

# Guide To Accreditation

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# Purpose

The information in this document was prepared through the collaborative effort of 15 accrediting agencies to give you an overview of the steps involved in accrediting academic programs at colleges, schools and universities. It will provide you with information and activities to help you learn what you need to participate on a site team or even prepare you for an accreditation visit at your institution.

The content is presented in a format that broadly applies to many accrediting agencies, so we encourage you to contact your own regional or specialized accreditation agency for details on its specific procedures.

If you have comments or questions regarding this document or the original website at <http://www.acpe-accredit.org/edcenter/sitevisits/>, please send them to:

**Ulric K. Chung**, A.B., M.C.S., Ph.D.  
Assistant Executive Director, Accreditation Evaluation and Research  
Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)  
20 North Clark Street, Suite 2500  
Chicago, IL 60602-5109

Tel: (312) 664-3575  
Email: [UChung@ACPE-Accredit.org](mailto:UChung@ACPE-Accredit.org)

# Accreditation: Overview of Accreditation

Acquainting the reviewer to accreditation, the impact of accreditation decisions, and site-visit activities.



Questions to ask about your accreditation agency:

- When was your agency established?
- How many programs does it accredit?
- Is graduation from an accredited program or institution tied to any type of licensure?
- What is the maximum length of an accreditation term?

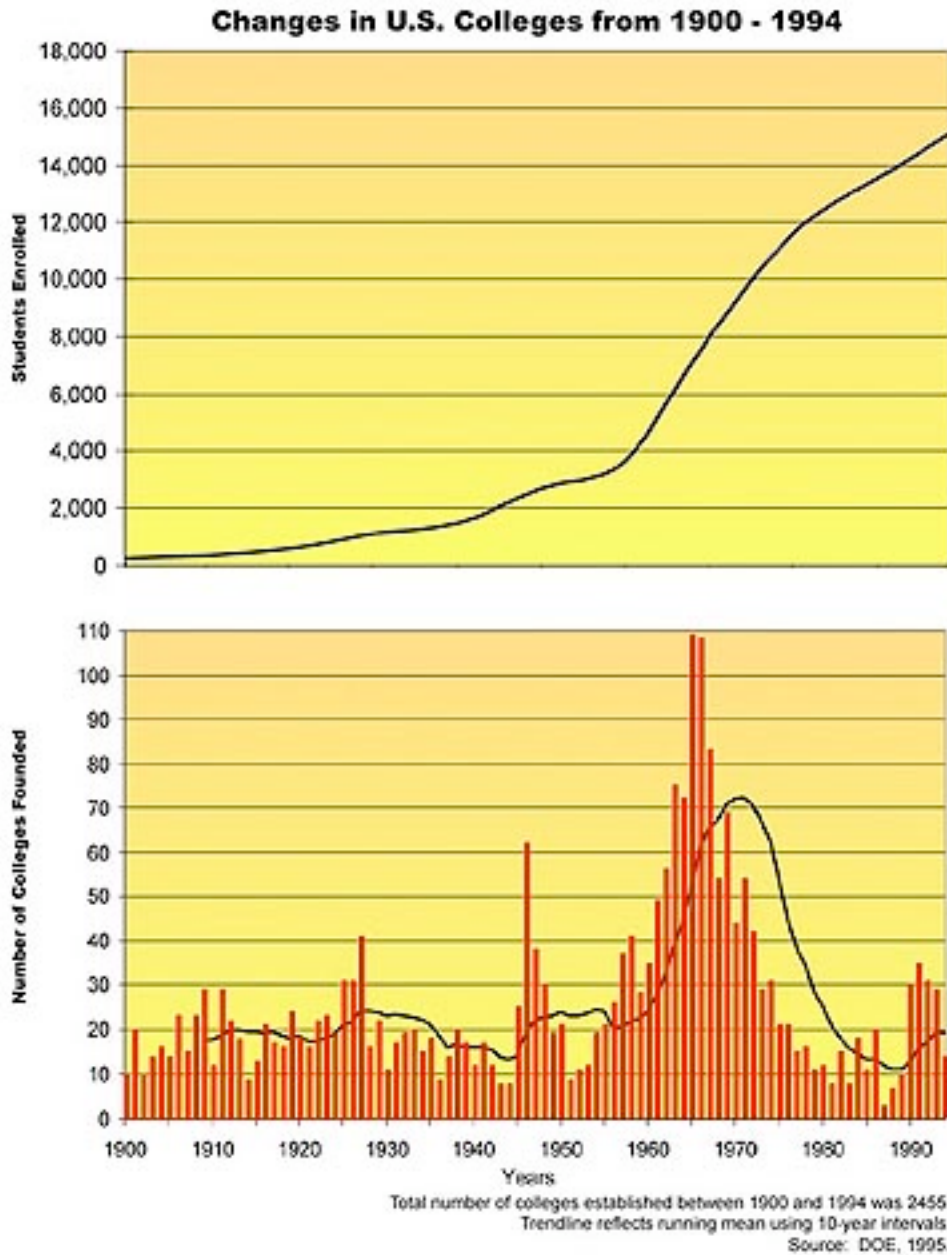
Definition and History:

Accreditation is the public recognition awarded to universities and academic programs that meet established criteria and educational standards. Accreditation decisions are based on evaluations whose purpose is to provide a professional judgment about the quality of a university or academic program and to promote institutional improvement. In other words, accreditation's main goals are to assure and enhance quality.

Accreditation in the United States has a long history that has developed into a voluntary system which is unique in the world. The first regional accreditation agency started in New England in 1885; the first specialized accreditation agency was founded in 1907 by the American Medical Association; and the first accreditation standards were developed in 1910 by the North Central regional accreditation agency.

Following World War II, the government passed the Government Issue or "GI" Bill which provided financial aid for veterans to go to school. Soldiers from poorer families who were previously unable, now had access to higher education. The presence of funds for learning caused tremendous growth in the number of new schools, but along with the

many legitimate schools came some with questionable motives.



The government needed to assure that schools were providing high-quality education; however, the large number of them made it impossible for government staff to do all the necessary evaluations. As a result, the government turned to the existing, private accreditation system and its models for assuring quality in higher education. The U.S. Department of Education lists the following benefits of accreditation:

- 1 Verifying that an institution or program meets established standards;
- 2 Assisting prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
- 3 Assisting institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
- 4 Helping to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;

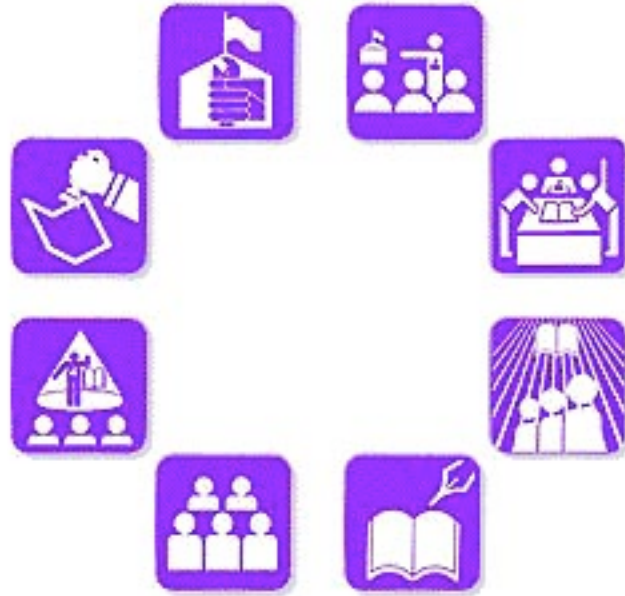
- 5 Protecting an institution against harmful internal and external pressure;
- 6 Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions;
- 7 Involving the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning;
- 8 Establishing criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation; and
- 9 Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.

