body conducting accreditation of a program preparing students for a profession or occupation is often closely associated with professional associations in the field.

Both institutional and specialized bodies conduct the accreditation process using a common pattern. The pattern requires integral self-study of the institution or program, followed by an on-site visit by an evaluation team, and a subsequent review and decision by a central governing group. Within this general pattern the various accrediting bodies have developed a variety of individual procedures adapted to their own circumstances. Increasingly, attention has been given to educational outcomes as a basis for evaluation.

II

An institutional accrediting body considers the characteristics of whole institutions. For this reason an institutional accrediting body gives attention not only to the educational offerings of the institutions it accredits, but also to other such institutional characteristics as the student personnel services, financial conditions, and administrative strength.

The criteria of an institutional accrediting body are broad, as is demanded by the attention to an entire institution and by the presence in the United States of postsecondary institutions of widely different purposes and scopes. Such criteria also provide encouragement to institutions to try innovative curricula and procedures, and to adopt them when they prove successful. The accreditation of an institution by an institutional accrediting body certifies to the general criteria that the institution:

- a. Has appropriate purposes;
- b. Has the resources needed to accomplish its purposes;
- c. Can demonstrate that it is accomplishing its purposes;
- d. Gives reason to believe that it will continue to accomplish its purposes.

Institutional improvement is encouraged by an institutional accrediting body through the requirement that the accredited institution conducts periodic self-evaluations seeking to identify what the institution does well, determining the areas in which improvement is needed, and developing plans to address needed improvements. While the certification of accreditation indicates an acceptable level of institutional quality, any institution, however excellent, is capable of improvement, which must come from its own clear identification and understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Institutional improvement is also encouraged by the institutional accrediting body through the advice and counsel provided by the visiting team, which comprises experienced educators drawn primarily from accredited institutions, and by the publications of the accrediting body.

III

A specialized accrediting body focuses its attention on a particular program within an institution of higher education. The close relationship of the specialized accrediting body with the professional association for the field helps insure that the requirements for accreditation are related to the current requirements for professional practice.

In a number of fields (e.g., medicine, law, dentistry) graduation from an accredited program in the field is a requirement for receiving a license to practice in the field. Thus specialized accreditation is recognized as providing a basic assurance of the scope and quality of professional or occupational preparation. This focus of specialized accreditation leads to accreditation requirements that are generally sharply directed to the nature of the program, including specific requirements for resources needed to provide a program satisfactory for professional preparation. Because of this limitation of focus to a single program, many specialized accrediting bodies require that the institution offering the program be institutionally accredited before consideration can be given to program accreditation.

Specialized accreditation encourages program improvement by application of specific accreditation requirements to measure characteristics of a program and by making judgments about the overall quality of the program. For a non-accredited program, the accreditation requirements serve as specific goals to be achieved. In addition to accrediting standards, assistance for program improvement is provided through the counsel of the accreditation visiting team members, which include practitioners of the profession and experienced and successful faculty members and administrators in other institutions.

IV

Institutional and specialized accreditation are complementary. The focus of an institutional accrediting body on an institution as a total operating unit provides assurance that the general characteristics of the institution have been examined and found to be satisfactory. The focus of a specialized accrediting body on a specific program provides assurance that the details of that particular program meet the external accreditation standards. Institutional accreditation, concerned with evaluating the institution as a whole, does not seek to deal with any particular program in great detail although programs are reviewed as a part of the consideration of the entire institution. Specialized accreditation, speaking to a specific program, does not seek to deal significantly with the general conditions of the institution, although certain general conditions are considered in the context in which the accredited program is offered. Occasionally there are institutions offering but a single program ("free-standing" schools), which may seek institutional and/or specialized accreditation. In such cases, the certification of the accreditation is that appropriate to either institutional or specialized accreditation, and does not imply both certifications, although a specialized body accrediting such an institution is expected to look at the whole institution, just as the institutional body is expected to consider the single educational program.

V

In fulfilling its two purposes, quality assurance and institutional and program improvement, accreditation provides service of value to several constituencies:

To the public, the values of accreditation include:

- a. An assurance of external evaluation of the institution or program, and a finding that there is conformity to general expectations in higher education or the professional field;
- b. An identification of institutions and programs which have voluntarily undertaken explicit activities directed at improving the quality of the institution and its professional programs, and are carrying them out successfully;

- c. An improvement in the professional services available to the public, as accredited programs modify their requirements to reflect changes in knowledge and practice generally accepted in the field;
- d. A decreased need for intervention by public agencies in the operations of educational institutions, since their institutions through accreditation are providing privately for the maintenance and enhancement of educational quality.

To students, accreditation provides:

- a. An assurance that the educational activities of an accredited institution or program have been found to be satisfactory, and therefore meet the needs of students;
- b. Assistance in the transfer of credits between institutions, or in the admission of students to advanced degrees through the general acceptance of credits among accredited institutions when the performance of the student has been satisfactory and the credits to be transferred are appropriate to the receiving institution;
- c. A prerequisite in many cases for entering a profession.

Institutions of higher education benefit from accreditation through:

- a. The stimulus provided for self-evaluation and self-directed institutional and program improvement;
- b. The strengthening of institutional and program self-evaluation by the review and counsel provided through the accrediting body;
- c. The application of criteria of accrediting bodies, generally accepted throughout higher education, which help guard against external encroachments harmful to institutional or program quality by providing benchmarks independent of forces that might impinge on individual institutions;
- d. The enhancing of the reputation of an accredited institution or program because of public regard for accreditation;
- e. The use of accreditation as one means by which an institution can gain eligibility for the participation of itself and its students in certain programs of governmental aid to postsecondary education; accreditation is also usually relied upon by private foundations as a highly desirable indicator of institutional and program quality.

Accreditation serves the professions by:

- a. Providing a means for the participation of practitioners in setting the requirements for preparation to enter the professions;
- b. Contributing to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, teachers and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice.

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