

# **Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors**

## **CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES**

**March 2008; May 2008\***

This document combines several previous ASPA documents related to core values and principles. It is divided into separate sections regarding the operation of ASPA as an organization as well as the operation of individual accrediting bodies. It should be viewed as a resource that supplements the *ASPA Code of Good Practice* and provides further interpretation related to the roles and functioning of ASPA and its member accreditors.

### **I. FOR THE OPERATION OF THE ASSOCIATION**

#### **A. MISSION**

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors shall:

1. Enhance the relationship among the respective accrediting organizations through scholarly thought, dialogue and activities to promote a climate of improvement of educational quality, service, rigor, efficiency, and fairness in accreditation;
2. Respect and protect the integrity, independence, and autonomy of accrediting organizations and their affiliated institutions and programs;
3. Facilitate collaboration among programs, institutions, and accrediting organizations;
4. Advocate quality improvement beyond threshold standards in programs, institutions, and accrediting organizations;
5. Encourage a focus on student learning and graduate competencies, rather than on methods utilized;
6. Establish means to respond effectively to and discourage forces which promote duplication, fragmentation, and/or inappropriate expansion of the accreditation system; and
7. Monitor and respond when deemed appropriate to concepts and proposals that would impede conditions for effective work in programs and institutions.

## **B. FUNCTIONS**

Members of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors work together to fulfill the following interrelated functions:

1. Facilitate professional interaction for organizations and individuals with accreditation responsibilities;
2. Provide a means for representing specialized and professional accreditation in public and governmental policy forums, and to the public;
3. Serve as a forum to exchange information and develop shared access to resources among members of the specialized and professional accreditation community;
4. Offer continuing education programming for individuals and organizations with accreditation responsibilities;
5. Provide a means for receiving counsel and sharing governance with administrative leaders of higher education institutions, with academic and non-academic leaders of the professions, and with the public;
6. Stimulate focused research on accreditation issues; and
7. Provide a forum for policy analysis and development.

## **C. OPERATING PRINCIPLES**

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors shall operate consistent with the following principles:

1. Orientation. The Association, the Board, and all Committees shall promote dignity, respect, courtesy, and cooperation in all aspects of the Association's work.
2. Consensus. In principle, all affairs of the Association, the Board, and various Committees shall be decided after efforts to reach consensus.
3. Consultation. Consultation shall be a hallmark of all aspects of the organization and its operations. In general, time shall be provided for thorough review of all proposals before action is taken. Association members, Board members, and others as appropriate shall be solicited for their views at the beginning and during the course of major policy reviews or initiatives. Care shall be taken to consult with appropriate communities of interest in projects undertaken by the Association.

4. Reporting. The Board and Committee on Nominations shall report regularly to the Association. The Executive Committee, the Committee on Membership, the Committee on Recognition, the Committee on Professional Development and all other Committees shall report regularly to the Board and, through the Board, to the Association.
5. Nondiscrimination Policy. No person shall be subject to discrimination in any relationship with the Association because of age, gender, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, or disability.

#### **D. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The Association strives to avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest in all aspects of its activities. The Association expects all individuals involved in any relationship, including staff, to declare potential conflicts of interest as they appear. Potential conflicts of interest may arise because of personal associations; past, current, or projected affiliations; past or current financial relationships; or for other reasons. Questions concerning conflicts of interest should be addressed to the office of the Executive Director.

The officers of the Association, members of the Board, and the Chair and members of a Committee on Recognition, if established, may not serve concurrently as chair of an accrediting organization or as chair or president of a national postsecondary association during the time of their service to the Association in these positions. Staff of voting members may serve in these positions as stipulated in the Bylaws.

No member of the Committee on Membership or, if established, a Committee on Recognition, may participate in any way in membership or recognition decisions in which he or she has a pecuniary or personal interest (or the appearance of same) or with respect to which, because of present organizational, institutional or program association, he or she has divided loyalties or conflicts (or the appearance of same) on the outcome of the decision. This restriction is not intended to prevent participation and decision-making in matters that have no direct or substantial impact on the organization, institution, or program with which the Committee member is associated.

