

The Outcomes Story in Specialized and Professional Accreditation

Standards

**ASPA, the Association of Specialized and
Professional Accreditors**
aspa-usa.org

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ZACH WAYMER, MPA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND SECRETARY,
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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ABSTRACT

Specialized and professional accreditors ensure the quality of postsecondary education by holding institutions and programs accountable for developing competent graduates, evidenced through good outcomes that are defined and measured. This report by the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) addresses how these accreditors use competency assessment (CA), bright lines (BL) measures, and program-determined indicators (PDI) as measures of student achievement.

KEY POINTS

- Programmatic accreditors add value to the programs they accredit with the use of outcomes standards.
- Outcomes assessment is universal among ASPA member accreditors surveyed.
- Competency assessment is universal across the standards reviewed, although accreditors use different terminology and approaches to assessing competencies.
- Most accreditors use a blended approach incorporating competency assessment, bright lines measures, and program-determined indicators.
- Even where programs establish competency achievement levels, accreditors evaluate the assessment process and evidence of attainment in determining compliance.
- Bright lines measures have become more prevalent since ASPA's 2016 study, increasing from 52% to approximately 65% of respondents.
- Outcomes standards are backed by enforcement mechanisms ranging from monitoring and warning through denial or revocation of accreditation.
- These practices exist across a variety of external accreditor recognition pathways.
- Each accreditor has its own story to tell about its approach to and use of outcomes standards.

INTRODUCTION

Accreditors serve as quality assurance entities for a variety of postsecondary education institutions and programs in the United States and abroad. Programmatic accreditation – which is also known as specialized or professional accreditation – is a quality assurance process that evaluates specific academic programs or single purpose postsecondary education institutions to ensure that the curriculum is rigorous and relevant to the professions that the programs lead to. For this paper, “programmatic accreditation” and “programmatic accreditor” will be used to refer to this process and the quality assurance entities that conduct it.

ASPA, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, is a national voluntary membership association of programmatic accreditors that advocates for, communicates about, and collaborates on good accreditation policy and practice. Established in 1993, ASPA currently has 61 member accreditors that accredit over 28,000 programs worldwide that lead to 100 different professions – from acupuncture to veterinary medicine and everything in between. Approximately 60% of ASPA member accreditors ensure the quality and continuous improvement of healthcare programs. About 75% of programs lead to professions that require some form of state licensure or certification. ASPA's oldest member is over 100 years old and its newest is less than ten years old.

Programmatic accreditation matters because it ensures quality by focusing on competencies, continuous improvement, transparency, self-assessment, expert judgment via peer review, and finally, outcomes, the focus of this paper. Programmatic accreditors have for decades measured the outcomes of their accredited programs using qualitative and quantitative data. This is one of the many ways that these accreditors add value to both the programs they accredit as well as to the highly specialized and professional fields that they lead to. This value is demonstrated with continuous quality improvement, quantitative and qualitative data and metrics, reputation and acceptance by stakeholders including students and employers, recognition by independent external bodies, return on investment of accredited programs in terms of median costs, employment rates, and salaries, student loan repayment rates, and positive societal impact such as patient safety, health, and satisfaction.

Many ASPA members are recognized by one of the two primary external bodies. Recognition entails an external review that essentially is an “accreditation of accreditors.” About half of ASPA members are recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a nonprofit with university and college members that works independently of the government to advocate for academic quality and vet accreditors for its award of recognition. About another half of ASPA members pursue recognition

by the U.S. Secretary of Education (ED) which primarily serves as a link to federal monies for the recognized accreditors' programs and their students. Some ASPA members are recognized by both of those entities and a handful choose not to pursue either of those two recognition pathways, instead pursuing other marks of quality such as ISO 9001. In addition, accreditor quality is recognized by currency and relevancy to the related professions, employers, state and territory licensure and certification bodies, and mission, history, and context.

