12 common questions and answers about accreditation

The questions and answers below provide basic information about the regional accreditation process. They will help you to understand the purpose of accreditation and how college self evaluations are implemented.

1. What is regional accreditation?

Regional accreditation is a successful and robust, time-tested model of professional peer review that supports educational excellence. Accreditation is a voluntary process of quality review that institutions agree to undergo periodically. The accrediting commissions with responsibility for accreditation in various regions are legally recognized by the federal government. The public has come to value accreditation as a mark of quality.

Accreditation is a system of self regulation developed by higher education institutions to evaluate overall institutional quality and encourage continual improvement. Colleges and universities form membership associations to set up an accrediting agency and work with that agency to establish the quality standards used to rigorously evaluate the institutions. Accreditation Standards represent the best practices in higher education and set a high expectation for quality.

There are six geographic regions under the U.S. system recognized by the federal government and one accreditor has exclusive responsibility for accreditation within each. There are other types of accreditation (national, programmatic) but regional accreditation status is regarded as the most comprehensive and rigorous for institutions to attain.

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) is part of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) region. WASC operates in California, Hawai'i and the Pacific Region that includes Guam, American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Five other regional accreditors operate in and have names associated with other geographic regions of the United States.

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2. What authority do regional accreditors like ACCJC have to impose Accreditation Standards on institutions?

Regional accreditors are given the authority to apply their Accreditation Standards by the member institutions that have voluntarily joined a regional association to improve educational quality. The ACCJC and other regional accrediting bodies are also authorized to operate by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) through the Higher Education Opportunity Act. The USDE evaluates accrediting bodies every five years through a process called "recognition."

The USDE has several requirements that accrediting bodies must demonstrate they continuously meet, including integrity of the process, making the results of accreditation available to the public, and fairness in the even application of the Accreditation Standards to all institutions.

Accreditation from a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accreditor, such as the ACCJC, enables institutions to qualify for federal Title IV funds (financial aid for students) and other federal grants and contracts. The Accreditation Standards of a recognized accrediting body such as the ACCJC are developed with some input from the Department of Education and Congress, which also asks each accreditor to encourage the active participation of all member institutions in a transparent and open process that assures educational quality.

3. What is the purpose of regional accreditation?

Accreditation is a proven method for assuring that a higher education institution has the ability to offer a quality education to the men and women who will lead their communities in the future, and to improve that quality over time. By establishing high standards and then being externally evaluated against those standards, colleges and universities can provide a degree or certificate that students and the community can trust.

In achieving and maintaining its accreditation a higher education institution assures the public that the institution meets standards of quality, that the education earned there is of value to the student who earned it, and that

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employers, trade or profession-related licensing agencies and other colleges and universities can accept a student's credential as legitimate.

Just as important, the process provides a means for an institution to continuously improve educational quality and grow to meet the changing needs of students and society. Internal evaluation is a critical part of the accreditation process and through the various phases of an accreditation process colleges and universities are able to build on strengths and improve weaknesses so that they offer a better education.

4. How is the accreditation review conducted?

There are four phases to the accreditation process involving internal evaluation, external evaluation by professional peers, Commission evaluation, and institutional self-improvement to meet evolving regional and federal standards. Every six years ACCJC members have agreed to undergo the comprehensive process to determine whether they are meeting their established Accreditation Standards and to develop ways to improve their future ability to serve students.

Every accreditation review starts with an internal evaluation. An institution engages in comparing itself to Accreditation Standards, writes an internal (i.e., self) evaluation report, develops its own plans for improvement where needed, and submits the written analysis to its accrediting agency for review.

At the second phase, a trained team of education professional peers from member institutions conducts an external institutional evaluation. The external evaluation team, all volunteers, visits the institution, examines the institutional internal evaluation, examines institutional practices, and writes an evaluative report with recommendations for improvement.

The third phase occurs when the members of the regional accrediting commission evaluate all the information and make the decision on the accredited status of the institution. The Commission may also provide recommendations and direction for institutional improvement in areas where improvement is needed. ACCJC Commissioners review institutional cases at meetings in January and June of each year.

Whether the institution meets the current Accreditation Standards or not, the fourth phase is about self-improvement and each institution uses the recommendations of the external evaluation team and the Commission to guide changes that make their educational quality better.

