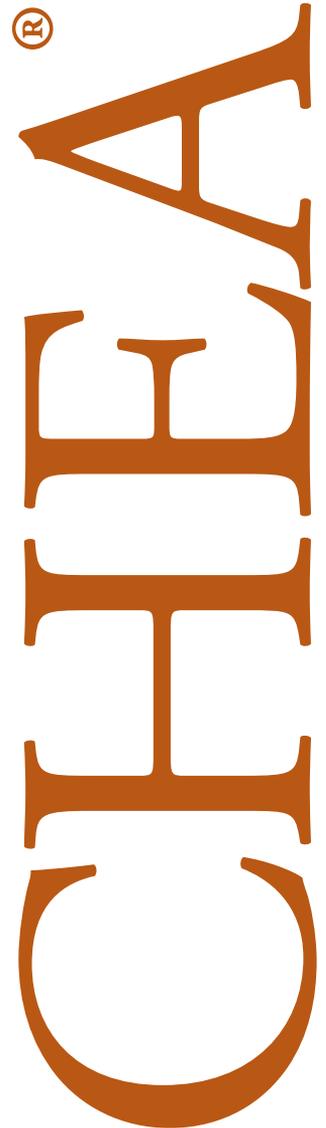


**Council for  
Higher Education  
Accreditation**

**An Overview of  
U.S. Accreditation**

*Judith S. Eaton*



*Revised November 2015*

## **The Council for Higher Education Accreditation Mission Statement**

*The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments, and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.*

*(1996)*

*The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 national, regional and specialized accreditors.*

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# An Overview of U.S. Accreditation

*Judith S. Eaton*

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Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. Accreditation in the United States is more than 100 years old, emerging from concerns to protect public health and safety and to serve the public interest.

In the United States, accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this specific purpose. External quality review of higher education is a nongovernmental enterprise. The U.S. accreditation structure is decentralized and complex, mirroring the decentralization and complexity of American higher education. The higher education enterprise is made up of degree-granting and non-degree-granting institutions. These may be public or private, two- or four-year, nonprofit or for-profit. For 2011-2012, degree-granting institutions spent US\$487 billion, employed approximately 3.8 million people, full- and part-time, and had a total enrollment of credit students estimated at more than 28 million.\*

**In the United States, accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this specific purpose.**

U.S. accreditors review colleges and universities in 50 states and 125 other countries. They review many thousands of programs in a range of professions and specialties, including law, medicine, business, nursing, social work, pharmacy, arts and journalism.

Both federal and state governments consider accreditation to be a reliable authority on academic quality. The federal government relies on accreditation to assure the quality of institutions and programs to which the government provides federal funds and for which the government provides federal aid to students. Most state governments will initially license institutions and programs without accreditation. However, states will subsequently require accreditation to make state funds available

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\*U.S. Department of Education (2013). *Digest of Education Statistics: 2013*.

to institutions and students. States often require that individuals who sit for state licensure in various professions have graduated from accredited institutions and programs.

## **TYPES OF U.S. ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS**

There are four types of accrediting organizations:

- **Regional accreditors.** Accredit public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions.
- **National faith-related accreditors.** Accredit religiously affiliated and doctrinally based institutions, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting.
- **National career-related accreditors.** Accredit mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and non-degree.
- **Programmatic accreditors.** Accredit specific programs, professions and freestanding schools, e.g., law, medicine, engineering and health professions.

## **HOW U.S. ACCREDITATION IS ORGANIZED**

**Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public.**

Eighty-five recognized institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations operated in the United States in 2012-2013.\* Accrediting organizations derive their legitimacy from the colleges, universities and programs that created accreditation, not government. In 2012-2013, accrediting organizations employed 832 paid full- and part-time staff and worked with 19,674 volunteers.\*\*

## **THE ROLES OF ACCREDITATION**

Accreditation carries out the following roles:

- **Assuring quality.** Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or program meets at least threshold standards for, e.g., its faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programs provide evidence of fiscal stability.

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\* 2013 CHEA Almanac of External Quality Review. The number of recognized accreditors varies depending on whether an existing accreditor maintains recognition or a new accreditor earns recognition. These variations have been modest, perhaps one or two per year.

\*\*2013 CHEA Almanac of External Quality Review.

- ***Access to federal and state funds.*** Accreditation is required for access to federal funds such as student aid and other federal programs. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution or program they are attending is accredited by a recognized accrediting organization. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the federal government distributed an estimated \$164 billion in financial aid to students attending accredited institutions (Baum, Elliott and Ma, 2014). State funds to institutions and students are contingent on accredited status.
- ***Engendering private sector confidence.*** Accreditation status of an institution or program is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education. Private individuals and foundations look for evidence of accreditation when making decisions about private giving.
- ***Easing transfer.*** Accreditation is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges and universities. Receiving institutions take note of whether or not the credits a student wishes to transfer have been earned at an accredited institution. Although accreditation is but one among several factors taken into account by receiving institutions, it is viewed carefully and is considered an important indicator of quality.