Programmatic accreditors have long been at the forefront of outcomes in postsecondary education because of the expectations by educators, employers, governments, and the public that students attain the competencies needed for safe and effective practice in their chosen profession. Indeed, students graduating from ASPA member accredited programs go into the many professions that protect, care for, and enhance the lives of millions of people every day from cradle to grave.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Typically, each year ASPA produces a brief report on a timely accreditation topic as a resource for its members and the public. These reports can be found on the ASPA website under Positions and Reports. The report process generally takes a year and starts the summer prior with the ASPA Executive Director proposing a topic to the Board of Directors for approval. Then, in the fall, ASPA conducts a survey and research of its membership to help inform the report. In the winter, the preliminary findings are usually presented at CHEA's annual conference in partnership with a few ASPA members. Finally, the full report is written and approved by the Board in the summer for publication and distribution. In June 2016, ASPA produced a similar report to this one titled *Outcomes – Getting to the Core of Programmatic Education and Accreditation*. In the ten years since, the calls for good postsecondary education outcomes and accountability from various stakeholders have grown ever louder so revisiting this topic for updates and new insights seemed particularly germane.

DEFINING OUTCOMES MEASURES

Within existing accreditor standards are three main types of outcomes measures:

Competency assessment (CA) includes measurement of student learning outcomes or competency attainment. Competencies include the knowledge, skills, and abilities or behaviors (KSA/B's) necessary for safe and effective practice of a profession. Accreditors may identify core or specific competencies that students must achieve to earn their degree or credential. In addition to competencies identified in accreditation standards, accreditors may require their accredited programs to develop their own competencies in alignment with a program or institution mission and demonstrate student performance in relation to those competencies.

Bright lines (BL) measures are key quantitative thresholds for outcomes typically related to retention and graduation rates, placement rates for employment or internships, and licensure examination pass rates for professions with such requirements for entry into practice.

Program-determined indicators (PDI) are usually based on program mission and context within a framework established by the accreditor. Some accreditors allow for discretion by programs to determine their indicators while others prescribe specific areas that must be addressed like those by BLs but without accreditor-determined quantitative thresholds. Other areas programs may include for tracking include student and alumni satisfaction and employer feedback.

METHOD

ASPA member accreditors were surveyed in December 2025, using a standard online survey platform to collect and analyze their responses and gain insights; 56 of 59 members participated resulting in a 95% response rate (membership has since increased by two to 61). See the Appendix for the complete survey instrument. In addition, ASPA reviewed the outcomes standards text submitted by respondents to identify common terminology, approaches, and requirements. This qualitative standards analysis was used to supplement and contextualize the quantitative survey responses, particularly regarding competency assessment.

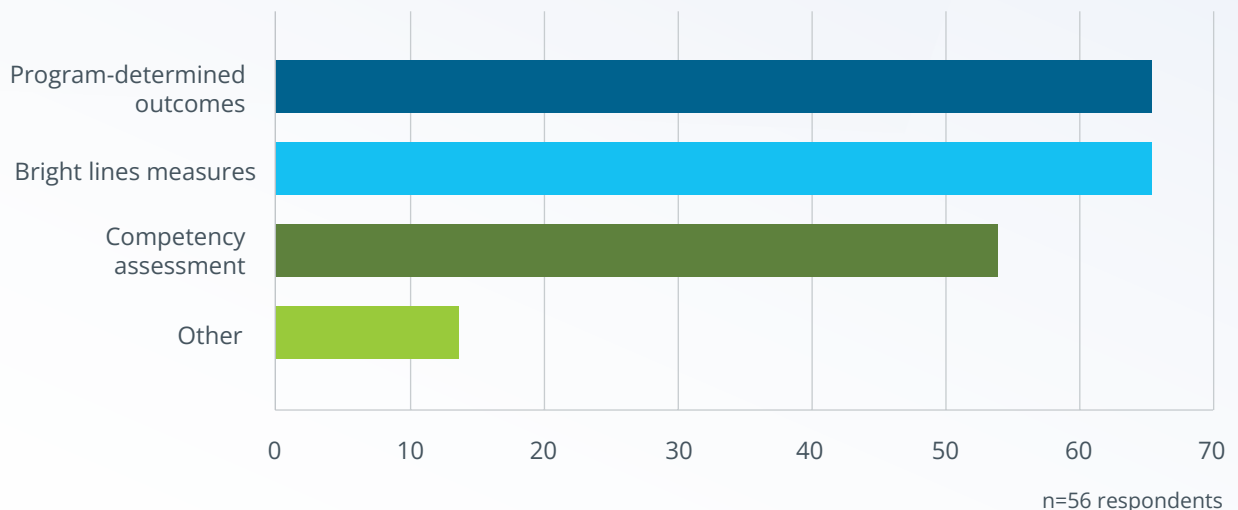
RESULTS

All respondents reported that outcomes are deeply ingrained in their standards and an important part of their quality assurance process. Across respondents, most use multiple outcomes measures in a blended approach incorporating CA, BL, and PDI.