(List from [http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation\\_pg2.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg2.html), October 7, 2005.)

Today, the Department of Education reviews all accreditation agencies every 5 years to make sure that they meet core requirements, but in all other respects, every U.S. accreditation agency is unique and free from government control in its day-to-day operations.

# Accreditation: Basic Steps in Accreditation

A description of the steps in the accreditation process that are common to most agencies.



Questions to ask about your accreditation agency:

- What is the maximum length of an accreditation term?

These are the basic steps for accrediting a university or academic program:

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| 1-Evaluation Request | The university or program makes a request to be evaluated by the accreditation agency.  |
| 2-Internal Review    | The university or program formally assesses its strengths and challenges based on the agency's standards and describes its plans for improvement in a one-time or continuously-updated document, commonly called a "self-study."  |
| 3-External Review    | The accreditation agency recruits peer reviewers to analyze the self-study documents and conduct an on-site evaluation of the university or program. On-site, evaluation-team members are often the same individuals who review the self-study; however, some agencies assemble a separate team to review the self-study. |
| 4-Report             | The evaluation team or accreditation agency present the findings. Some agencies may also make recommendations based on standards. In addition, at some agencies, the team may also determine the terms of accreditation.  |

5–Public Comment	Accreditation agencies often receive input from the general public during accreditation activities through public–interest panels or by having public members on accreditation boards and review teams. Agencies also consider public comments and formal complaints about programs as part of the evaluation process.
6–Agency Review	The accreditation agency's decision–making body (e.g., Board of Directors) reviews the team reports and may choose to meet with university or program representatives for clarification.
7–Recommendation	The accreditation agency's decision making body accepts or modifies the recommendations and affirms or determines the terms of accreditation.
8–Implementation	The university or program is expected to implement the recommendations and report to the accreditation agency as specified by the terms of the accreditation.

This web site will focus on steps 3 – 5.

# Accreditation: Roles of Team Members

An overview of the various roles of team members.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What is my role on the team?
- May I offer suggestions for improvement?
- How many people are on a typical accreditation site team and from what areas?
- How long does a typical visit last?
- When are accreditation agency staff included on a team?
- Are members of the agency's decision-making body included on teams?
- Are observers allowed on teams?
- How are the team and session leaders chosen?
- What authority does the agency give site teams to make accreditation decisions?
- When do site teams work in conjunction with teams from other agencies?
- Will team members be reimbursed, and if so, how?
- What procedures should be followed if a team member does not show up for the site visit or is unable to perform his or her duties?
- Under what circumstances should a site visit be rescheduled?

An evaluation team essentially "audits" a university or program, providing an external, peer review from the framework of the accreditation agency's standards. It reports areas of strength and weakness, especially those that may be in noncompliance with standards, and provides recommendations for continuing improvement based on standards.



The evaluation follows a pre-determined and highly-structured schedule that includes interviews and meetings with the university administrators, deans, faculty and students. Tours may be made of physical facilities and educational resources including off-campus facilities used for students to gain real-world experiences.

Reporting practices vary at each accreditation agency, so it will be important to know the normal procedures for your team. For example, at the conclusion of the visit, the evaluation team may verbally present its findings and may also include recommendations to university, college or school officers. Some agencies even allow the evaluation team to render accreditation decisions. Other agencies neither allow the team to verbally report nor make recommendations of any sort. And in many instances, only the agency's decision-making body is permitted to make accreditation decisions. In spite of difference in reporting practices, the team's findings will become the basis for a written report, that is subsequently given to the institution and accreditation agency.

A key factor in the acceptance and success of the U.S. accreditation system is the wide range of individuals who participate in it. Teams are usually selected by accreditation-agency staff, with opportunities for the program or institution to review the selections for potential conflicts of interest. Evaluation teams may be composed of any of the following types of individuals:

- academics
- administrators
- students
- regulators
- practitioners
- accreditation agency staff
- accreditation agency decision-making bodies
- members of the public

Some accreditation agencies include a staff member who has experience with site visits and accreditation standards. That individual frequently coordinates the visit, but every team member must participate fully in the evaluation. Site teams typically include faculty members and deans. Sometimes a first-time evaluator will be assigned to the team, but usually no more than one to assure that the team has enough experienced evaluators. In addition, the Department of Education requires certain professional disciplines to have a practitioner on the site team.

Observers sometimes accompany teams to provide an opportunity for the general public to better understand the accreditation process. An observer may have the dual responsibility of not only watching the evaluation process unfold, but also providing insights to the evaluation team from a fresh perspective.

On occasion, teams from different accreditation agencies will coordinate their efforts in order to conduct joint evaluations that minimize costs and disruption to a campus or program.

When you agree to participate as an evaluator on a site team, you must make yourself available for the entire duration of the visit. On occasion, however, weather, illness, or other unavoidable circumstances may make it impossible for you to go on a scheduled visit or fulfill your duties. If this should happen to you, contact the accreditation agency or team leader immediately, so that alternate arrangements can be made. The agency's policies and procedures will dictate how the program or institution should be informed and how a decision should be made regarding whether to continue or postpone the visit.

# Accreditation: Ethics of Team Members

A discussion of topics including conflict of interest, confidentiality and appropriate behavior to assure that the site team members understand and represent the values of the accreditation agency.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What are the agency's guidelines for ethical conduct?
- When should team members dispose of documents and how?
- What constitutes a real or perceived conflict of interest?
- Who has the ability to reject site team members because of conflicts of interest?
- Which expenses are reimbursed by the agency?
- What, if any, gifts may team members accept from a program or institution being reviewed?
- Are team members paid for their participation?

The strength and credibility of accreditation rests on fairness, ethical conduct and impartiality. As long as a program or institution meets an agency's standards, the agency must accredit it. Site team evaluators are highly visible members of the accreditation process, consequently they must not only behave in an impartial and ethical manner, they must also avoid situations that could give the appearance of improper conduct. For example, team members should keep expenses to a minimum and not use an evaluation visit as an opportunity to search for jobs or recruit faculty or students. Furthermore, no team member should ever use the accreditation process for personal gain or to advance the agendas or economic interests of others. Being aware of issues of confidentiality, impartiality and conflict of interest will help you to maintain the values of your accreditation agency:

- **Confidentiality:** Team members always learn from site visits and often take back useful ideas to improve their own organizations. However, discretion should be used to keep information resulting from the accreditation visit confidential. This would include contents of documents from the institution, events during meetings and tours, deliberations of the team, information contained in team reports and anticipated accreditation actions. Evaluation team reports, in particular, are the property of the university or college and no information may be released to third parties without the approval of the university president or designate. In general, documents related to the visit should never be left unattended where unauthorized individuals might gain access to them. Unless directed otherwise by your accreditation agency, all documents should either be returned to the accreditation agency, returned to the individual(s) responsible for the self-study at the program or institution, or destroyed when the team's work is finished. After a visit has ended, requests for clarification or interpretation of the evaluation team report should be referred to the accreditation agency and not answered by an individual team member.
- **Impartiality:** When a university or program is being accredited, all aspects of the process must be fair and objective no matter what you believe about the institution or about the context in which it operates. Because team members come from a variety of backgrounds, it is tempting to compare the program or institution under review to others. During discussions or when making recommendations, team members should refrain from drawing comparisons with other programs or universities and should evaluate and discuss the school within

its own context from the framework of the standards. Your agency's standards provide the basis for all evaluations and decisions. Any information or events without relevance to a standard should not be considered.