**Accreditation status of an institution or program is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education.**

## **VALUES AND BELIEFS OF ACCREDITATION**

U.S. accreditation is built upon a core set of traditional academic values and beliefs. These are described by the following statements:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for academic quality; colleges and universities are the leaders and the key sources of authority in academic matters.
- Institutional mission is central to judgments of academic quality.
- Institutional autonomy is essential to sustaining and enhancing academic quality.
- Academic freedom flourishes in an environment of academic leadership of institutions.
- The higher education enterprise and our society thrive on decentralization and diversity of institutional purpose and mission.

## **HOW U.S. ACCREDITATION IS FUNDED**

Accrediting organizations are funded primarily by annual dues from institutions and programs that are accredited and fees that institutions and programs pay for accreditation reviews. In some instances, an accrediting organization may receive financial assistance from sponsoring organizations. Accrediting organizations sometimes obtain funds for special initiatives from government or from private foundations. Accrediting organizations report that they spent more than US\$137 million in 2012–2013.\*

## **THE OPERATION OF U.S. ACCREDITATION**

Accreditation of institutions and programs takes place on a cycle that may range from every few years to as many as 10 years. Accreditation is ongoing; the initial earning of accreditation is not entry to indefinite accredited status. Periodic review is a fact of life for accredited institutions and programs. Self-accreditation is not an option.

An institution or program seeking accreditation must go through a number of steps stipulated by an accrediting organization. These steps involve a combination of several tasks: preparation of evidence of accomplishment by the institution or program, scrutiny of this evidence and a site visit by faculty and administrative peers and action by the accrediting organization to determine accreditation status.

- **Self-study.** Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance, based on the standards of the relevant accrediting organization.
- **Peer review.** Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self-study is completed. Peers constitute the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments about accrediting status.
- **Site visit.** Accrediting organizations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or program. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit. In addition to the peers described above, teams may also include public members (non-academics who have an interest in higher education). All team members are volunteers and are generally not compensated.

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\*2013 CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review*.

- ***Judgment by accrediting organization.*** Accrediting organizations have decision-making bodies (commissions) made up of administrators and faculty from institutions and programs, as well as public members. These commissions may affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs, reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs and deny accreditation to institutions and programs.
- ***Periodic external review.*** Institutions and programs continue to be reviewed over time. They normally prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time.

Accreditation is a trust-based, standards-based, evidence-based, judgment-based, peer-based process.

### **HOLDING ACCREDITORS ACCOUNTABLE: “RECOGNITION” OF ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS**

In the United States, accreditors are accountable to the institutions and programs they accredit. They are accountable to the public and government that have invested heavily in higher education and expect quality. Accreditors undertake an organizational self-assessment on a routine basis and are required to have internal complaint procedures.

Accreditors also undergo a periodic external review of their organizations known as “recognition.” Recognition is carried out either by another private organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, a national coordinating body for institutional and programmatic accreditation) or the United States Department of Education (USDE). Although accreditation is strictly a nongovernmental activity, recognition is not.

### **HOW RECOGNITION OPERATES**

The process of recognition is similar to accreditation in a number of ways:

- CHEA and USDE each develop standards that must be met by an accrediting organization in order to be recognized.
- An accrediting organization undertakes self-evaluation based on recognition standards.

- CHEA and USDE each require a staff site visit to the accreditor and a report on the visit.
- CHEA and USDE award or deny recognition status.
- An accrediting organization undergoes periodic review to maintain recognition.

As of 2013, 18 institutional accrediting organizations were or had been recognized by either CHEA or USDE or both. These organizations accredit approximately 7,896 institutions that make up U.S. higher education. Sixty-seven (67) programmatic accrediting organizations were or had been recognized and accredit 42,686 programs.\*

### **COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION (CHEA)**

CHEA has six standards by which it reviews accrediting organizations for recognition. The standards place primary emphasis on academic quality assurance and improvement for an institution or program. They require accreditors to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage purposeful change and needed improvement, employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision making, continually reassess accreditation practices and sustain fiscal stability.

CHEA accreditors are normally reviewed on a 10-year cycle with two interim reports. The review is carried out by the CHEA committee on recognition, a group of institutional representatives, accreditors and public members who scrutinize accreditors for their eligibility for CHEA recognition and review accreditors based on an accreditor self-evaluation. The review may also include a site visit. The committee on recognition makes recommendations to the CHEA governing board to affirm or deny recognition to an accreditor.

