

## **Chapter I**

### **The Accreditation Process in America**

#### **Overview**

*Accreditation is a uniquely American activity which encourages institutional quality through a process of self-evaluation and peer review. It may be either programmatic or institutional. Voluntary in nature, institutional accreditation activities are undertaken for most colleges and universities by six regional associations of institutions, membership in one of which is synonymous with accreditation. Regional accreditation has the dual purpose of both providing quality assurance for institutions of higher education in the United States and encouraging institutions to work toward improving their quality and increasing their effectiveness.*

#### **The Role and Value of Accreditation**

Accreditation is an activity developed and long accepted in the United States, but generally unknown in most other countries, which typically rely on governmental supervision and control of educational institutions. The record of accomplishment and outstanding success in the education of Americans can be traced in large part to the reluctance of the United States to impose governmental restrictions on institutions of postsecondary education, and to the success of the voluntary American system of accreditation in promoting quality without inhibiting innovation. The high proportion of Americans benefiting from higher education, the great variety of institutions of higher education, the reputation of universities in the United States for both fundamental and applied research, and the widespread availability of professional services in the United States, all testify to postsecondary education of high quality and to the success of the accreditation system which the institutions and professions of the United States have devised to promote that quality.

Accreditation is a status granted to an educational institution or a program that has been found to meet or exceed stated criteria of educational quality. In the United States accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and programs, and is conferred by non-governmental bodies.

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Accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or program and to foster the improvement of the institution or program. Accreditation, which applies to institutions or programs, is to be distinguished from certification and licensure, which apply to individuals.

Bodies conducting institutional accreditation, such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc., are national or regional in scope, and comprise the institutions that have achieved and maintain accreditation. A body conducting specialized accreditation of a program preparing students for a profession or occupation is often closely associated with professional associations in the field. Institutional or programmatic accreditation cannot guarantee the quality of individual graduates or of individual courses within an institution or program, but can give reasonable assurance of the content and quality of the education offered.

Many members of the general public as well as various governmental and corporate entities rely on the quality assurance provided by accreditation. Not only do prospective and current students expect that institutions in which they are interested be accredited but also state and federal governments use accreditation to identify those students and institutions eligible to receive direct financial support. Most states and corporations who reimburse employee tuition also directly or indirectly depend upon accreditation for quality assurance. In addition, attendance at an accredited institution often facilitates the transfer of credit for those students wishing to move to another such institution.

Although the quality assurance provided by accreditation has led to its widespread acceptance as an indicator of academic merit, accreditation is not a regularizing force, measuring every institution by a uniform set of quantitative standards. Rather, self-regulation means that institutions have come together to formulate a set of standards for the measurement of educational quality upon which all agree and that they have established a mechanism to apply those standards.

Both institutional and programmatic bodies conduct the accreditation process using a common pattern. The pattern requires integral self-study of the institution or program, followed by an on-site visit by

an evaluation team composed of peer educators, and a subsequent review and decision by a central governing group. Within this general pattern the various accrediting bodies have developed a variety of individual procedures adapted to their own circumstances.

An institutional accrediting body considers the characteristics of a whole institution and judges the success with which it is meeting its stated mission. For this reason an institutional accrediting body gives attention not only to the educational offerings of an institution it accredits, but also to other such institutional characteristics as student personnel services, financial conditions, and administrative strength.

The criteria of an institutional accrediting body are broad, as is demanded by attention to an entire institution and by the presence in the United States of post secondary institutions of widely different missions, purposes and scopes. Such criteria also provide encouragement to institutions to try innovative curricula and procedures, and to adopt them when they prove successful.

Overall institutional improvement is stimulated by the requirement that the accredited institution conduct periodic self-evaluation seeking to identify what it does well, determine the areas in which improvement is needed, and develop plans to address needed improvements. While accreditation indicates an acceptable level of overall quality, any institution, however excellent, is capable of improvement, which must come from its own clear identification and understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Institutional improvement is also encouraged through the advice and counsel provided by the visiting team, which comprises experienced educators drawn primarily from accredited institutions, and by the publications of the accrediting body.