The first chart below depicts the use of CA, BL, and PDI outcomes measures used by the accreditors.

Figure 1. Types of Outcomes Standards Used by Accreditors

To assess outcome quality, which do you use?

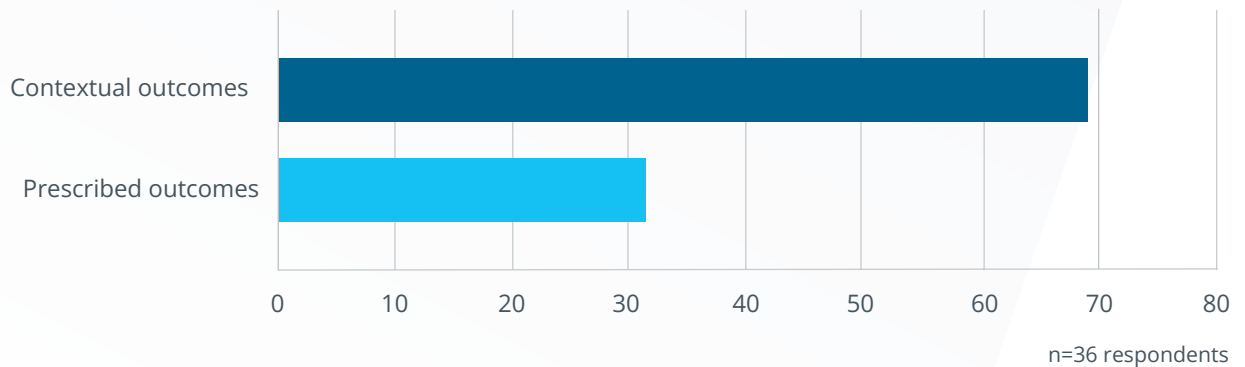


Most accreditors use multiple approaches – 65% use two or even three of the types of outcomes standards above. In the Other category, respondents provided additional details about their standards in those three categories. Notice that PDI and BL methods get equal use by accreditors. As discussed later in this report, subsequent analysis of the standards text submitted by respondents found that competency assessment is universal across the standards reviewed, although many accreditors use terminology other than “competency assessment.” Next, the survey drilled down into each outcomes standards approach – CA, BL, and PDI.

Turning to CA first, respondents were asked if they prescribe an outcome or level of achievement for CA.

Figure 2. Prescribed Competencies Outcomes by Accreditor vs. Program

For competencies, do you prescribe an outcome for the program that it must meet?

