

Accreditation: What It Is . . . and Is Not

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The conceptual notion of accreditation is as specialized, complex, and diverse as is the field of hospitality management education. Before an argument can be made for or against accreditation within the professional field of hospitality management, a common understanding of accreditation must be achieved. The following article, the first of a two-part series, is intended to expand the reader's knowledge of the accreditation process. Part two will discuss its relationship to hospitality management education at the college or university level.

Accreditation is a voluntary process in which recognition is granted to educational programs which meet or exceed established standards of educational quality. Implicit within this definition is the multifarious framework within which accreditation should be interpreted. In addition to being a process by which formal evaluation occurs, accreditation is also a concept, one which is uniquely American. The conceptual notion of accreditation is that of voluntary, non-governmental self-regulation. The regulatory functions are conducted by organizations referred to as accrediting bodies, whose goals are to assist and encourage improvements in educational quality.

The third perspective of accreditation is that of a status, a status of affiliation granted to educational institutions and/or programs which have met or exceeded pre-established standards of quality. Recognition of status is generally achieved through a published list of accredited institutions or programs. This three-part definition of accreditation was first suggested by Kenneth E. Young, the first president of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). By viewing accreditation through each of its three parts, concept, process, and status, a more exacting definition is achieved.¹

Post-secondary accreditation is either institutional and/or specialized. Institutional accreditation is concerned with the evaluation of whole colleges or universities. Institutional accrediting bodies may be national, single-purpose institutions (the American Association of Bible Colleges) or regional (the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six). Almost all of the chartered or licensed educational institutions in the United States are served by either a national or regional institutional accrediting commission. Accreditation, at the institutional level, is granted only to total education units.

Specialized accreditation, also referred to as programmatic accreditation, is limited to a particular field, discipline, or specialization. These bodies are typically composed of professionals who, within their respective fields, have assumed the responsibility for self-regulation. The common feeling among the specialized accrediting bodies is that they are the most appropriate assemblage to regulate the educational preparation necessary to strengthen their respective professions.

The American Medical Association (AMA) is generally considered to be the first voluntary, non-profit educational agency to perform accrediting activities.² In 1906-7, they published their initial list of classified medical schools. This listing laid the foundation for the eventual closing of schools which were believed by the AMA to be providing inadequate training. The American Bar Association (ABA) followed suit a few years later with the establishment of standards in schools of law. In 1982, COPA recognized a total of 37 specialized accrediting agencies representing 53 different professional fields.³

Standards Are Set for Programs

Standards are the base upon which program and/or institutional evaluation occurs. Standards are developed, maintained, and periodically reviewed by the accrediting body. It is the standards which serve as the common frame of reference for all individuals involved in the accreditation process. The standards additionally serve as the required minimum level of quality for the educational institution and/or program seeking accreditation status. The term "standards" is used synonymously with "criteria" and "essentials" in accreditation literature.

A number of the specialized accrediting commissions supplement the actual standards with interpretations, the purpose of which is to explain, reinforce, detail, or translate the standards. Generally the interpretations are more specific and precise than the standards. Synonymous terms include "preambles" and "guidelines."

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) was founded in 1975 through a merger of the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education (FRACHE, formed in 1964) and the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA, formed in 1949). Just as the institutional and specialized accrediting bodies serve as a means of self-regulation for educational quality, COPA serves as a means of self-regulation for the accrediting bodies. COPA is a non-governmental organization, recognized by the educational community as the sole means by which an accrediting body can achieve formal, national recognition.⁴

COPA has numerous functions, foremost of which is the administration and review of the formal procedures required of groups expressing an interest in becoming recognized as accrediting bodies. COPA decided, as a first priority, to deal with the proliferation of specialized accrediting bodies. Written documentation must be submitted by accrediting bodies to COPA for verification at least once every five years. The recognition function is to assure the professional integrity of the individual accrediting bodies. COPA works with and counsels accrediting bodies to improve their practices in view of the established standards.

The evaluation of educational quality, with an emphasis on the assessment of educational outcomes, is a secondary function. COPA has been involved in the development and funding of numerous research studies in this area. Additionally, COPA serves as an information center for all concerns relative to accreditation. The cumulative effect of these and additional activities is that COPA serves to coordinate, improve, and maintain a balance of the entire spectrum of non-governmental post-secondary accreditation.