- **Conflict of interest:** Team members are in a position of trust that requires them to exercise judgment on behalf of the public and the institution or program. Any other interest or obligations that might interfere with the judgment of team members must be avoided or openly declared. Team members should also be careful to avoid the appearance of a conflict and should declare any past, present or potential situations to the accreditation agency that could positively or negatively influence decisions. These would include:
  - Being a graduate, employee or consultant of the institution
  - Having immediate relatives or close working colleagues at the institution
  - Having an inability to set aside positive or negative biases about an institution
  - Being in a situation where one can financially or professionally gain as a result of specific accreditation decisions
  - Being in a situation to put an institution at a disadvantage for the purpose of benefiting competitors
  - Restricting the number of graduates solely to change local or national economic outcomes

The accreditation agency or representatives of the institution or program under review may choose to screen out individuals from the site visit who have a real or perceived conflict of interest.

No discussion on the ethics of being a site team member would be complete without mentioning hospitality expenses and payment for services. Expenses incurred while a team conducts the business of the accreditation agency may be reimbursed if they address a genuine need in the service of the agency and are

- appropriate to the occasion,
- reasonable in amount,
- allowable by agency policy, and
- verifiable.

In some cases, programs or institutions may provide gifts or transportation, offer to directly pay for meals, or reimburse team members for expenses during the site visit. Agencies differ on whether gifts of a certain value, favors, or direct reimbursements from the program or institution are acceptable. Agencies also differ on whether or not they pay evaluators an honorarium in addition to, or in place of, stipends or reimbursements for expenses. Be sure to consult with your accreditation agency regarding its policies and procedures for ethical behavior, appropriate conduct and reimbursement and payment prior to an on-site evaluation.

# Preparing for a Visit: Skills for the On-Site Visit

An introduction to the processes of interpersonal relationships and group dynamics that will be needed throughout the site visit.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What are the agency's guidelines for running a meetings and interviews?
- What techniques does the agency recommend to encourage participation in meetings?
- What happens to written team-member notes and self-study materials after the visit?

During an on-site evaluation, team members will have multiple opportunities to meet with groups and individuals at the host institution. The primary purpose of these meetings is to provide the opportunity for individuals to have input into the evaluation process through an open, collegial dialogue. The objectives of the team include verifying statements and impressions presented in written materials (self-study report, supplemental information) or information from other meetings during the on-site visit.

Team members are advised to be prepared for a wide variety of reactions during meetings. These include everything from very quiet or withdrawn behavior, requiring more probing on the part of team members, to very assertive, aggressive behavior, requiring restraint or redirection on the part of team members.

A meeting chair will be assigned for group meetings, to help assure a structure and flow logically from one topic to the next. Each accreditation agency may have its own, specific meeting procedures, but general guidelines for team members include the following:

1. Prepare for meetings by learning about the committee's or meeting participants' role in the institution and in preparing the self-study report. This information will be included in the self-study materials, but if not, request it. Be clear about what you would like to learn from any meeting and develop lines of questions in advance to structure the meeting appropriately.

2. Build a rapport with the meeting participants by:
  - Greeting them warmly
  - Taking 5 to 10 minutes for introductions.
    - Describe who you are, why you're there, and the specific purpose for the meeting.
    - Where time permits, allow meeting participants to introduce themselves, providing a brief overview of their backgrounds and current interests and activities.
  - Setting the ground rules and establishing the available time frame
  - Assuring participants that all remarks are confidential
  - Using appropriate titles when addressing participants
  - Giving your undivided attention throughout the session
  - Maintaining eye contact
  - Maintaining an open dialog
  - Emphasizing support from the agency
3. Facilitate a productive discussion with participants by:
  - Stressing the importance of the their contribution and input
  - Confirming the areas under evaluation
  - Describing relevant issues in context
  - Encouraging self assessment, comments and interpretations
  - Providing opportunities to discuss changes
  - Summarizing areas of agreement and disagreement
4. Encourage meeting participants to do 80% of the talking by having questions in mind and using effective questioning techniques.
  - Pose open-ended questions that start with words like, "describe" or "explain..."
  - When possible, ask "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how" questions instead of "yes"/"no" questions.
  - Avoid the urge to break the silence if participants are quiet. Use silence to obtain more information by saying "take your time... think about it."
  - Confirm information by asking similar questions in different venues
- 5 Take notes, writing key words or phrases as you hear them to help reconstruct the sessions.
- 6 Adhere to the schedule, but if serious issues come to light that require adjusting it, make sure appropriate individuals at the institution are informed.
- 7 A few minutes before the end of the meeting, ask participants if they have closing questions for the team members.
- 8 Explain follow-up procedures.
- 9 Regardless of the interactions during the meeting, end on a positive note.
- 10 Don't linger in the room after the meeting.

Some individuals may come to the meetings with supplemental documentation and/or prepared presentations. In such cases, team members should receive the information for transmittal to the entire team. Occasionally, information is presented which is not germane to the work of the team; when this occurs, team members are encouraged to move on to more relevant issues as quickly and smoothly as possible.

# Preparing for a Visit: Team Leadership

Information for individuals who are in charge of the visit and who will coordinate or chair meetings and discussions.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What titles does your agency use to designate team members with specific roles and leadership responsibilities?
- What requirements and qualities are needed for being team leader, coordinator, or meeting chair?
- How are team leaders, meeting coordinators and meeting chairs selected and trained?
- What procedures should be followed if a team member does not show up for the site visit or is unable to perform his or her duties?
- Under what circumstances should a site visit be rescheduled?

Depending on the accreditation agency and the size of the evaluation team, team members may have different roles, responsibilities and titles. Sometimes one person or a small number of team members will have leadership roles, while at other times, roles and responsibilities will be shared by many or even all team members. For example, in some agencies, the team leader always chairs meetings; whereas in other agencies, every team member has the responsibility of chairing at least one meeting during a site visit.

As the name implies, "team leaders" are in charge of the site-visit team. The team leader is designated by the accreditation agency and must have knowledge of the agency's policies and procedures in order to ensure that they are followed during the visit. At some agencies, this individual may be involved in coordinating activities and facilitators for sessions with the institution's representatives or even in the selection of other members for inclusion on the site-visit team. Depending on the agency, duties of the team leader could include:

- Contacting team members prior to the visit
- Coordinating the schedule before and during the visit
- Serving as the primary liaison between the institution and agency
- Chairing meetings
- Facilitating team discussions
- Achieving team consensus
- Preparing the final report
- Mentoring team members
- Assigning roles or duties to other team members

Some site-visit team members may also be given other titles such as "coordinator," "facilitator," or "chair," etc. Special responsibilities may be designated prior to arriving at the visit or assigned by the team leader during the team's orientation session at the institution. Such responsibilities may include:

1. Coordinating the logistics for assigned sessions. These may include:

- **Room set-up:** Arrange the seating in the room to facilitate discussion. The team should be seated together, in a fashion that permits discussion and interaction, while alleviating the need to search for team members in a mixed

audience.

- **Introductions:** While introductions may have occurred as individuals assemble for the session, it is helpful to go around the room and have each participant introduce himself/herself and provide a brief statement of background and/or how the individual is involved in the particular group. It is helpful to provide a brief statement describing the team and its purpose both in a general sense and relating to the specific session at hand.
  - **Ground Rules:** It is important to describe the ground rules for each session prior to beginning; this consists of describing the available time frame, as well as the approach to be used. The chair should serve as timekeeper, to assure adherence to the schedule.
2. Serving as discussion leader/facilitator to foster interaction between all team members and representatives of the institution during assigned sessions. Frequently the session leader/facilitator is given the title of "meeting chair" and will initiate the discussion and questions for the session, with other team members joining in if they have comments or questions.