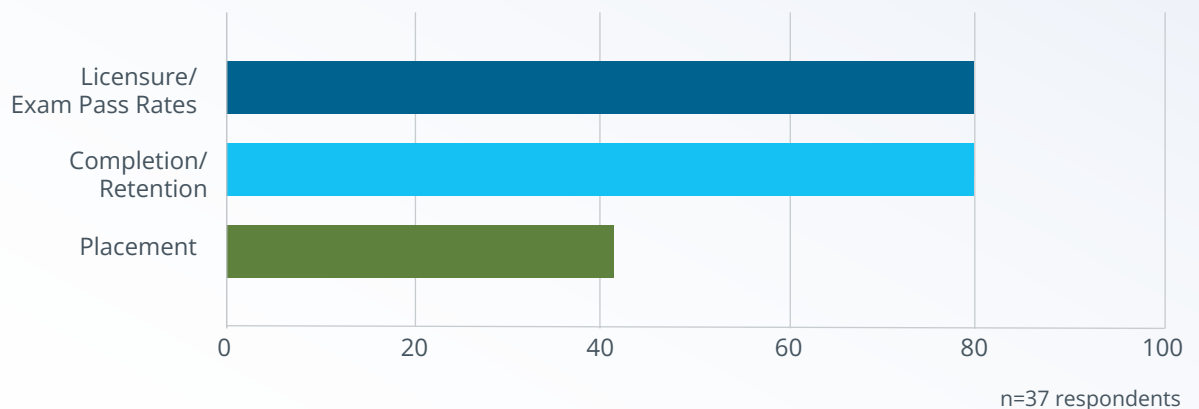


While 30% of accreditors responding to the survey do prescribe an outcome, others allow the program and its context to determine if the student meets the competency. Even where accreditors do not prescribe a uniform level of competency achievement, their standards generally do not leave competency determination solely to the program. Programs establish competency expectations or achievement levels within the accreditor's framework and document and assess student attainment then the accreditor evaluates the adequacy of that process and evidence in determining compliance with accreditation standards. Respondents provided brief standards text examples of CA standards to include standardized domains, touchpoints such as residencies and entry into practice, use of Bloom's Taxonomy applied to learning outcomes, and quantitative thresholds for student achievement of all competencies.

Next, ASPA asked about BL measures and thresholds.

Figure 3. Types and Use of Accreditor Bright Lines Measures

If you use bright lines measures, what are they?



For BL, 80% of respondents said they use licensure examination pass rates and/or completion and retention with 40% using job placement rates. Of the respondents, 75% use two or more BL indicators in their standards. Note that licensure examination pass rates and completion/retention get equal use as BL. Respondents shared examples of rigorous BL measures ranging for completion/retention from 50% to 80%; for placement from 60% to over 95%; and for licensure examination pass rates from 60% to over 90%.

Many accreditors mentioned that they have transparency requirements of their programs related to publicly disclosing outcomes results. This shows that accreditors help add value by requiring programs to be transparent about expected outcomes and if those programs are meeting those goals.

The third and final outcomes standards category ASPA asked its member accreditors about was PDI and what specific areas they require programs to use and report on including completion/retention rates, alumni and employer satisfaction, employment placement rates, and licensure examination pass rates. With PDI, the accreditor has prescribed the indicator, but not the numeric threshold like BL.

Figure 4. Types and Use of Program-determined Indicators

If you use program-determined indicators for outcomes standards, what are they?



Over 70% of respondents use more than one PDI and over 30% use all five. Other PDI areas reported by accreditors included transfer rates, cohort loan default rates, and graduate and faculty scholarship production.

DEFINING COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT

It is important to note that CA appears in all member accreditor responses. Based on text analysis of all respondent outcomes standards, some form of CA is required even if the way they word it in their standards is different. Different CA terms include student learning outcomes, program-level outcomes, performance benchmarks, readiness (for examination, for profession), disposition, achievement, KSA/Bs, and more.

Below is a term to meaning crosswalk for CA that shows across all accreditor standards reviewed, programs are required to assess whether learners demonstrate the competencies necessary for professional practice.

Term used	What it means
Competencies	Integrated knowledge, skills, behaviors
Student learning outcomes	Observable, assessable competencies
Program outcomes	Aggregated competency achievement
Benchmarks/thresholds	Minimum acceptable competence
Licensure pass rates	External validation of competence, readiness for practice
Practice readiness	Applied competency in context

RECOGNITION STATUS AND COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT

ASPA also looked at methods of outcomes standards in relation to recognition status. CA was universal across recognition type whether granted by CHEA, ED, or both.

Recognition status	Competency assessment
CHEA + ED	Universal
CHEA only	Universal
ED only	Universal

Competencies appeared in all recognized accreditor standards for outcomes assessment. The citations below from CHEA and ED, respectively, are their recognition standards that apply to accreditors to require student achievement standards:

CHEA Standard 1. Academic Quality and Student Achievement

To be recognized, the accrediting organization provides evidence that it implements and enforces standards, policies, and procedures which: 1.A. advance academic quality using quantitative and/or qualitative measures; 1.B. detail how it supports the autonomy of an institution or program in determining academic quality as it relates to the mission of the institution or program; 1.C. require resources specific to ensuring adequate student preparation and health and safety; and 1.D. support implementation of innovative practices.

34 CFR § 602.16(a)(1)(i) Accreditation and preaccreditation standards.

...

(1) The agency's accreditation standards must set forth clear expectations for the institutions or programs it accredits in the following areas:

(i) Success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, which may include different standards for different institutions or programs, as established by the institution, including, as appropriate, consideration of State licensing examinations, course completion, and job placement rates.