Process Begins with an Application

Accreditation is entirely voluntary. To initiate the process, an institution or program which wishes to be considered for accreditation requests an application from the appropriate accrediting body, along with standards and guidelines. Once the institution or program submits the application it is generally reviewed by the accrediting body to determine if the educational unit is ready to be considered for accreditation. If the accrediting body feels the institution/program is ready for consideration, self-study evaluation materials or questionnaires are sent.

The self-study can then be undertaken by the institution/program. The report provides basic information for the accrediting body as well as the future on-site visitation team. The report consists of various parts, typically coinciding with the established standards. Each report request differs to some degree depending upon the particular accrediting body. The majority of specialized accrediting bodies have prepared an accompanying guide to assist in the process of compiling the report. Documentation and attachments are required, but vary among the accrediting bodies. Self-study requirements may also vary depending upon whether the request is for initial accreditation or reaccreditation. At the request of the institution or program, the accrediting body is available for assistance at appropriate phases during the process.

Once the self-study report/questionnaire is received by the accrediting commission, a visit is scheduled by a team which represents the accrediting body in a fact-finding mission. Team composition varies, but does not consist of fewer than two persons and frequently will include representatives from both industry and education.

The length of the campus visit varies, but generally is completed in two days. Activities which the visitors may include are discussions with program directors, students, faculty, and administration; evaluation of libraries, laboratories, and classrooms; examination of relevant teaching materials and classroom assignments, papers, or special projects. Before leaving, the team (or a representative) will meet with the institution/program director. At this time an oral report of the findings is presented, in some cases allowing the program representatives an opportunity to identify inaccuracies.

Following the visit, the team chairperson prepares a comprehensive report on the team's findings. The institution/program is given the opportunity to comment on the written report, and oftentimes is allowed to submit supplemental materials pertaining to the conclusions drawn.

Accreditation action is taken based on the self-study report, visitation team findings, and comprehensive final report. The period for which accreditation is granted varies widely among accrediting bodies, as does the degree of accreditation status which may be granted. Each accrediting body provides grievance procedures which the institution/program may seek, as well as a policy concerning the revocation of accreditation. Fees for seeking the accreditation process vary widely.

Accreditation Has a Purpose

The essential clarification which must be made when discussing accreditation is the distinction between "purposes" and "uses." A knowledge of the purposes of accreditation is paramount to a discussion of its application in the educational setting. In lieu of the many possible uses to which accreditation might be put, the accrediting bodies actually serve very limited purposes.

The first purpose is that of identification. Through the self-study and visit, institutions or programs which meet or exceed a pre-determined level of educational quality are identified. Quality in education is elusive and subjective. The process of accreditation serves to further educational quality, not define it.⁵

While determination of educational quality is admittedly difficult, for the purpose of accreditation, quality is evaluated by one of two means. First is the philosophy that each program should be evaluated in relationship to its own stated mission, goals, and objectives. This philosophy is applied to all institutional, and some programmatic evaluations (the American Council on Education for Journalism and Mass Communication, ACEJMC). Craven refers to this as "institutional integrity," judging whether the institution or program is actually doing what it says it does.⁶

The majority of specialized accrediting bodies evaluate educational quality by a different philosophy. In these groups (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE) programs are evaluated as to the degree that they meet or exceed nationally-established standards.⁷ This is not to imply that programs evaluated in accordance with their own stated purpose do not have minimal standards which they too must meet or exceed. Many of the specialized accrediting bodies, for example, will only consider requests for accreditation from programs within accredited institutions.

A second purpose of accreditation is that of stimulation, or encouraging the improvement of educational standards at either an institution or within a specific program of study. Improvement of educational standards is sometimes viewed by specialized accrediting bodies as a means of bringing about the improvement of their respective professions.⁸

Self-study fosters programmatic self-improvement. On-going self-analysis is an essential part of self-regulation. Frequently the mere mechanics of proceeding through the self-study process generate self-improvement. The interactions necessary between and among administration, faculty, and students to complete the self-study frequently generate positive side effects.

