Principles for Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) is dedicated to assuring the quality of specialized and professional (programmatic) higher education programs and schools in the United States.

Programmatic accreditation closely examines and evaluates measures of learning or competence that are fundamental to a discipline, focused study or profession (e.g., dentistry, engineering or religious study). It is conducted by experts in the discipline or profession and serves the public interest by ensuring that graduates are ready to take the next step toward entry in a profession. Programmatic accreditation differs from regional or national institutional accreditation which reviews academic and organizational structures of a college or university as a whole.

ASPA supports legislation in the Higher Education Act that is based on the following principles:

• **Institutions, programs and accreditors make academic decisions, set standards and define educational quality.**
  The current HEA affirms the independence of higher education institutions and accreditors in making academic decisions and defining educational quality. Such independence is especially important for specialized and professional academic programs whose job is to provide the public with qualified and competent practitioners, often in areas affecting public health and safety.

• **Student achievement is best determined by institutions, programs and accreditors in partnership with communities of interest.**
  Quantitative indicators of institutional performance such as graduation and job placement rates are inadequate for determining knowledge and skill acquisition by students in many fields, especially at advanced levels. Specialized and professional accreditors are concerned primarily with producing competent practitioners in their respective fields. For the public good and because each field is inherently different in its expectations, experts in the field in cooperation with accreditors should be responsible for identifying appropriate indicators of educational quality and student learning.

...experts in the field in cooperation with accreditors should be responsible for setting and measuring appropriate indicators of quality and student learning...
About ASPA

A nonprofit association, ASPA provides a collaborative forum dedicated to assuring the quality of specialized and professional higher education programs and schools. It is the only unified, national voice that solely represents specialized and professional accrediting bodies in the United States. ASPA members set national educational standards for 80 different specialized disciplines and professions. They ensure students receive a quality higher education, consistent with standards for entry or advanced practice in field or discipline. Through an emphasis on self-evaluation and peer review, accreditation plays an important role in continuous quality improvement in higher education.

In addition, ASPA:

• Facilitates collaboration among programs, institutions and accrediting organizations
• Promotes quality in higher education and accreditation through discussion, advocacy and educational offerings
• Encourages a focus on student learning and graduate competencies
• Advocates for the integrity, independence and autonomy of accrediting organizations and their affiliated institutions and programs

Each of ASPA’s member organizations has a common commitment to uphold standards that are rigorous, comprehensive and outcome-based, with specific attention directed to the professional or special-purpose curriculum.

For more information on ASPA and our member organizations, contact us at 773-857-7900 or mailto:aspa@aspa-usa.org.

• Professional judgment, peer review and contributions of communities of interest ensure quality in education.

Professional judgment exercised through peer review is a major strength of U.S. higher education and accreditation. Subject matter experts (including practitioners, employers and academics) contribute to setting standards, reviewing program compliance with those standards and determining educational quality and preparation of graduates to enter a field of practice. The diversity in the functioning of disciplines and professions necessitates different approaches to the common goal of ensuring quality in education.

• Public information about accreditation decisions should serve the public good and allow for quality improvement in higher education.

Public information provided by accreditors includes details of accreditation processes, accreditation status, accreditation terms, schedules for reviews, adverse actions and reasons for adverse actions. In addition to ensuring that a program meets the required level of quality necessary for preparation of competent practitioners in a field of study, accreditation also fosters quality improvement, which identifies program aspects that exceed quality standards and have the potential for further development that may better serve students and the public. Public information provided about quality improvement efforts is determined by accreditors and programs to allow flexibility to work on new or experimental approaches to education without penalizing programs for innovation.

• Programmatic accreditation and institutional accreditation serve different purposes.

Programmatic accreditation conducts an in-depth assessment of specialized or professional programs that are essential to the profession. Institutional accreditation is concerned with the overall capacity of an institution, general educational quality and educational foundations. Requirements for recognition should reflect this fundamental difference.

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3304 North Broadway Street, #214
Chicago, IL 60657
Phone 773-857-7900