On occasion, weather, illness, or other unavoidable circumstance may make it impossible for a team member to go on a scheduled visit or fulfill his or her duties. If this should happen, the accreditation agency should be contacted and the agency's policies and procedures should be followed to inform the program or institution about the situation and to decide whether to continue or postpone the visit.

If the agency receives sufficient notification prior to a visit, there may be time to find a replacement team member or reschedule the activities in a way that is acceptable to the program or institution. If a team member becomes unavailable on extremely short notice, and the decision is made to continue the visit, the team leader will typically work with representatives of the program or institution to rearrange the activities on the visit schedule.



# Preparing for a Visit: Mentoring Skills

Information for experienced site visitors to mentor and evaluate new team members.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What are the mentoring responsibilities for team leaders or experienced team members?
- What are the requirements and qualities needed for being a mentor?
- What training or instruction is available for mentors?
- What are the procedures for dealing with difficult team members?
- What additional resources are available for new team members?
- Are new team members formally assigned to a mentor?

Team leaders have the difficult task of organizing a group of strangers into a cohesive and effective team. You must know the policies of your agency, clearly communicate your expectations to team members, and also determine team members' expectations in order to address their concerns and questions. By creating a friendly atmosphere that respects every individual, team members will be more open to your role as a leader and a mentor.

Encourage interdependency among the team members, recognizing and praising the achievements of the team as a whole, while providing private, constructive criticism for individual members as needed. Develop individual competence by sharing your knowledge and providing supportive directions to new team members and trusting them with responsibilities.

Except for rare situations, you will not have more than one new member assigned to your team. Personal teaching and advising will be especially appreciated by an inexperienced team member whether you provide the mentoring, yourself, or you ask a senior team member to assist you. On occasion, you may find that individuals who have been on several visits may still be new to particular roles, such as chairing meetings. Direct mentoring or strategically pairing team members of different levels will help inexperienced team members to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them to become more effective evaluators:

**Knowledge:** Prepare team members for the evaluation visit by assuring that they have access to all the necessary materials. If you've never worked with a particular team member before, you may find it useful to take some time to speak with him/her after any materials are sent and shortly before the team assembles at the institution. This will give the team member the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about responsibilities or procedures as well as give you the chance to get acquainted with the team member before pressures of the visit start.

New team members will benefit from your personal insights into the challenges of being a site team member. Information that is particularly helpful includes your suggestions for being effective, typical risks evaluators face, appropriate dress for various activities, protocol at meetings or with school representatives, and effective questioning techniques.

**Skills:** Because of a visit's short duration, the team leader needs to get the members to work as efficiently as possible. Assist them by reviewing the skills needed for asking questions, taking effective notes, chairing meetings, preparing

effective team reports, thinking strategically, and doing other specialized tasks for the visit.

It will also be important to brief the team on key issues and develop a strategy for approaching the visit. To the extent possible, help team members to generalize their personal experiences to the skills needed for site visits, directing them to written materials as needed.

**Attitudes:** Attitudes are difficult to change in team members. As soon as possible, establish a dialogue with the team. Allow individuals to take an active role in meetings by showing that you value all ideas and by encouraging everyone to speak.

It will be cathartic to let team members voice thoughts and opinions about the visit and the institution during the first team orientation meeting prior to a formal discussion of the facts. This will allow any biases to be addressed, thereby reducing the chance that they will resurface later in the visit. Be careful, to clarify the distinction between factual information and opinion, emphasizing the importance for the team to only consider facts.

Model the values that you want to develop in your team members by showing collegiality and respect for the individuals at the institution and your team members. Site visitors may encounter difficult individuals, however team members must show patience, keeping evaluations constructive and positive.

Show sincere concern and support for team members who might be feeling anxious. Team members may express anxiety by either reticent or aggressive behavior. Although team members need to be assertive, they should be conscious of any underlying fears that affect their behavior.

Effective listening, advice and coaching can help you to assure growth in your team members; however, you can only judge yourself by honestly evaluating the quality of your mentoring and the outcomes of the team members. By the end of the visit, team members should feel ownership in the process and be responsible for the successful completion of the site visit.

# Preparing for a Visit: Building Confidence

Information to help new team members prepare for the experience of a site visit.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What training is available for new team members?
- What additional resources are available for new team members?

Feeling anxiety during a site visit is a normal and appropriate emotion that often arises when doing something new or doing something that carries a lot of responsibility. Most teams will include no more than one first-time member, so even if you're inexperienced, always keep in mind that you bring important expertise and insights to your team and your more-experienced team mates will support if you need it. Until you feel comfortable and confident, do your best to project an air of self-assurance until the feeling becomes natural. Whether you are chronically shy or are suffering from a temporary loss of confidence, here are some tips to help you overcome the jitters.

## Before the Visit

- Remind yourself of the unique abilities and strengths that you bring to the team.
- Prepare yourself as thoroughly as possible by reading the materials for the visit.
- Recall how you behave when you are feeling confident or observe another person who behaves confidently in situations that you find stressful.
- Learn your responsibilities for the visit, and visualize yourself successfully performing those activities.
- Practice the following social skills in advance with people you feel comfortable around or in front of a mirror: maintaining eye contact, displaying confident body language, smiling, making introductions, making small talk, and asking questions.
- Get advice from the team leader or mentor if you have any concerns about your ability to perform prior to the visit and ask for feedback after.

## During the Visit

- Use people's names when speaking to them. It radiates confidence.
- Body language makes a powerful statement. Behave as if you are self-assured to convey a feeling of calmness. Move slowly; speak deliberately and reflectively. Smile and maintain eye contact.
- Be polite and pay attention to what people are saying. If your voice is shaky, only make brief comments or nod to indicate that you're listening.
- Continue all assignments even if you feel nervous. You probably won't appear nervous to others who don't know you and you will eventually start to feel calmer in a few minutes.
- Try relaxation techniques such as controlling your breathing.
- Avoid stimulants such as coffee and sip water to keep from fidgeting.
- Be aware of your own biases and avoid the tendency to dwell on single issues where you happen to feel the most comfortable. (e.g., "diversity")
- Don't worry if you can't recall every detail of the self-study. Ask questions and seek clarification.

People sometimes express anxiety in contradictory ways, including shy or aggressive behavior. Try to be aware of how anxiety affects your behavior to enable yourself to alter it; however, don't be overly critical of yourself if you can't always overcome your anxiety immediately. Just be receptive to comments from your team members,

acknowledge your success in facing your fears and learn from your mistakes, because it will be easier next time.

# Preparing for a Visit: Pre-Visit Preparation

Suggestions to prepare for a site visit.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- How does one obtain a copy of the agency's standards?
- What is the format for a typical self-study report?
- Does the accreditation agency accept innovative self-study formats?
- How long is a typical self-study report?
- How much lead time will team members have for reading the self-study report?
- Do other readers beside the site-visit team review the self-study?
- What are the accreditation agency's guidelines for reviewing self-studies?
- What are the "official" and "alternate" interpretations of individual standards?

The self-study report is a record of the institution's progress, a planning document and serves as the foundation for the site visit. The self-study development process begins at least one year prior to the on-site evaluation and should describe and analyze the program, present findings and conclusions, appraise strengths and weaknesses, and, outline steps necessary for improvement if deficiencies exist. It should also include qualitative and quantitative information on both faculty and student achievements and on outcomes which demonstrate the program's success in attaining its objectives.

Prior to your review, you should become familiar with your agency's standards. The standards serve as the framework from which to perform the evaluation. Be sure to ask your agency whether there are accepted alternate interpretations for any particular standard. Take time to acquaint yourself with the stated mission, goals and objectives of the program or institution, because this will give you the context from which to understand its workings. Give yourself sufficient time to thoroughly review the self-study, analyzing it from multiple perspectives. Knowing your responsibilities before the visit will also help you to focus on the information in the self-study that you'll need to perform your evaluation. For example, if you're assigned to conduct faculty interviews, you will pose more relevant questions if you have read your faculty-members' Curricula Vitae (CV's).