Accreditation Means Evaluation

Inherent in the accreditation concept, process, and status is the function of evaluation. Accreditation is viewed by some as a process of evaluation, not regulation.⁹ This process includes both internal (self-study) and external (peer-based) evaluations upon which the accreditation status is either granted or denied. Stufflebeam, in defining evaluation, saw it as serving a theoretical paradigm for quality control as well as a conceptual framework for continuous self-improvement.¹⁰ If accreditation is to fulfill its purpose of self-improvement, it must be seen as the beginning of new activities, and not merely the summation of past events.

A third, somewhat less frequent purpose of accreditation is that of protection against both internal and external forces, political or other. Even though accrediting bodies have no legal means of control, the mere presence of the accreditation process has served to hinder those groups which, in the past, have sought to interfere with the educational process or academic freedom.

Standards Are the Heart of the Process

Accreditation represents "a struggle over standards" by the very nature of its process.¹¹ Standards are such an intrinsic element in the accrediting process that many activities, such as the self-study report, realize their very structure from them.

Although precise categories from which standards evolve may vary from one accrediting body to another, the standards typically contain statements on the administration, governance, and organization of the institution/program; financial resources; student admissions and retention; faculty qualifications, teaching loads and ratios; curriculum materials (content and balance); and facilities and equipment (may include the library or, in some cases, the library becomes a separate category). Development of the standards usually occurs by the formulation of proposed drafts which are subjected to national hearings, and then voted on by the sponsoring organization.¹²

The focus of accreditation standards has historically been process-oriented as opposed to oriented to products, results, or output. This has generated a great amount of concern within the accreditation literature that there is a lack of demonstrated relationship between educational quality and the standards employed to determine that quality.¹³ Just as the field of educational evaluation has made the transition from process to product orientation, so is the field of accreditation slowly making that transition. A number of specialized accrediting bodies, including the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, have recognized the need to improve the usefulness of their standards.

In addition to the efforts to direct emphasis away from the educational process there is a focus on development of standards which are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. As elusive a characteristic as quality is, accreditation does make a determination as to a program's commitment to and fulfillment of quality.¹⁴ The importance of the development of accreditation standards is self-evident. In 1978-79, COPA supported a study conducted by Peterson, which examined the

standards of all COPA-recognized accrediting bodies. She concluded that “with some exceptions, accrediting standards and guidelines are more qualitative than quantitative, more general than specific, more flexible than rigid, and more up-to-date than outdated.”¹⁵

Uses Are Broad and Varied

The uses of accreditation have been greatly expanded over the years. Seldon and Porter have identified four general categories: internal, external, professional, and social.¹⁶

Internal uses would include assessing and identifying programs which meet or exceed established standards, encouraging the self-improvement of both programs and faculty, and determining the acceptability of transfer credits. Possible external uses would include identifying institutions for prospective students, parents, and counselors, along with providing a means by which private institutions and organizations can determine allocation of funding. Insuring that educational programs which are preparing future practitioners are meeting specified requirements, and establishing certification standards are two examples of professional uses. Social uses of accreditation relate to the protective purpose of preventing internal or external forces to exert control over the educational institution/program.

Inherent within the uses is the recognition of the primary beneficiaries of accreditation. To the institutions seeking accreditation, one of the most important uses is that made by the government as a means of establishing eligibility for federal funds. Accredited institutions/programs are seeing an additional benefit, as several private foundations now require accreditation status as a prerequisite to obtaining grants. Many institutions/programs can attest to the importance which is placed on accredited status by several national publications and directories. Prospective students, their parents, and high school counselors frequently utilize these publications in their decision-making process. Educational institutions themselves become beneficiaries of the accreditation process, as they use directories to determine the status of other institutions/programs.

A number of professions are affiliated with state boards which license practitioners before they can exercise their skills and training. Frequently graduation from an accredited program is an essential requirement prior to licensure for such individuals as dentists, engineers, lawyers, and physicians. Protection of society underlies the importance of the accreditation process in such disciplines.

And finally, the consumer of the educational process — the student — benefits from accreditation. All too often in the past, student involvement in or awareness of accreditation was non-existent, or limited at best. In fact, much of the criticism aimed at accreditation stems from the apparent lack of emphasis on student needs or benefits. By involving students in the accreditation process and developing standards to measure educational quality which is relevant to outcomes, it is hoped that the future direction of accreditation will provide for a closer relationship with the student as a primary beneficiary.

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