### **CHEA (NONGOVERNMENTAL) RECOGNITION STANDARDS\*\***

- ***Advance academic quality.*** Accreditors have a clear description of academic quality and clear expectations that the institutions or programs they accredit have processes to determine whether quality standards are being met.

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\* 2013 CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review*. This number reflects a very large increase in accredited programs as compared to the 2011 *Almanac*. The primary cause of this increase is the change in reporting from several accreditors that reflects counting a program at each location at which it is offered, even if it is the same program. In addition, programmatic accrediting organizations were requested to provide the number of programs they accredited rather than the number of institutions that house the programs.

\*\*As of June 2010. This language illustrates the recognition standards and is not the full or official CHEA policy statement.

- ***Demonstrate accountability.*** Accreditors have standards that call for institutions and programs to provide consistent, reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment.
- ***Encourage, where appropriate, self-scrutiny and planning for change and needed improvement.*** Accreditors encourage self-scrutiny for change and needed improvement through ongoing self-examination in institutions and programs.
- ***Employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision making.*** Accreditors maintain appropriate and fair organizational policies and procedures that include effective checks and balances.
- ***Demonstrate ongoing review of accreditation practice.*** Accreditors undertake self-scrutiny of their accrediting activities.
- ***Possess sufficient resources.*** Accreditors have and maintain predictable and stable resources.

### **UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (USDE)**

USDE recognition standards place primary emphasis on whether an institution or program is of sufficient quality to qualify for federal funds for student financial aid and other federal programs. These standards require accreditors to maintain criteria or standards in specific areas: student achievement, curricula, faculty, facilities (includes equipment and supplies), fiscal and administrative capacity, student support services, recruiting and admissions practices, measures of program length and objectives of degrees or credentials offered, record of student complaints and record of compliance with program responsibilities for student aid as required by the 1965 federal Higher Education Act (Title IV) as amended.

USDE recognition review normally takes place every five years. USDE staff conduct the review based on communication with the accreditor, a written report from the accreditor and, from time to time, a visit to the accreditor. USDE staff make recommendations to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), an appointed group of educators and public members, to recognize or not recognize an accrediting organization. The committee, in turn, recommends action to the U.S. Secretary of Education.

## **FEDERAL (GOVERNMENTAL) RECOGNITION STANDARDS\***

- Success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, which may include different standards for different institutions or programs, as established by the institution, including as appropriate, consideration of course completion, State licensing examination and job placement rates
- Curricula
- Faculty
- Facilities, equipment and supplies
- Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations
- Student support services
- Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalogs, publications, grading and advertising
- Measures of program length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered
- Record of student complaints received by, or available to, the agency
- Record of compliance with the institution's program responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, based on the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency.

CHEA and USDE recognize many of the same accrediting organizations, but not all. Accreditors seek CHEA or USDE recognition for different reasons. CHEA recognition confers an academic legitimacy on accrediting organizations, helping to solidify the place of these organizations and their institutions and programs in the national higher education community. USDE recognition is required for accreditors whose institutions or programs seek eligibility for federal student aid funds.

## **HOW RECOGNITION IS FUNDED**

CHEA funds its recognition activity through annual fees paid by its institutional members. The federal government funds its recognition activity through a budget allocation from Congress to USDE.

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\*As of July 2010.

## SUMMARY

Accreditation in the United States is about quality assurance and quality improvement. It is a process to scrutinize higher education institutions and programs. Accreditation is private (nongovernmental) and nonprofit — an outgrowth of the higher education community and not of government. It is funded primarily by the institutions and programs that are accredited. Accreditation has a complex relationship with government, especially in relation to funding higher education. It adds value to society through assuring quality, enabling government to make sound judgments about the use of public funds, aiding the private sector in decisions about financial support and easing transfer of credit.

Recognition in the United States is about scrutiny of the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations. It is carried out by the higher education enterprise through CHEA, a private body, and by government (USDE). CHEA recognition is funded by institutional dues; USDE recognition is funded by the U.S. Congress. The goals of the two recognition processes are different:

- **CHEA:** Assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining and improving academic quality.
- **USDE:** Assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining the soundness of institutions and programs that receive federal funds.

The two recognition processes are similar: self-evaluation based on standards, site visit and report, award of recognition status. Recognition adds value to society as a vital part of accreditation accountability or “accrediting the accreditors.”

## REFERENCES

Baum, Elliott and Ma (2014). *Trends in Student Aid*. New York: The College Board.

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*For additional information, visit the Council for Higher Education Accreditation Website at [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org) and the United States Department of Education Website at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).*

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