The appendices in some self-studies will be voluminous and will appear overwhelming, but they serve to support the main messages in the self-study narrative. Skim the appendices for any valuable insights; however, if time is limited, focus on the narrative of the self-study.

A useful preparation strategy is to schedule enough time in advance of the site visit to review the self-study document, faculty CV's and accompanying material three times:

- 1) Skim for a sense of the main themes and areas that will need closer scrutiny.
- 2) Read for content and details.
  - a. Take notes.
  - b. Highlight important information and bookmark as needed.
  - c. Note strengths/weaknesses, inconsistencies and warning flags that require further exploration during the site visit, especially regarding:

- Compliance issues with standards
- Problems found in the self-study report
- Student and institutional outcomes
- Balance of resources to needs
- Quality and quantity of faculty to students
- Complaints

d. Develop opening remarks and questions

3) Review prior to the on-site evaluation

Some accreditation agencies use a separate team of individuals to review self-studies. In some cases that team will also screen the study to determine which areas need or do not need further investigation by the on-site evaluation team. Always keep in mind that programs or institutions may appear better or worse in real life than they do on paper. Your challenge will be to know when to use information in the self-study report as a clue to probe deeper and when to move on.

# On-Site Skills: On-Site Evaluation

Overview of the on-site evaluation.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- How long are typical comprehensive on-site evaluation?
- How long are typical focused evaluations?
- What are typical meetings and tours?
- What is the schedule for a typical on-site evaluation?
- Which documents may team members legitimately request during an evaluation?
- What is appropriate dress?

An on-site evaluation is a planned series of focused interviews, meetings, observations or tours that provide information to validate the positive and negative findings in the self-study report and to further evaluate the institution or program. The first interview of the visit is typically with a chief executive officer, director or administrator of the institution or program. This sets the tone for the visit and gives the team the opportunity to ask about details, broad elements and vision. The last meetings, commonly called "exit interviews," are usually with chief executive officers, program directors or administrators to report on the team's findings. You should feel free at all times to ask questions to clarify unclear information in the self study, validate information or follow up on new information learned during the visit; however, requests for information about an individual's salary are generally not appropriate.

Some accrediting agencies ask team members to arrive early or the day before the start of the visit in order to get acclimated to the area. Team members will frequently hold an orientation meeting before the visit to get to know each other, discuss key issues and develop a strategy for approaching the visit.

On-site evaluations may last as little as a few hours or as long as several days. A "focused," on-site evaluation is usually short and designed to investigate issues around specific standards, whereas a "comprehensive" or "full" on-site eventuation is intended to evaluate the program or institution from the perspective of all the standards. Your schedule will be busy. During the visit, your team will meet many individuals and, depending on your agency, may tour various facilities or visit locations connected with the program or institution:

**Typical Interviews & Meetings:**

- University Administrators
- University Board of Directors
- Deans and College Administrators
- Self-Study Committee Members
- Executive Committee Members
- Curriculum Committee Members
- Students
- Individual Faculty
- Student-Affairs Officers
- Practice-Site Preceptors
- Site Team Members
- Recent Graduates or Alumni
- Employers

**Typical Tours & Observations:**

- Classrooms
- Libraries
- Technology Centers
- Student Lounges
- Laboratories
- Clinical Facilities
- Faculty Offices
- Recreational Facilities
- Distance-Learning Sites
- Off-campus practice locations
- Files (e.g. complaint records)

A typical day on a comprehensive, on-site evaluation may start as early as 7:30 AM with interviews, meetings and tours through the late afternoon or early evening. After a short break, the evaluation team will reconvene for a team dinner to discuss the day's findings and to begin preparing the framework for its report and exit interviews. In some cases, the team leader will continue working after the team dinner, drafting documents late into the night.

On occasion, weather, illness, or other unavoidable circumstances may make it impossible for a team member to go on a scheduled visit or fulfill his or her duties. If a team member becomes unavailable on extremely short notice, and the decision is made to continue the visit, the team leader will typically work with representatives of the program or institution to rearrange the activities on the visit schedule.



# On-Site Skills: Gathering Information

Facilitating data collection used for accreditation decisions.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What questions should team members typically ask?
- What compliance issues have been identified by the agency?
- What questions does the agency's decision-making body want to be answered?
- What written documentation does the agency require?
- Which documents are necessary or appropriate for a team to request from a program or institution?
- What accreditation reports or background documents will the agency provide?

Whether you are touring facilities, meeting with students, or interviewing individual faculty, the information that you gather must effectively support your accreditation decisions and recommendations for quality improvement. Proper observations and documentation should be

- objective and unbiased, not based on hearsay, or negative or positive perceptions of the institution, program or people;
- consistent and balanced, using the same level of detail for positive and negative findings without letting one finding overshadow all others; and
- factual and accurate, using direct observations and specific examples with confirmation from multiple sources

All questions and the resulting information are significant to the team's work, so team members are encouraged to ask questions, even if the question's importance appears uncertain. Because the evaluation team must assess and validate the self-study that the institution has prepared, it is important and appropriate to pose the same question(s) in

multiple sessions or to different individuals. If an area of partial or non-compliance is found, the proper questions will help the team to understand how the program or institution rationalizes it in terms of its unique mission and resources.

Requests for information may include, but are not limited to:

- To what extent do you agree with the self-study document? Were there any errors of commission and/or omission?
- Tell me about some of the challenges in developing a plan to collect outcomes data for your institution.
- Describe the procedures that you use for assessing outcomes data, and how is that information used to improve the institution?
- Explain how program or institutional concerns are addressed through short- and long-term (strategic) planning?
- Describe your perceptions of the students and their academic and professional development.
- What is being done to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills?
- Give me some examples of how the school supports faculty and their professional development.
- Describe your perceptions regarding the professional development process and your personal development opportunities.
- What are your individual goals and objectives? What do you require to address your individual needs and departmental, collegiate or institutional goals?
- Describe your perceptions regarding the leadership and direction of the Dean (... Associate and/or Assistant Dean(s)) and/or your direct supervisor (e.g., Department or Division Chair).
- Do you feel there is an adequate flow of information and communication within the College, School or institution? Do you feel involved in the College, School or institutional affairs?
- Do you have any questions for the evaluation team?

Questions should not be presented in a judgmental manner. Rather, they should seek information and clarification. It is not advisable for any team member to offer examples from the member's home institution; because the institution being evaluated is unique, and such comparisons, while offered in a positive sense, may be misconstrued. Such information may be provided if it is not attributed to a particular institution or if the information is specifically requested by individuals from the host institution.

When gathering information, clearly document your findings through your notes. When taking notes, remember to do the following:

- Tell interviewees that you will be taking notes in order to remember key points; however their remarks are confidential
- Avoid letting the interviewee see your notes
- Write key words/phrases as you hear them to help you reconstruct the sessions
- Only keep notes that are related to areas outlined by agency standards
- Use multiple reviewers whenever possible and compare notes

# On–Site Skills: Responding to Confrontation

Information to help new team members appropriately respond to confrontational situations.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What situations or issues are considered "controversial" by your agency?
- What is your agency's policy for dealing with controversial situations?
- What common problems are not covered by the standards?
- What is your agency's policy for reviewing complaint files?
- What is your agency's policy regarding minority opinions from team members?
- How does your agency evaluate or review the performance and behavior of team members?

