



HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

by Kristen Koehler

Accreditation refers to an external review process used to analyze colleges, universities, and other educational programs for academic quality and accountability. For institutions and programs of higher education in the United States, accreditation is a voluntary process; however, it is also the primary method by which students, families, policymakers, and the public know that an institution or program offers a quality education. This *issue brief* discusses state and federal accreditation policies for higher education, the accreditation process, accrediting organizations, and the standards to be met to receive accreditation.

Why is Accreditation Important?

Although accreditation is not always mandated by state law, accreditation has several benefits and may be desirable for any higher education institution wishing to recruit students and remain competitive with other institutions or programs. In certain situations, an applicant for a state professional license in a specific field may be required to attend an accredited institution or program for the license to be issued. An institution's accreditation status may impact students who wish to transfer earned credit hours to another institution. An employer may ask if an institution or program is accredited before providing tuition assistance, or upon evaluating the qualifications of prospective employees. Furthermore, students who want to receive federal financial assistance must attend a college, university, or program that has been accredited. Similarly, for an institution or program to be eligible for federal grants and loans or other federal funds, it must be accredited.

Accreditation Under State and Federal Law

In Colorado, higher education institutions are regulated by the state and include: public state-supported institutions, private occupational schools (i.e., American School of Dental Assisting), private four-year institutions (i.e., Regis University), and private seminary colleges (i.e., Colorado Baptist College). Except for private four-year institutions, accreditation is not explicitly required by state statute. However, Title IV of the federal Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) requires that higher education institutions receiving federal student assistance funds or other forms of federal aid be accredited by an accrediting organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).

State law requires that private four-year institutions be accredited by an accrediting organization recognized by the USDE in order to operate in the state under the authorization of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE). In addition, the HEA requires that private four-year institutions be "authorized" by their state in order to receive federal student financial aid. To be authorized in Colorado, private four-year institutions must be accredited, or demonstrate due diligence toward obtaining accreditation.

There are two main types of higher education accreditation: institutional accreditation, and specialized or programmatic accreditation. Institutional accreditation applies to an entire institution and indicates that each component of the institution contributes to the achievement of the institution's overarching goals. Specialized or programmatic accreditation applies to specific programs, departments, or schools that are a part of an institution. Most institutions hold an institutional accreditation, in addition to specialized accreditation for specific programs or disciplines.

Specialized accreditation also applies to institutions of higher education that are vocational in nature, and to educational programs within a noneducational setting, such as a hospital.

Accrediting Organizations and Standards

Accrediting organizations use predetermined standards to evaluate institutions of higher education. In the United States, accreditors are private, nongovernmental organizations created specifically for the purpose of reviewing higher education institutions and programs for quality.

Standards of accreditation. Accrediting organizations establish quality standards in collaboration with the higher education community. The federal government requires that accrediting organizations evaluate institutions on specific criteria as well. Standards of accreditation focus on an institution's:

- role, mission, and governance;
- programs and academic policies;
- financial and physical resources and operations;
- effectiveness, recruitment, and student achievement; and
- library and information resources and student support services.

The accreditation process. The accreditation process requires a large amount of work by the higher education institution being accredited, and by the accrediting organization. The main features of the accreditation process include:

- *quality standards*, as established by the accrediting organization, in collaboration with educational institutions;
- *self-examination*, which requires institutions and programs to prepare a summary of the institution's performance based on the accrediting organization's standards;
- *peer review*, conducted by faculty, administrators, and members of the public;
- *site visit*, performed by personnel of the accrediting organization;
- *judgement of accrediting organization*, based on a review of the steps conducted by the accrediting agency's commission; and
- *continuous review*, occurring every few years, or in some cases, every ten years.

Who approves accreditors? The USDE and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) are the two authoritative bodies that recognize accrediting organizations. Accrediting organizations are reviewed for their qualifications and activities to determine if the organization meets the USDE or CHEA standards.

USDE recognition is based upon ten standards including the accrediting organization's administrative and fiscal responsibilities, the standards used by the organization to evaluate the quality of education offered by the institutions it accredits, and the voluntary basis of the higher education institutions being accredited by the organization.¹ The goal of the USDE recognition is to ensure that the standards of the accrediting agency meet the expectations for institutional and program participation in federal initiatives, including student financial aid. The CHEA recognition is governed by policies adopted by the CHEA's 17-member board of directors with the goals of advancing academic quality, increasing accountability, and encouraging improvement.

Organizations recognized by the USDE may be recognized for up to five years before undergoing full review again; however, annual report submissions are required. For organizations recognized by the CHEA, the maximum recognition period is ten years, with an interim review after five years.

Loss of Accreditation

If an institution of higher education violates the standards established by its accrediting agency, the institution may jeopardize its accredited status. In general, an accrediting agency will issue a warning to an institution and place the institution on probationary status, allowing a period of time for the institution to correct the violations. If an institution is unable to correct its violations, it will lose its accreditation standing. For certain institutions in Colorado, loss of accreditation means that the institution is no longer eligible to operate in the state. For other institutions where accreditation is voluntary, the loss of accredited status does not necessarily mean the institution ceases to operate; however, it will not be eligible to receive federal financial assistance and will forego the other inherent benefits of being an accredited institution.

¹ 34 CFR Part 602, Subpart B.