

**PRINCIPLES FOR REVIEWING POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS
REGARDING INSTITUTIONAL AND SPECIALIZED ACCREDITATION**

**ASPA: Association of Specialized & Professional Accreditors
(Adopted by the ASPA Board of Directors: April 4, 2005)**

1. RESPONSIBILITY

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that respect the ability of accrediting organizations to serve multiple constituencies, that preserve accreditation responsibilities of accreditors, and that help to clarify constituency understanding about the necessity of maintaining these responsibilities within the voluntary accreditation process.

- A. Accreditation is centered in the work of accrediting bodies that have strong relationships with institutions, programs, and professions. These accrediting bodies serve a variety of functions for the public, students, higher education, the professions, governments, philanthropies, and many other constituencies. Accrediting organizations must make decisions that respect the needs and interests of all these constituencies. This may mean that not all constituencies will be in complete agreement with specific policy changes.
- B. Accrediting organizations are supported by institutions and professional groups. Thousands of volunteers from higher education and professional practice and accreditation staff members have built accrediting organizations and continue to develop the accreditation system in the United States. The accrediting organizations set standards, operate the process, incur the risks of evaluative engagement, and, with their institutions and programs, constitute the primary sources of innovation and development in accreditation.

2. FREEDOM

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that preserve the freedom and autonomy of both accrediting organizations and educational institutions and programs.

- A. In concept and practice, accreditation reflects American values about freedom and responsibility. The accreditation system operates on the premise that freedom, a sense of mission, and individual initiative are the primary ingredients for success in fulfilling the multiple responsibilities held by educational institutions and programs. Accreditation supports a healthy relationship between individuals and communities at both institutional and personal levels. Its traditional goal is to establish common frameworks that enable and encourage individual differences and local responsibility.
- B. The American people have benefited tremendously from federal policies and national practices that use the results of accreditation without impinging on the autonomy of accreditors and the associated institutions, programs, and professions that rely upon them to set standards and make judgments.
- C. The dispersion of accreditation powers into regional groups, across types of institutions, and by professional specialization reflects operation of the freedom principle in accreditation itself. It also clarifies the responsibility and protects the freedom and autonomy of institutions and programs. This decentralized structure for accreditation prevents a centralization of authority that would negate many existing checks and balances.
- D. Accreditation protects the freedom of educational institutions and of disciplinary and professional programs to set mission, goals, objectives, curricula, and establish operational plans, provided that threshold standards appropriate to specific institutional types and professions are met.

3. HONESTY

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that enable accrediting organizations to continue to pursue honesty in their relationships with their various constituencies.

- A. Accreditation is based on the evaluation of large sets of information associated with adherence to standards as well as institutional and programmatic improvement. Accrediting organizations cannot rely on or promote superficial indicators of success.
- B. Accreditation does not promote or deal in false correlations. For example, accreditation works diligently to help institutions and programs institute changes for the better in terms of their mission, and in light of multiple realities and aspirations present in each local circumstance. Accreditation does not equate change with quality, fame with achievement, or quality with the use of a particular method. Accreditation decisions are informed by quantitative measurement, but accreditors recognize the limitations of such measures. Significant reliance on professional judgment is inherent in the peer-review process of accreditation.
- C. Many factors and conditions create educational effectiveness. For example, results or outcomes relate to resources; there is no particular type of strategic plan that ensures future advancement. For each institution or program, accreditation examines and judiciously considers all of the possible factors and conditions operating at the time of a specific review and provides the most honest and comprehensive assessment of the relationship of all these factors to the meeting of standards and the advancement of quality in that institution or program.
- D. Accrediting organizations have long articulated to their constituencies what accreditation means and what it does not mean. Accreditation status means that an institution or program has a clear purpose, has met a set of published standards, and can be projected to continue to meet those standards for the designated period of accreditation.
- E. Accrediting organization statements about accreditation results are factual and structured to obviate false interpretation, manipulation, or legal challenge. Accrediting organization statements about reviews must not lead to public speculation or create opportunities for the production of false images about an institution or program.
- F. Accreditation is not centered on public relations issues or techniques. It is not the public relations arm of any institution or program, or of movements, methodologies, fads, political parties, or governmental or private sector organizations.

4. EXCELLENCE

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that enable the pursuit of excellence as part of the work of accrediting organizations.

