I.1 The role of accreditation

Accreditation is a voluntary, nongovernmental, and collegial process of self-review and external verification by peer reviewers. In higher education, accreditation has two goals: 1) to ensure that post-secondary educational institutions and their units, schools, or programs meet appropriate standards of quality and integrity; and 2) to improve the quality of education these institutions offer.

The two types of postsecondary education accreditation are institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditors evaluate and accredit an institution as a whole. There are a number of institutional accrediting agencies throughout the U.S. Each accrediting agency is responsible for accrediting institutions within its region. For this reason, institutional accreditation is sometimes referred to as regional accreditation.

Specialized accreditors evaluate and accredit professional and occupational education at the unit or program level. Each accrediting agency is responsible for the units or programs in its specialty. As a specialized accreditor, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Committee on Accreditation (COA) accredits programs leading to the first professional degree in library and information studies, which is the master’s degree. While COA recognizes that there are many information disciplines that provide important contributions to the education of a professional librarian and that professional education in librarianship may contribute to the skills and accomplishments of information professionals outside of librarianship, the accreditation process overseen by COA was entered into by ALA and COA “… in order to acknowledge the central role of the COA accreditation process to the recognition of librarianship as a distinct and autonomous profession…” (ALA-COA MOU 2010).

Accreditation has several benefits. It assures the public that individuals who have graduated from accredited schools or programs have received a quality education. It assures students that accredited programs meet the standards of the profession that they seek to enter. Institutions of higher education benefit from self and peer evaluation and through the opportunity for continuous improvement. Accreditation does not result in ranking of programs. Rather, it respects the uniqueness of each program while ensuring that all accredited programs meet the same standards.

The accreditation process involves the continuous assessment and evaluation of a program and the enhancement of the program’s operations using standards. This process, through self-evaluation and peer review, is designed to foster collegial relations among educators and members of the profession. Accreditation indicates that a program demonstrates a commitment to quality and that the program seeks to continue that commitment.

The accreditation process and activities of the ALA’s COA are founded on principles of accreditation (see section I.3). In the spirit of continuous improvement, the standards, procedures, and documents for ALA accreditation are periodically revised and updated as part of the effort to ensure optimal benefit to the profession and the public.

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