Sometimes, people at the institution under review become frustrated or angry with evaluation team members and vice versa. Nevertheless, team members are invited guests of the institution, so a professional demeanor is needed and a confrontational style should be avoided. If the team is approached in a confrontational manner, team members should do whatever is possible to resolve the situation collegially. When individuals or groups approach the site team angry, upset, or just to complain, be prepared to document the facts and respond professionally:

- show appropriate, professional concern and probe to discover underlying issues
- ask for the facts of the situation
  - What is the issue or event?
  - When did it happen?
  - Where did it happen?
  - Who was involved?
  - Why did it happen?
- ask for a suggestion to resolve the situation
- listen attentively, without interrupting or reacting, looking individuals in the eye
- take notes and ask for clarification only if needed until you have a good grasp of the situation
- confirm by summarizing key issues or repeating the entire story if necessary
- describe the team's procedure for addressing such issues, but offer no promises that the situation will be fixed
- emphasize the agency's general support, but if the issue is not within standards, make it known
- end on a positive note, thanking them for taking the time to speak with you

Avoid showing impatience, arguing, or stating facts with people who are angry. This will only escalate the situation. Always inform the team of emotionally charged interactions regardless of the issue. When dealing with a potentially volatile situation:

- debrief all team members
- know your agency's policies regarding controversial issues
- request assistance from representatives from the agency if necessary
- only address situations where accreditation standards apply
- get consensus among team members about a strategy
- schedule special meetings with school representatives if needed to validate the information
- review complaint files and ask about current and past policies and practices if needed

- present the team's findings logically and rationally to appropriate representatives of the institution

The team is at the institution to improve and address problems related to the standards. No institution will be perfect, therefore team members should not be so critical that they forget or dismiss its strengths. The team must strive to be positive, constructive, practical and assist the school even when it finds faults.

On rare occasions, team members, themselves, may disagree with each other. Under no circumstances should team members make disagreements public to the institution. If consensus cannot be reached on decisions about the institution, individuals should follow the agency's policies and procedures for expressing minority opinions and allow the team leader to decide how to present findings to the institution. Whether problems arise between team members or the institution, the best strategy for avoiding confrontation is to treat everyone in a facilitative and constructive manner.

# On-Site Skills: Evaluation within Standards

Assuring that actions of team members are made from within the framework of agency standards and determining the relevance of information used for accreditation.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- What areas do the standards cover?
- Who created your agency's standards?
- What process was used?
- How does the agency assess the validity of its standards?
- How often are the standards revised?
- What are objective measures for each standard?

During the evaluation process, site team members will decide whether particular issues are within the scope of their authority and whether the information is useful for decision making. When faced with an issue, the first question to ask is whether it has an impact on the institution or program's ability to comply with the accreditation agency's standards. All accreditation agencies have standards that establish minimum levels of quality around which evaluations and accreditation decisions must be based. The team should refrain from addressing issues that fall outside those standards.

Standards are created through a consensus process that calls for input from educators, students, practitioners, regulators and the general public. That input is gathered by the accreditation agency staff and, after a long process of comment and revision, accepted by the agency's decision making body or governing body. Standards are routinely revised as recommended by the U.S. department of education using the same or similar processes.

An accreditation agency may have a few standards or many standards, but most cover aspects of the following areas:

- Academics & Research
- Curriculum
- Ethics/Integrity
- Evaluation & Assessment of Outcomes
- Faculty
- Financial Resources
- Library, Information & Learning Resources
- Mission & Planning
- Organization & Administration
- Physical, Laboratory & Training Facilities
- Students
- Support Services

Standards often have two components. The first component is the requirements that the program or institution must achieve. The second component is one or more guidelines that suggest or illustrate how to fulfill the requirements. Often, the first component is regarded as non-negotiable, whereas guidelines may be viewed as somewhat flexible or providing interpretations of how to meet standards. Team members should always strive to interpret standards from within the context of a program or institution's unique mission whenever possible.

Although a program or institution's mission should not be used to supercede standards, applicable laws may. For example, even though an agency's standards might explicitly prohibit discrimination of any kind, Section 2000e-2 [*Section 703*] of the U.S. Civil Rights Act permits religious institutions to hire employees on the basis of religion, thereby making them exempt from accreditation standards that target certain types of religious discrimination.

Even though you may have a thorough understanding of the standards, sometimes it is not immediately obvious whether a standard applies or which ones apply. For example, two faculty members having personal disagreements is not typically covered by accreditation standards; however, if the disagreement affects overall faculty or student morale, then accreditation standards may be involved and the disagreement itself may need to be addressed. Team members must also use their judgment to determine whether information is important enough to consider. Some key questions to ask are:

- Is the information source reliable?
- Is the information verifiable?
- Does the information validate the self study or contradict it?
- Is the information significant for improving the institution?
- Is the information or situation already being addressed elsewhere by the team?

The relevance of issues and the appropriate application of standards will generate much thought and discussion among team members and may even result in an occasional phone call for consultation with accreditation agency staff. Discussions resulting from each site visit will test the validity of the standards and will help them to evolve and improve over time.

# On-Site Skills: Concluding the Visit

Developing skills to formulate responses that address the strengths and weaknesses of the institution or program.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- Who is typically included in the exit interview(s)?
- What are the responsibilities of the meeting chair and how is the chair selected?
- What type of recommendations, if any, is the team allowed to make?
- Who makes the final accreditation decision?
- How much time is provided to prepare for the exit interview?
- What, if any written documents are left after the interview?

The evaluation team's on-site visit concludes with one or more exit interviews with selected academic officers and administrators (Deans, Presidents, Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs, and Provosts). Exit interviews provide the opportunity for the team to relate its findings to the individuals responsible for improving the institution and its academic programs. The exit interview should discuss all of the major issues noted by the evaluation team during the visit; including important concerns voiced by students, faculty and deans that are related to the agency's standards. For example, the team may ask a dean whether his or her program has any pressing issues that need to be brought to the university's upper administration. If the issues have merit based on the standards, the team will present them to the administration and document them in the written reports. Even though an issue may seem negative, having it brought to light by the team provides leverage for program and university administrators to obtain support for change and resources through the campus or state legislatures.

The general format for an exit interviews is as follows:

- 1 Summary of the gains made since the last on-site evaluation.
- 2 Overview of the strengths and weakness of the program or institution as identified by the self-study and by the evaluation team.
- 3 Presentation of the major findings of the evaluation team, organized in the following manner:
  - a. A synopsis of the strengths of the program in the view of the evaluation team.
  - b. Review of needed improvements, organized by the accreditation standards.
  - c. Suggestions for specific steps for improvements if appropriate
- 4 In some agencies, the team is also empowered to render accreditation decisions at the end of the visit; if not, the agency's governing board makes the decision based on information from the team.

The details of the team's presentation are discussed prior to the exit interviews. As is the case with other sessions, a designated chair leads each exit interview with support from the rest of the evaluation team. The team's findings are also written in a report or a summary letter that is sent to the school and accreditation agency. With this in mind, the team must take care to verbally mention all major issues that will be included in the written report. If the institution and the site-visit team have undertaken this and all other aspects of the self-study process properly, there are generally few surprises in either the exit interview or written reports.

# Post-Visit Activities: Preparing the Report

Developing skills to communicate findings and recommendations to the institution and decision-making bodies.



Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- Who is assigned to write the evaluation team report?
- Who will read the final report and for what reasons?
- What are the content, format and style guidelines for writing reports?
- What is the timeframe for completing the report?
- What happens if the institution disagrees with the report?

The evaluation team report formally documents the information presented during the verbal exit interviews. Following the team's departure, the team leader or an agency staff member prepares the report and transmits a draft to the other team members for comment. A draft is subsequently sent to the institution to review it for accuracy and further comment. In cases where the team and the institution disagree on the content of the report, the institution may attach information supporting their position, however, the report itself is usually not modified. Once the report is finalized by all parties, the finished version is sent to the institution and to the accreditation agency for action at the designated meeting of its decision making body.

