

ASPA VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY

Accrediting bodies use the following values and philosophy 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.

Several basics guide us.

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.

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 who are to be reviewed.

Trust is built over time. What is done is far more important than what is said or written. Treating others as we would be treated, consistently applying principles, and meeting the same expectations we hold for others are critical if trust is to be gained and maintained.

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 to success with these responsibilities.

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 our missions, goals, objectives, and attitudes.***

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.

A national oversight group does not deliver accreditation. Instead, it assures attainment of certain thresholds of acceptability, and it promotes quality beyond each threshold. Therefore, a national oversight group serves accreditation; it does not control accreditation.

Given these realities, providing service is far more important than seeking, securing, or exercising power. A service orientation builds trust, a power orientation destroys it.

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. They seek quick, effective, and diplomatic solutions to problems. They respect the vast expertise and significant achievements evident in the work of most institutions and programs. They are minimally bureaucratic and regulatory.

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 is the only way 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 is the only way peer review can work effectively when knowledge is expanding at such a rapid rate that no one person or group can have the expertise required for effective control at all levels. It is the best way to maintain the integrity of degrees and other credentials while content expands and educational delivery systems change.

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. ***Common searches for wisdom provide the most effective bases for decision-making.***

The multiple complexities of the accreditation arena and the multiple responsibilities of accrediting bodies demand extreme care with decision making. Bad or wrong decisions are costly because of their ripple effect, often over long periods of time. Accreditors and the accreditation community as a whole must be extremely careful not to become surrogates for educational fads, ideologies, political views, or doctrines. They must rely on in-depth analysis, considered action, and effective work. The search for wisdom in accreditation thus involves maintaining a focus on the essence of educational quality, on *what* is right rather than *who* is right. This focus is essential if accreditation is to maintain its values regarding service, mutual accountability, and trust.

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.

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.

The relationship between time and results is understood and respected. It is more important to have time for work that produces accountability than to spend time proving accountability.

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

The complexities, multiple responsibilities, high expectations, and numerous temptations of the accreditation arena demand that accrediting bodies and the accreditation system as a whole be governed by written documents. Individuals involved must participate in the development and revision of policies and procedures, but once those policies and procedures are established, they must be implemented until changed 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 continue uninterrupted by personnel changes.

Under this principle, standards and procedures must not be subject to individualistic interpretations, thus establishing by precedent that which has not or could not be established through regular democratic procedures. 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. Expertise from these basic sources must be judiciously and appropriately balanced. Including all sectors is essential if peer review is to occur. Providing each of them with a significant role promotes trust, encourages a service orientation, and protects 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.