If a conflict of interest issue arises, the matter shall be forwarded to the Executive Director who shall gather information, solicit advice as appropriate, and attempt to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all concerned, consistent with the published policies and procedures of the Association and with consideration of standard practice within the postsecondary accreditation community. Should the Executive Director be unable to achieve resolution, he or she shall refer the matter to the ASPA Chair or the Executive Committee, as appropriate. If the conflict involves the Executive Director, the matter shall be referred to the Executive Committee. The assigned Chair or Executive Committee shall seek resolution through procedures developed to address the specifics of each case. These procedures shall avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of same.

## **E. COMPLAINTS**

The Association will investigate complaints regarding a member agency only if the complaint contains facts or allegations that, if substantiated, may indicate that the member agency is not following the *ASPA Code of Good Practice* or is not in compliance as a member in good standing as defined by ASPA's membership criteria.

The Association will not intervene on behalf of an individual complainant regarding an ASPA member agency issue and will not serve to mediate or determine the results of disputes between or among student, faculty, program or institution and the member agency.

## II. FOR THE OPERATION OF ACCREDITING BODIES

### A. VISION

An accrediting body is successful if it is able to:

1. promote trust within its own specific accreditation arena and maintain the trust of higher education, the public, the professions, and the accreditation community based on its ability to balance numerous interests and perspectives with integrity and fairness,
2. uphold by word and deed the highest ideals and standards of service,
3. promote effective balances among autonomy, mutual accountability, diversity, and common responsibility,
4. develop effective standards, policies, and decisions that advance quality education, cooperation, and creativity,
5. stimulate development of evaluation concepts that promote substantive educational results,
6. enjoy a reputation for independence, due process, intellectual depth, and technical competence, and
7. serve as a primary source of expertise and assistance in matters of evaluation and quality assurance to the many constituents of accreditation.

### B. VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY

This section outlines seven basic values for the accreditation community as a whole. It discusses the fundamental concepts underlying successful and effective accreditation in a peer-review framework. Effective accrediting bodies apply the following values and philosophies to guide and evaluate a broad range of decisions.

#### ***1. Trust is critical to the success of specific accreditation reviews, individual accreditation organizations, and the accreditation system as a whole.***

Accreditation addresses issues of quality, effectiveness, and integrity in higher education. Accreditation recognizes that higher education occurs in many different settings and formats, none exactly the same as any other. The trust that is at the heart of effective accreditation must be earned through extreme care with decisions, positions, and public pronouncements.

The following basic principles of trust guide accreditors.

- a. Accreditation is not owned by any one set of interests. Individual accrediting bodies must reflect a variety of interests as they establish policy and make decisions.
- b. Peer review is central to accreditation work at every level, including national recognition or oversight mechanisms. Significant responsibility for standards and procedures as well as evaluation by peers must be given to those entities that are to be reviewed.
- c. Trust is built over time. Consistently applying principles and meeting the same expectations we hold for others are critical if trust is to be gained and maintained.
- d. Effective accreditation will produce natural tensions within the higher education context. These tensions must be used to develop and operate appropriate systems of checks and balances and to seek improvements, not to promote a climate of fear and hostility. Mutual respect among institutions, programs, and accrediting bodies is indispensable in achieving success.

- e. The accreditation community must demonstrate constantly its ability to communicate effectively with, listen intently to, and work in the common interests of institutions and programs of higher education, the public, the disciplines and the professions.

**2. *Service is the core of accreditors' missions, goals, objectives, and attitudes.***

- a. Accreditation does not deliver education. Instead, it assures attainment of certain thresholds of acceptability, and it promotes quality beyond each threshold. Therefore, accreditation serves higher education; it does not control higher education.
- b. Given these realities, providing service is far more important than seeking, securing, or exercising power.
- c. Effective accrediting bodies acknowledge limits to their powers and continually seek to raise the quality of their service within those limits. In general, they exhibit a sense of discipline and restraint about the real and symbolic uses of their influence. They concentrate on helping institutions, programs, and individuals find their own answers through a self-assessment component. They seek quick, effective, and diplomatic solutions to problems. They respect the vast expertise and significant achievements evident in the work of many institutions and programs.
- d. Accrediting bodies also inform the public about the accredited status of institutions and programs, provide information and counsel about the meaning and process of accreditation, maintain means for concerned parties to seek assistance or file complaints as necessary, and serve the advancement of intellectual and professional work by encouraging the fullest possible development of student capacities.