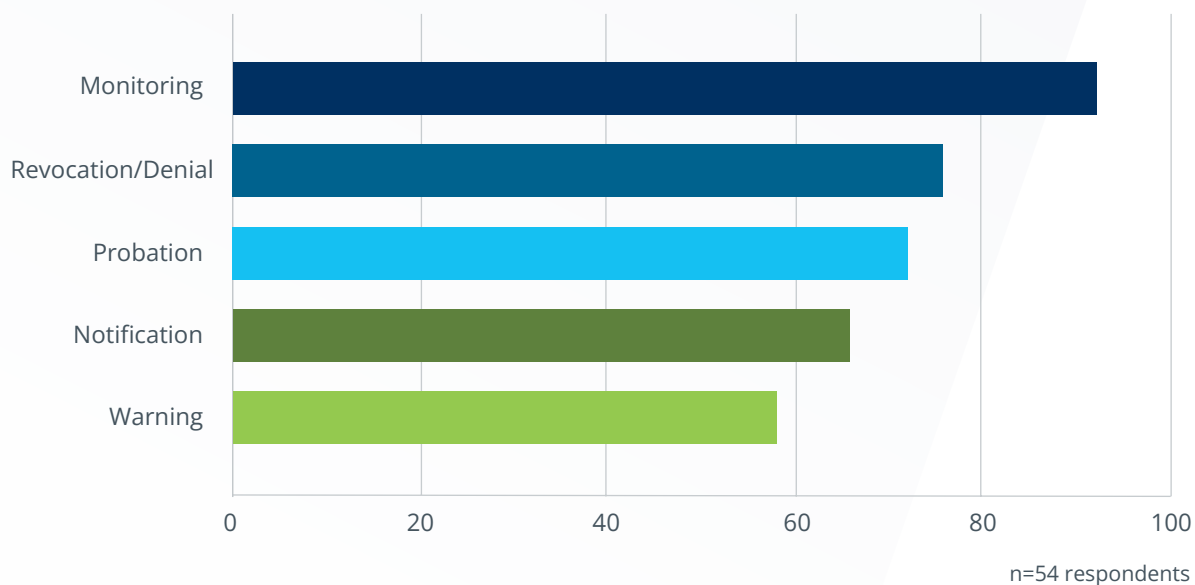
Notwithstanding CHEA or ED recognition status, non-recognized accreditors also included CA in their outcomes standards across the board. Competencies endure across all accreditors regardless of recognition status.

ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

ASPA also asked what types of enforcement actions member accreditors take when a program falls short of compliance. Notification is typically the baseline standard of communication from an accreditor to a program when a formal communication occurs to flag administrative or minor compliance issues that require attention. Monitoring, typically considered non-punitive, is an active oversight status when an accreditor conducts continuous observation and tracking of a program out of concern that it may become noncompliant. Warning is typically the starting point of formal disciplinary or corrective intervention with official notification from the accreditor to the program stating that a specific standard or policy is out of compliance and requires action to remedy or face harsher penalties. Probation is often a conditional status that allows an accredited program to keep functioning under strict constraints during which it must meet certain conditions, specific performance metrics, or corrective action plans. Failure to satisfy the conditions of probation within a specified timeframe usually triggers the final, most severe tiers of enforcement, either revocation or denial. Revocation is the withdrawal or cancellation of accreditation and denial is the refusal to grant, approve, or renew it.

Figure 5. Types and Use of Outcomes Standards Enforcement Mechanisms

What types of actions do you take to enforce outcomes standards?



Over 80% of accreditors use three or more of these types of actions – usually in a graduated or escalating manner over time. Other responses included using one-year accreditation cycles, show cause to not deny or withdraw accreditation, and accreditor-developed action plans for programs that include a set period to come into compliance. These findings demonstrate that outcomes standards are not just reporting requirements but that accreditors back them with graduated mechanisms for requiring corrective action up to denying or withdrawing accreditation.

COMPARISON TO THE 2016 STUDY

ASPA last surveyed its membership about their outcomes standards in 2016 using somewhat similar questions but a different instrument. Thus, this is not a replicated survey.

However, what remains the same between the two studies is that competency assessment remains universal after 10 years. As noted above, accreditors may use different terminologies to address CA, but all of them are using competency standards to evaluate the outcomes of their accredited programs. This is unsurprising as most programmatic accreditors are responsible for assuring that their accredited programs produce competent graduates in highly specialized and technical fields where human care, protection, and safety are at stake.