The report is designed for several audiences which include the accrediting-agency's decision making body and university and academic-program administrators; nevertheless, it must objectively address key points of the agency's standards based on evidence provided by the school and gathered by the site team. "The report should be written in a manner that provides analytical, evaluative, and constructive information about the program's compliance with the standards. It should lead the reader to draw



conclusions about the strengths, limitations, and challenges of the program. The report should be balanced in order to help improve the quality and effectiveness of the program and the school."<sup>1</sup> Some agencies only give teams the authority to determine and document the facts of the visit, others give teams some flexibility to formulate recommendations and suggestions for improvement based on accreditation standards, while yet others allow teams to make actual accreditation decisions. The final accreditation actions of any agency, however, must be narrowly constructed along the lines of accreditation standards and guidelines.

When writing the report, keep the following points in mind:

- Consider the purpose of the report and the needs of the audience(s) that will read it.
- Follow the content, format and style guidelines suggested by your accreditation agency.
- Always provide information on strengths of the institution or program under review, not just the weaknesses.
- Criticize constructively when needed.
- Define discipline-specific jargon if the general meaning cannot be inferred from context.
- Define terms that are key to understanding the report or the accreditation actions.
- Support statements with evidence. Avoid citing personal opinions without documentation.
- Be logical, concise and grammatical.
- Write in a direct style, avoiding passive sentence constructions where possible.
- If the evaluation team is authorized to make accreditation decisions, then all decisions must be based on agency standards and guidelines.

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<sup>1</sup> American Library Association Committee on Accreditation. (2003). *Accreditation Process Policies & Procedures*. pp. 39–40. Chicago: Author.

# Post-Visit Activities: Evaluating the Visit

Reviewing the activities of the site team by its members and the institution.

Questions to ask your accreditation agency:

- How does your agency evaluate the site-visit process?
- How does your agency evaluate behavior or performance?
- Who participates in evaluations?
- How does your agency use the information that it gathers?

Site team members should continually try to improve all aspects of the site-visit process. Accreditation agencies may perform formal and informal evaluations of team members and visits in one of several ways. An independent observer may join the team to verify whether the process was appropriate and fair. After the visit, representatives from the institution requesting accreditation may be asked to evaluate the team and process through questionnaires or phone surveys. Individual members of the site team, itself, may also be asked to evaluate the process and the other members. As an incentive for completing evaluations, some accreditation agencies may even withhold reimbursement checks until team members have submitted their evaluation forms.

Results from the evaluations may be used to improve the agency's procedures and to mentor or select future team members. A simple team-member evaluation might be designed as follows:

Directions: Please evaluate the site visit process and participants using the scale:

## Self Evaluation

*I was given all the documents that I needed to be effective during the visit.*

①	①	②	③	④
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

*I received clear instructions regarding expectations and responsibilities.*

①	①	②	③	④
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

*I was assigned reasonable tasks, given my expertise and interests.*

①	①	②	③	④
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

*I felt that I needed more feedback or guidance during the site visit.*

①	①	②	③	④
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

*Appropriate accreditation decisions were made for this institution.*

①	①	②	③	④
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always

## Team Leader

*The Team Leader provides appropriate direction or guidance.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader delegates tasks and authority effectively.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader treats me with respect and considers my suggestions or ideas.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader responds effectively to team-member concerns.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader does not show favoritism to individual team members.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader recognizes the importance and contributions of all team members.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader maintains/encourages open lines of communication among team members.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The Team Leader leads by example in quality of work.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

## Other participants

*The other team members treated me with respect.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The other team members considered my suggestions and ideas.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The team members treated each other with respect.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The team members considered each other's suggestions or ideas.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The team members treated the institution's representatives with respect.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

*The team members considered suggestions or ideas from the institution.*

①                      ①                      ②                      ③                      ④  
Never                Rarely                Sometimes                Usually                Always

Please type additional comments in the box below:

# Collaborating Agencies

This project is a collaborative effort of the following accreditation agencies:

**Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)**

20 North Clark Street, Suite 2500  
Chicago, IL 60602-5109  
(312) 664-3575  
[www.acpe-accredit.org](http://www.acpe-accredit.org)

**The American Board for Accreditation in Psychoanalysis, Inc. (ABAP, Inc)**

Office of Accreditation  
2007 Valley Road  
Rockford, IL 61107  
(815) 397-7729  
[www.abapinc.org](http://www.abapinc.org)

**American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)**

233 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 2150  
Chicago, IL 60601-5800  
(312) 233-1100  
[www.ahima.org](http://www.ahima.org)

**American Library Association (ALA)**

50 East Huron Street  
Chicago, IL 60611  
(800) 545-2433  
[www.ala.org/accreditation](http://www.ala.org/accreditation)

**The Accreditation Council on Optometric Education**

243 North Lindbergh Blvd.  
St. Louis, MO 63141-7881  
(314) 991-4100 x246  
(800) 365-2219  
[www.aoa.org/students/accreditation.asp](http://www.aoa.org/students/accreditation.asp)

**American Osteopathic Association (AOA)**

142 East Ontario  
Chicago, IL 60611  
[www.aoacoca.org](http://www.aoacoca.org)

**American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)**

1931 N. Meacham Road - Suite 100  
Schaumburg, IL 60173-4360  
(847) 925-8070  
[www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)

**Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education of the American Dietetic Association (CADE)**

120 South Riverside Plaza, Suite 2000  
Chicago, IL 60606-6995  
(800) 877-1600 extension 5400  
[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

**Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP)**

35 East Wacker Drive, Suite 1970

Chicago, IL 60601-2208

(312) 553-9355 extension 25

[www.caahep.org](http://www.caahep.org)

**Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME)**

2000 14th Street North, Suite 780

Arlington, VA 22201-2543

[www.cahmeweb.org](http://www.cahmeweb.org)

**Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA)**

146 Monroe Center, NW, Suite 1318

Grand Rapids, MI 49503-2822

(616) 458-0400

[www.fider.org](http://www.fider.org)

**Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC)**

30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400

Chicago, IL 60602-2504

(800) 621-7440

[www.aqip.org](http://www.aqip.org)

**Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology (JRCERT)**

20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 2850

Chicago, IL 60606-3182

(312) 704-5300

[www.jrcert.org](http://www.jrcert.org)

**Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE)**

524 Main Street, Suite 202

Racine, WI 53403

(262) 898-1846

[www.macte.org](http://www.macte.org)

**Planning Accreditation Board (PAB)**

122 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600

Chicago, IL 60603

(312) 334-1271

[www.showcase.netins.net/web/pab\\_fi66](http://www.showcase.netins.net/web/pab_fi66)

**For more information, please contact:**

**Ulric K. Chung, A.B., M.C.S., Ph.D.**

Assistant Executive Director, Accreditation Evaluation and Research

Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)

20 North Clark Street, Suite 2500

Chicago, IL 60602-5109

(312) 664-3575

# Accreditation Glossary<sup>2</sup>

This glossary is being compiled through the efforts of many accreditation agencies to broaden our collective knowledge of accreditation terminology. Often, different terms are used by accreditation agencies to refer to the same concept, or a single term may have several, nuanced or even radically different meanings from one agency to the next. We encourage individuals who are new to accreditation to contact their regional or specialized agencies for specific lists of terms; and we welcome suggestions from accreditation agencies for new additions or changes to the glossary.

## **Accreditation**

A voluntary, non-governmental system of evaluation used to protect the public interest and to verify the quality of service provided by academic programs and institutions.