The goal is always to improve institutional performance before the start of the next six-year review. The Commission may monitor and advise an institution until it improves. If an institution is out of compliance with the Accreditation Standards, the Commissioners may require a follow-up report from the institution, or another team visit, and/or may impose a sanction and deadlines for the institution to come into compliance with all Accreditation Standards. A sanction signals the institution and the public that there are institutional issues that need to be addressed if quality is to be maintained. While on sanction, institutional accreditation continues and the institution works to resolve any such issues.

An institution seeking accreditation for the first time undergoes a similar process including an internal examination using the Accreditation Standards and an external team evaluation using the Accreditation Standards. It then will spend three to five years in pre-accreditation statuses of Eligibility and Candidacy as it demonstrates that it has the capacity to continuously meet Accreditation Standards. When the institution is found to meet all Accreditation Standards and policies, it is awarded "initial accreditation", and thereafter is subject to a comprehensive review every six years.

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5. What are the Accreditation Standards?

The Accreditation Standards are the basic tool used by member institutions to gauge their success in providing high quality education and in continually improving. The Accreditation Standards focus a good deal on institutional practices that support student completion of certificates and degrees, and student learning. Accreditation helps assure that students get a sound and useful education that is of lifelong value.

Accreditation Standards are established in collaboration with an accrediting association's member institutions and discussed in public hearings with multiple opportunities for comment by the member institutions and the concerned public before they are adopted. Standards are reviewed, and changes are considered, every six years. In addition, Accreditation Standards are statements of expected practice that are developed by the Accrediting Commission, with input from the U.S. Department of Education that reflect Congressional guidelines and expectations for institutional quality. These federal requirements are increasingly more rigorous.

The Accreditation Standards describe good practices in areas of institutional operations, including institutional mission, institutional effectiveness (i.e., achieving stated mission, providing effective educational services), instruction, support services, library and learning resources, human resources, facilities and physical resources, information technology resources, fiscal resources and fiscal management, and governance and decision making.

6. Who are the Commissioners?

The ACCJC has nineteen Commissioners who represent the interests of the general public and the regional member institutions. According to the ACCJC bylaws established by the member institutions:

- Five Commissioners are faculty from member institutions;
- Three represent the public interest and have no affiliation with any member institution, as required by federal regulations;
- Two may be people who do not fit any of the other categories of members; and
- Three are administrators from member institutions;

Six people each representing one of the following educational entities:

1. The California Community Colleges;
2. The University of Hawai'i Community Colleges;
3. The Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of WASC;
4. The Accrediting Commission for Schools of WASC;
5. The Pacific Colleges other than Hawai'i accredited by the ACCJC; and
6. Private colleges accredited by the ACCJC.

7. How are the members of the Commission elected?

The Commissioner election process solicits nominations and applications for vacant Commissioner positions through a widely distributed announcement each year in February. Persons interested in becoming a Commissioner complete application materials. A Nominating Committee comprised of four sitting Commissioners and four persons from member institutions nominates a slate of candidates; chief executives of member institutions may add alternative candidates to the slate. The chief executive officers of member institutions then elect the new Commissioners. The Commissioner election process ensures that individuals with personal integrity and true commitment to higher education quality are elected to serve as Commissioners.

8. Who serves on evaluation teams?

Evaluation teams are comprised of eight to 12 volunteer education professionals from member institutions who have relevant expertise and are trained by the Commission staff to employ the ACCJC Accreditation Standards in evaluating institutional practices. They are administrators, faculty, and sometimes trustees of two-year colleges. They have experience in educational governance and administration, instruction, student services, research, facilities, learning resources, fiscal management, human resources and technology resources.

The Commission selects evaluation team members on the basis of their professional expertise and specializations (e.g., Distance Education experts are frequently needed), their experience with accreditation at their own campuses and their ability to apply the Accreditation Standards fairly and consistently. Work as a volunteer evaluator requires a substantial commitment of the evaluator's time, and a team member participates in a four-to five-day long evaluation visit.

Evaluators must also be analytic and use evidentiary materials, have strong interpersonal skills, be able to apply Accreditation Standards to institutions objectively, be able to write well, use a computer for writing, and work well as members of the team. Evaluator training and experience help the team members enhance their skills, and so individuals willing to serve as team members for several years are desirable.