**3. *Autonomy balanced by mutual accountability is preferable to central control enforced by regulation.***

The vast array of institutions, programs, disciplines, and professions involved in accreditation demands a system where autonomous bodies volunteer to be mutually accountable. Voluntary mutual accountability allows accreditors to produce a quality assurance and enhancement mechanism that allows for diversity of approach, maximum creativity, quick response to evolving complexities, and the freedom from interference that enables outstanding achievement. It also enables peer review to work effectively when knowledge is expanding at very rapid rates. It is the best way to maintain the integrity of degrees and other credentials while content expands and educational delivery systems change.

Accreditation organizations implement their accreditation systems within broad principles of autonomy, while applying respect for the rights and responsibilities of their respective institutions and programs with regard to their respective missions, goals, and objectives; educational and philosophical principles; approaches to content; areas of study; operational decisions; and content and methodologies of tests, evaluations, and assessments.

Peer review that balances autonomy and mutual accountability respects multiple means for reaching common ends, and keeps clear distinctions between compliance with threshold criteria and recommendations for improvement. In addition, new technologies will both demand and facilitate governance based on mutual accountability of autonomous bodies and institutions within networks. Accreditation and the accreditation system, having embraced the mutual accountability approach for decades, must, in the interests of quality and creativity, continue to resist regulatory approaches.

**4. A focus on the essence of educational quality provides the most effective bases for decision-making.**

Accreditation actions and decisions about accreditation must result from careful consideration of all points of view and a genuine search for consensus on fundamental matters of policy. Consistent reputations for intellectual integrity, calm deliberation, collaborative effort, and prudent judgment will produce transcending respect and support. A focus on educational quality is essential if accreditation is to maintain its values regarding service, mutual accountability, and trust.

**5. Results achieved and functions fulfilled indicate effectiveness more than the presence of means or the utilization of methods.**

Accreditation is primarily concerned with the achievement of goals for teaching and learning. It is also concerned with the presence and management of tangible or intangible resources for educational achievement. While concerned with means, accreditors must not dictate means. To do so destroys the concept of autonomy balanced by mutual accountability. Accrediting bodies focus on the work of the institution or program, not on themselves as organizations or their evaluation process or method.

Accreditors also respect the different means and approaches for achieving and evaluating results indigenous to and varying within the many disciplines and professions. Accreditation standards and procedures respect different habits of work and mind, various approaches to and perspectives on content, and the often unique quality of superior work.

**6. Statements regarding scope of authority, operations, and decision-making must be public and exhibit integrity, set reasonable limits, guide work, and promote the professionalism that engenders confidence.**

The complexities, multiple responsibilities, and high expectations of the accreditation arena demand that accrediting bodies and the accreditation system as a whole be governed by written documents. These documents must be developed and maintained without regard for personal agendas and prerogatives.

Accrediting bodies and the accreditation system as a whole must be governed by published bylaws, procedures, policies, and regulations so that its basic fairness and consistency are widely recognized and consistently applied. Professional judgment must be exercised, but within the context of published guidelines.

Organizations concerned with accreditation must exhibit technical proficiency with organizational and operational matters so that work in these arenas supports rather than dominates the work of accreditation. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure consistency of treatment across the range of review actions. Scopes of authority must be clearly defined for all individuals and groups.

**7. Excellence requires expertise sufficient to each task.**

Higher education is devoted to the development of expertise. It follows, therefore, that respect for expertise is central to accreditation activity. Research and analysis, individual competence and experience, knowledge and skills gained through personal study and interaction all contribute. In terms of content and process, accreditation involves the expertise of individuals in higher education, including accreditation professionals, members of the professions, and the public in order to promote trust, encourage a service orientation, and protect autonomy.

The assignment of expertise to specific tasks is a critical matter. The complexity of the accreditation arena and the increasing sophistication of accrediting operations demand careful matching of capability and capacity with each task to be done.

**March 2008:** Endorsed in principle by ASPA Members

**\*May 2008:** Edits requested by Members approved by ASPA Board