What has changed is an increasing use of bright lines measures by accreditors – those precise quantitative thresholds for the types of program performance metrics previously discussed. In 2016, 52% of ASPA member accreditor survey respondents reported using

BL measures; today, 65% report using them, a 13-percentage-point increase equaling a 25% relative increase. Again, this is not surprising since the expectations have increased by a variety of stakeholders, including by the accreditors themselves, for more defined program outcomes. The survey data suggest that programmatic accreditors will continue to increase their use of BL measures.

Program-determined indicators remain an important feature of programmatic accreditation, although their use appears to have shifted over the past decade. In 2016, 82% of ASPA members used some form of PDI outcome standard, compared with approximately 65% of respondents in 2026. At the same time, use of accreditor-established BL measures increased as noted above. The findings suggest movement toward greater use of standardized quantitative thresholds without abandoning program-centered outcomes assessment.

CONCLUSION

Programmatic accreditors add value for accredited programs and institutions, students, employers, patients, the federal and state governments, and the public with their continued use of well-embedded outcomes standards to evaluate program performance and student competency. They do so by using a combination of competency assessment, bright lines measures, and program-determined indicators. This is the case whether the accreditor is recognized by the federal government, CHEA, or via other recognition pathways.

The outcomes story in programmatic accreditation is therefore not one of a single measure or methodology. It is a layered system of quality assurance in which professional competency, quantitative performance measures, program-specific outcomes, transparency, expert peer judgment, continuous improvement, and enforcement work together. The balance among those elements varies appropriately by profession and program context.

Ten years after ASPA's 2016 outcomes study, the evidence shows both continuity and evolution: competency assessment remains universal, quantitative bright lines measures have become more prevalent, program-determined indicators continue to preserve program mission and context, and accreditors maintain meaningful mechanisms for addressing deficient outcomes. These practices reflect the fundamental quality assurance mission of programmatic accreditation that transcend external recognition pathways.

What programmatic accreditation outcomes standards show is that the experts closest to the work of the complex enterprise of teaching and learning continue to emphasize student achievement. Outcomes standards remain a key part of the story of programmatic accreditation.

APPENDIX

ASPA Members Outcomes (Student Achievement) Standards Survey

ASPA is collecting information on outcomes (student achievement) standards that accreditors use in assessing the quality of programs for its 2026 report and preview presentation at the CHEA conference.

Q1: Full Name of Accreditor (Include acronym.)

Q2: Respondent Name

Q3: Respondent Email

Q4: Are you? (Select all that apply.)

CHEA recognized

ED recognized

Neither

Q5: To assess outcomes quality, do you use? (Select all that apply.)

Competency assessment

Bright lines measures

Program-determined indicators

Other

Other (please specify)

Q6: If you use competency assessment, do you prescribe an outcome or level of achievement?

Yes

No

Q7: If you prescribe an outcome or levels of achievement for competency assessment, what are they?

Q8: If you use bright lines measures, what are they? (Select all that apply.)

Completion/retention rates

Placement rates

Exam/licensure pass rates

Other

Other (please specify)

Q9: If you use completion/retention rate bright lines, what are they?

Q10: If you use placement rate bright lines, what are they?

Q11: If you use exam/licensure pass rate bright lines, what are they?

Q12: If you use program-determined indicators, what are they? (Select all that apply.)

Completion/retention rates

Placement rates

Exam/licensure pass rates

Alumni satisfaction

Employer satisfaction

Other

Other (please specify)

Q13: If you use program-determined indicators for completion/retention, are they required to be used by the accreditor or chosen by the program/institution?

Accreditor requires use

Program/institution chooses to use

Q14: If you use program-determined indicators for placement rates, are they required to be used by the accreditor or chosen by the program/institution?

Accreditor requires use

Program/institution chooses to use

Q15: If you use program-determined indicators for exam/licensure pass rates, are they required to be used by the accreditor or chosen by the program/institution?

Accreditor requires use

Program/institution chooses to use

Q16: What types of actions can be taken by the accreditor for programs/institutions that do not fully meet outcomes standards? (Select all that apply.)

Notification

Monitoring

Warning

Probation

Revocation/denial

Other (please specify)

Q17: Please copy and paste a public website link to your outcomes standards.

Q18: Please copy and paste the text of your outcomes standards.

Q19: Please provide any additional brief comments or information about your outcomes standards.