9. Are the institutions expected to meet all Accreditation Standards at all times?

Yes. Institutions that seek ACCJC accreditation agree to adhere to the Accreditation Standards established by the member institutions at all times. Since accredited status is a signal to the public that an institution satisfies all Accreditation Standards, institutions have to remain in compliance at all times. Anything short of that would diminish public confidence in accreditation as a means of assuring quality. When there is a major change in

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Accreditation Standards, the Commission sets a reasonable time line for institutions to comply with them; for example, the 10-year time line for implementing student learning outcomes.

However, institutional practices may change, and institutions sometimes don't continuously meet all Accreditation Standards. The purpose of the six-year review is to provide the impetus for re- evaluation of institutional quality. Recommendations for improvement result if the evaluation concludes there are some institutional deficiencies to address OR there are opportunities to improve and exceed the Accreditation Standards.

10. Does the Commission's process help institutions improve, or just expose them to negative publicity when the institution is found not to meet all Accreditation Standards?

The accreditation process is very effective in helping institutions to improve their educational and institutional effectiveness. Accreditation Standards developed by the ACCJC are drawn from best practices within the member institutions as well as from best institutional practices nationally.

The accreditation processes reinforces the institutional responsibility to implement these Accreditation Standards. The institution is given a good deal of professional advice and support for improvement and opportunities to train faculty and staff on the Accreditation Standards. Professional peers who comprise the evaluation teams give good advice, tailored to the institution's mission and other institutional characteristics. Professional peers on the Commission also provide advice and recommendations. Commission staff also gives advice, training and support to institutions that have been found out of compliance and are trying to make needed changes.

Except in the most egregious cases, the Commission gives institutions some time to implement the recommendations for improvement and to come into compliance with Accreditation Standards. Colleges report to the Commission that the accreditation findings and recommendations, and the time limit given for improvement, and even the sanctions given, help to focus institutions on what must be done to improve.

11. If found out of compliance, how long does the institution have to correct that situation? Is there a limit on the amount of time an institution will be given to improve?

Federal law requires higher education institutions that are found to be out of compliance to come into full compliance with all Accreditation Standards within two years. This is known as the "Two Year Rule." The law requires the Commission to terminate accreditation if an institution fails to come substantially into compliance within this period unless there are some rare and extenuating circumstances.

12. How does the Commission ensure that its decisions are fair and unbiased, and that its evaluation teams are unbiased?

The Commission applies the Accreditation Standards in a consistent manner to all the institutions being accredited. The accreditation process is designed to be transparent and collaborative so that the institutions feel the accreditation process is fair and will yield accurate results. The Commission holds itself accountable for good practice by evaluating and assessing its own ability to make fair and unbiased decisions on accreditation. The evaluation encourages feedback so an institution's views of the process or an evaluation team report can be heard by the Commission.

The Commission works to make sure the process is fair through the development of clear conflict of interest policies, effective training of evaluators, rigorous evaluation of team members by staff and member institutions, and by encouraging feedback by institutions undergoing evaluation.

The Commission's policy on Conflict of Interest applies to Commissioners reviewing an institutional case as well as to evaluation team members and Commission staff. Commissioners with a conflict or potential conflict are not permitted to evaluate a case; team evaluators with a conflict or potential conflict are not permitted to serve on a team or are removed from an evaluation team if a conflict is identified by the individual, the institution or the Commission.

The Commission members undergo training on fairness and consistency. Commission meetings always begin with a review of the Policy on Conflict of Interest as well as a discussion of fairness and consistency in applying Accreditation Standards to all institutions. All evaluation team members are trained prior to each comprehensive evaluation assignment. All members of comprehensive evaluation teams are evaluated by the team chair, and the ACCJC keeps data on those evaluations. Team members who receive critical evaluations are individually advised to correct behaviors, or are not asked to serve on future teams.

In addition to the extensive self-evaluations of these professional peer review teams, the accreditation process encourages feedback at all levels. Colleges undergoing comprehensive evaluation are asked to evaluate the performance of the visiting evaluation team. That feedback may include general or specific statements about team members. These comments are also retained in the Commission's database and, if negative, may result in a decision not to ask the individual to serve on future teams.

The chancellor, president, or other top official of an institution undergoing accreditation review is given opportunity to respond to draft evaluation team reports in order to correct errors of fact. A college may also exercise its right to respond to a team's findings and recommendations in writing or by appearing before the Commission when the case is being considered.