## **Accreditation Actions**

Any decision made by an accreditation agency affecting the accreditation status of a program. These actions are: 1) grant precandidacy, 2) grant candidacy, 3) initially accredit, 4) continue accreditation, 5) conditionally accredit, 6) withdraw accreditation, or 7) deny initial accreditation.

## **Action and Recommendation Report**

See "*Decision Document*."

## **Adverse Action:**

Withdrawal or denial of accreditation or preaccreditation by an accreditation agency.

## **Appeal**

The right and process available to a program or institution for a review of an adverse accreditation decision.

## **ASPA**

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. A national, non-profit organization providing a collaborative forum and a collective voice for U.S. accreditation agencies that assess the quality of specialized and professional higher education programs and schools. ASPA represents its members on issues of educational quality facing institutions of higher education, governments, students, and the public. ASPA also advances the knowledge, skills, good practices, and ethical commitments of accreditors, and communicates the value of accreditation as a means of enhancing educational quality.

## **Biennial Narrative Report**

A report submitted every two years to an accreditation agency by a dean or chief academic officer for the purpose of sharing major developments and illustrating ongoing program planning.

## **Candidacy Status**

A new program that has students enrolled but has not had a graduating class. Candidate status denotes a developmental program, which is expected to mature in accord with stated plans and within a defined time period. Reasonable assurances are expected to be provided that the program may become accredited as programmatic experiences are

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Many of the original terms on this page were adapted with permission from the American Library Association.

gained, generally, by the time the first class has graduated. Graduates of a class designated as having Candidate status have the same rights and privileges as graduates of an accredited program.

**CAO**

The chief academic officer at an academic program or institution.

**CEO**

The chief executive officer at an academic program or institution.

**CFO**

The chief financial officer at an academic program or institution.

**CHEA**

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. A private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity and recognizes regional, institutional, and professional accrediting agencies in the United States.

**Compliance**

The extent to which a program or institution conforms and adheres to accreditation standards

**Comprehensive Review**

Periodic review of a program by an accreditation agency, where the agency's decision-making body or its representatives evaluate a program's conformity to Standards. The process typically includes the program submitting a self-study, undergoing an on-site evaluation, and an accreditation decision being made.

**Conditional Accreditation** (also Provisional Accreditation)

Accreditation status that is granted for a shorter-than-normal period of time, pending significant and immediate improvement to maintain conformity with the Standards.

**Conflict of Interest**

Any personal, financial, or professional interest that might create a conflict with an evaluator or member of a decision-making body's ability to fairly and objectively carry out accreditation responsibilities.

**Continued Accreditation**

Accreditation status granted to programs and institutions that continuously demonstrate evidence of their conformity to the Standards.

**Criteria**

See "*Standards.*"

**Dean**

Chief academic officer (dean, director, or chair) of an accredited program.

**Decision Document** (also Action and Recommendation Report)

The official document sent to a program's dean or to an institution's chief executive officer conveying the accreditation-agency's accreditation decision following a comprehensive or focused review.



**Evaluation–Team Report**

A report written by external reviewers during or following the on–site evaluation visit to validate the program self–study and document the level of compliance with standards and performance with respect to program and institutional outcomes.

**Evaluation Team.**

See "*External Reviewers.*"

**External Reviewers** (also Evaluation Team, External Review Panel)

A group of individuals appointed by the accreditation agency with the task of visiting a program or institution for the purpose of verify information in Self–Study Report.

**External Review Panel.**

See "*External Reviewers.*"

**Focused Report** (also Special Report)

A report submitted by a program or institution to the accreditation agency to address specific areas or concern as outlined in a decision document.

**Full Accreditation**

Programs or institutions which demonstrate that they comply with accreditation standards and will continue to do so receive full Accreditation in the form of Initial Accreditation for programs or institution being accredited for the first time or Continued Accreditation for those who have already been accredited.

**Full Review**

See "*Comprehensive Review.*"

**Initial Accreditation**

Accreditation that has been granted to a program or institution being accredited for the first time.

**Institutional Accreditation**

The evaluation and accreditation of an institution as a whole (e.g., a university), usually by a regional accreditor.

**Interim Reports**

Narrative or statistical reports sent by the program or institution between Comprehensive Reviews for the purpose of updating the accreditation agency on progress towards meeting Standards.

**On–Site Evaluation**

(also On–Site Review, On–Site Visit, Evaluation Visit, Site Visit)

The part of the comprehensive review in which members of the External Review Panel travel to the program's location to validate the information contained in the Program Presentation. Also known as visit or site visit.

**Peer Review**

A process for evaluating the quality of a program or institution using one's equals from other programs or institutions to ensure that it meets accreditation Standards.

**Plan for the Program Presentation**

Document submitted by the program or institution to the accreditation agency one year before the on-site evaluation to ensure that the preparation for the review is done in a timely and effective manner.

**Precandidate Status**

Status granted by an accreditation agency prior to enrolling students. Granting precandidate status indicates that a program or institution's planning has taken into account Standards and guidelines and suggests reasonable assurances of moving to the Candidate status. Granting precandidate status brings no rights or privileges of accreditation.

**Probation**

Status granted by an accreditation agency to an accredited program or institution that is determined to be in non-compliance with one or more standards. Probation is not an adverse accreditation action; however, adverse accreditation action (withdrawal or denial of accreditation or preaccreditation) will be taken if a program or institution fails to come into compliance within the period specified by the agency and the U.S. Department of Education.

**Program**

A program of study leading to a degree.

**Program Presentation**

See *"Self-Study Report."*

**Provisional Accreditation**

See *"Conditional Accreditation."*

**Public Member**

A member of an accreditation agency who is appointed from the public at large to represent the public interest.

**Regional Accreditor**

An agency that accredits institutions of higher education. In the United States, the regional agencies (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and Western Association of Schools and College) generally accredit institutions that are only within specific geographic areas.

**Retroactive Period of Initial Accreditation**

A period of time where students are considered to have graduated from an accredited program or institution, even though initial accreditation was granted after students actually graduated.

**Schedule of Evaluation Reviews**

The calendar of scheduled on-site evaluations maintained by the agency.

**School**

An administrative unit (e.g., school, college, or department) in an institution of higher education offering one or more programs that lead to a degree.

**Self-Study Report** (also Self-Study; Program Presentation)

A document prepared by the program or institution as part of the comprehensive review process. This document describes the program or institution, how it meets the Standards, analyzes its strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, and sets forth the program's plans and goals for future development and continued compliance with the Standards.

**Special Report**

See "*Special Report.*"

**Specialized Accreditor**

An agency that accredits post-secondary professional and occupational-education programs or schools, such as medical schools, engineering schools, teacher-education programs and health-profession programs.

**Standards** (also Criteria)

Accreditation standards establish minimum levels of quality around which evaluations and accreditation decisions must be based. Standards are created through a consensus process that calls for input from educators, students, practitioners, regulators and the general public.

**Statistical Report**

Statistical information submitted to an accreditation agency. The data may include information about faculty, students, curriculum, and income and expenditures and may be collected on a regular basis as a part of routine monitoring.

**Substantive Change**

Significant modification, expansion or contraction in the nature or scope of an accredited program or institution including, but not limited to mission, organization, curricular delivery, enrollment, leadership, etc.

**Transparency**

The concept of making accreditation processes easier to understand, including opening them to public scrutiny and making them subject to clear methods of challenge or change.

**Withdrawn Accreditation**

An accreditation status indicating a program is no longer accredited by an agency effective as of a specific date. Accreditation may be withdrawn by either 1) a program or institution voluntarily withdrawing from the accreditation process, or 2) the accreditation agency withdrawing accreditation for serious lack of conformity to the Standards, for failure to participate in the process, or for not meeting financial obligations to the accreditation agency.