

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Accreditation is the educational community's means of self-regulation through quality assurance and improvement. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of exercise of external control.

There are many ways in which institutions may affirm the value and realize the benefits of accreditation. As each undertakes its institutional self-study and participates in other aspects of the accrediting process, the Commission urges particular attention to several basic institutional responsibilities. The institution's commitment to quality and regard for accreditation fundamentals are reflected in an institution's

- integrity in dealing with its constituencies and the public
- involvement of administrators, faculty, students, and others in the self-study process
- commitment to continuous improvement

These responsibilities should be considered in the context of the Commission's **Standards of Membership for Institutions of Higher Education at the Technical or Career Level**.

DEALING WITH CONSTITUENCIES AND THE PUBLIC

An important aspect of institutional responsibility in accreditation is the integrity with which the institution deals with its constituencies and the public. The Commission on Technical and Career Institutions and its member institutions have a shared responsibility for maintaining educational quality and public confidence in higher education.

Accreditation rests on trust and good faith in the integrity of institutions and their leaders. The Commission on Technical and Career Institutions relies on the information conveyed in self-study reports, catalogs, and other institutional publications, and on the findings of visiting teams. The openness with which teams are received and the access they are given to an institution's records are a measure of the trust and good faith necessary to the effectiveness and credibility of accreditation. An institution's responsibility to provide such access and openness is a central aspect of the accrediting process.

The Commission on Technical and Career Institutions holds confidential those documents, such as the self-study and the evaluation report, that describe an institution's strengths and weaknesses and other information upon which an accreditation decision is based. Although the Commission will make available to the public summary information contained in the membership roster, it is the responsibility of the institution to provide any other information pertaining to its self-study, evaluation visit and accreditation status.

In order to ensure that the public receives accurate information about an institution and to sustain and satisfy its accountability as a recognized accrediting agency, the Commission must be kept informed of any changes, both routine and substantive, that occur between regularly scheduled

periodic evaluations. The Commission's policy statement **Substantive Change in Member and Affiliated Institutions of Higher Education** should be consulted about specific procedures for obtaining prior approval of any substantive changes or for determining if prior approval is required.

An institution's integrity also is measured by how it fulfills its responsibilities with regard to students. The primary responsibility is to assure the fair and equitable treatment of students. The following are examples of ways in which such responsibility can be demonstrated:

- Institutions must ensure that program length and tuition and fees are always appropriate to the objectives of the educational program offered by the institution. For example, when an institution increases the number of credits or hours required for the successful completion of a course or program of studies without changing course content, students should not be adversely affected by a corresponding increase in tuition.
- Students must be given the opportunity to submit complaints to the institution. Complaint procedures should be published and accessible to students and a record of complaints maintained. (See **Complaints Against Affiliated Institutions**.)
- Institutions participating in federally-guaranteed student loan programs (under Title IV of the Higher Education Act as Amended) and designating the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions as a gatekeeper agency must demonstrate diligence in keeping student default rates at an acceptable low level and must also comply with program responsibilities incumbent on institutions participating in the Title IV programs as defined by prevailing governmental guidelines. Institutions whose default rate requires a default reduction plan share with the Commission their plans to reduce the default rate through prudent institutional policies.
- In the event that an accredited institution closes, the institution is required to develop a teach-out agreement that must be submitted to and approved by the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions. (See **Policy on Teach-Out Agreements**.)
- The institution ensures that students are provided any instruction it has promised prior to its closure, at no additional charge and in close proximity to itself. An institution that enters into a teach-out agreement should be able to demonstrate the compatibility of its programs and scheduling to that of the closed institution. The document, **Considerations When Closing an Institution of Higher Education**, outlines the procedures and requirements for a closing institution.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE SELF-STUDY

Institutional commitment to quality and improvement may be manifested in many ways, but that commitment is clearly demonstrated through the institution's involvement of administrators,

faculty, students, and trustees in the self-study process. Although the size of the institution may affect the number of those participating in the self-study, involvement must be representative of the institution's constituencies.

While administrators, faculty, students, and governing board members are essential participants in self-study activities, alumni, and representatives of the local community may contribute as well. (See **Policy and Procedures for Third-Party Comments During Comprehensive Evaluations**.) Whether or not these constituencies are directly involved, an institution demonstrates its commitment through its efforts to keep all constituencies apprised of self-study activities and progress. An evaluation team quickly discovers the level of awareness of the self-study effort on any campus, and that is always an indication of the level of institutional commitment and integrity in the accreditation process.

A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

A fundamental aspect of accreditation is continuous improvement. Because accreditation is a process, not an end result of a self-study or periodic review report, an institution's responsibility to participate in the accrediting process persists throughout the ten-year accreditation cycle. One way in which an institution demonstrates fulfillment of this responsibility is through ongoing review of institutional effectiveness and outcomes assessment.

Outcomes assessment is a tool that allows an institution to determine the extent to which teaching and learning opportunities and outcomes are consistent with the objectives of the institution. The Commission's Standard Two on **Planning and Assessment** helps institutions design, initiate, and conduct effective outcomes assessment programs.

Institutional responsibility for continuous improvement goes beyond simply conducting outcomes assessment. It is important that the institution use the results to improve teaching, learning, and services on the campus.

OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES

There are other significant responsibilities that an institution must accept as part of its accreditation.

As a membership organization, the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions develops its policies and procedures through a democratic process. The Commission therefore encourages institutions to participate in the policy development and decision-making process within the region. Institutions are given numerous opportunities to provide input and designate the policies and procedures through which accreditation decisions are made. Institutional representatives are often invited to participate in groups for a variety of purposes, including policy and standards development. Annual meetings provide special forums and other opportunities for open and candid discussions of common as well as uncommon concerns. Should these not provide the appropriate venue for an institution's participation, it is the institution's responsibility to find a way to participate actively.

Institutions are required to meet government guidelines to be eligible to participate in Title IV and other student assistance programs. Some of these requirements are demanded of institutions directly through the Title IV Program Participation Agreement and Federal and State regulations, while others are required by government indirectly through Federally mandated accreditation standards and regulations. Examples of these requirements and responsibilities are described in the preceding section on dealing with constituencies and the public. Institutions also may be required to meet certain State or local requirements to be licensed or eligible to operate as an institution of higher education.

The Commission on Technical and Career Institutions regularly provides member institutions, other accrediting agencies, and State and Federal agencies with current copies of its **Standards of Membership** and **Eligibility Requirements**. The Commission, however, does not act as a clearinghouse for all State, Federal, or other requirements. It is the responsibility of the institution, therefore, to be apprised of and comply with any criteria or standards that are required directly by the Federal or State governments or by any other external organization. Information on these requirements can be obtained directly from the organizations with which the institution must establish or maintain a working relationship.