- A. Accrediting organizations know that excellence comes from individual efforts and not from policies alone and that institutional and programmatic excellence comes from the combined efforts of many individuals.
- B. Accrediting organizations respect expertise and also the freedom and time that expert individuals need to produce excellent work.
- C. At higher education levels, excellence in the myriad disciplines and professions offered can be judged best by those with expertise in those areas. Through accreditation, the American people and institutions of higher education have the benefits of an evaluation system in which outstanding subject matter experts volunteer to create standards and promote quality advancement.
- D. Accrediting organizations recognize that excellence is created by the local academic community and work to protect the ability of educational institutions to make academic judgments within the context of their stated purposes. Thus, specific judgments about such issues as admission, retention, grades, transfer of credit, credential requirements, etc. must be made by individuals with the expertise and authority to make such decisions at the local level. Accreditation frameworks and guidelines must facilitate, not preempt, decisions at the local level.
- E. Accreditors understand that their primary goal is to help institutions and programs enable students to grow intellectually in the subject matters and techniques of their fields. Accreditation does not pursue power for its own sake. Accreditation is therefore not about winning, but about helping others to succeed.

5. EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that foster trust; focus on content and results, not solely process or method; limit bureaucracy; support the spirit of volunteerism; encourage local resolution of grievances; and limit the prospect of accreditation litigation.

- A. Accreditors know that they must be trusted if they are to be effective. An atmosphere of trust increases efficiency and decreases cost.
- B. Accreditation reviews focus more on the fulfillment of functions and results outlined by standards than adherence to particular methodologies or approaches. This core value and the operational decisions that grow from it maintain strong connections between freedom and efficiency.
- C. Accreditation works to keep its bureaucracy to a minimum.
- D. Much of the work of accreditation is accomplished by volunteers, who receive little or no compensation for their services.
- E. Accreditation, through standards and operational procedures, promotes rapid mediation of differences and problem solving at local levels without the interference of third parties or the need to divert resources to public relations issues.

6. INTEGRITY

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports proposals that preserve basic conditions for the integrity of the work of accrediting organizations; that value diverse standards and procedures; and that encourage strong relationships among accreditors, institutions, and programs. ASPA supports the responsible recognition of accrediting organizations in which accreditors maintain operational control of their work. This control must not be given to the federal government or to any other national entity.

- A. There is a strong relationship between autonomy and integrity. The decisions of accreditors are not controlled or preempted by institutions, professions, governments, or other constituencies or organizations.
- B. Accreditation judgments are apolitical, non-ideological, and comply with principles of fair business practices.
- C. Accreditation operations and judgments are based on expertise and experience, acting within published standards and procedures. The framework presented in these publications, not individual whims, rules the process and determines the results of reviews.
- D. Accrediting organizations maintain significant internal systems of checks and balances. They also volunteer to be reviewed externally, typically by governmental or non-governmental recognition agencies. Internal checks and balances ensure that no one individual or group controls all decisions and that there are recourse procedures in the case of disagreements.
- E. Accreditors maintain a direct relationship with the institutions and/or programs they accredit. There is no third party intervention in this relationship.

7. PUBLIC INFORMATION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports time-tested principles and policies now in effect in the accreditation community regarding public information and confidentiality. These principles and policies require the provision of basic public information about accreditation standards and procedures and the accreditation status of institutions. Beyond these basics, current principles and policies preserve the rights of accrediting organizations and their institutions and programs to determine what should be made public and what should remain confidential. In the exercise of these rights, policies vary depending on the natures and preferences of various fields, groups of institutions, and accrediting organizations. This diversity must be maintained and protected.

- A. Public information and confidentiality both serve the public interest. Proposals at the federal or national level that would damage or destroy confidentiality in accreditation are against the public interest. Accrediting organizations must have access to sensitive information to enable a thorough review based on an in-depth understanding of the aspirations and achievements of institutions. Confidentiality encourages open and frank analyses of strengths and weaknesses and fosters wide-ranging deliberations regarding means for improvement in terms suitable for the institution.
- B. Public information and confidentiality policies at the federal or national level must not be active generators of liability or litigation which may result in increases in the costs of liability insurance for accrediting organizations. A climate of litigation is not conducive to the free exchange of ideas and information that encourages and produces excellence in education.
- C. Public information and confidentiality policies at the federal or national level must not compromise the trust base accreditation needs to be effective or enable the misuse of information gained in accreditation reviews. Accreditation cannot maintain the trust base it needs to be effective if every review is tainted in advance with the prospect that the institution or program will incur high and virtually irrevocable negative public relations or financial consequences.
- D. The public benefits greatly from policies that encourage experts in all fields to volunteer their time and talents to participate in accreditation reviews. Confidentiality protects volunteers and volunteerism. If the confidentiality principle is voided in federal or national policy, individual reviewers are far more likely to face charges of liability. One instance of litigation against a volunteer will be sufficient to destroy general willingness to participate and threatens the level of expertise that now serves institutions, programs, and the public through accreditation.

- E. Accreditation standards require institutions to publish accurate information about their programs, faculties, resources, requirements, and achievements. Published accreditation standards outline the realistic threshold requirements for degrees and other operational elements of higher education. Published lists of accredited institutions and programs provide accurate information about accreditation status. Public notice is given when accreditation is withdrawn from an institution, and the causes of withdrawal are published. For prospective students, vast amounts of information are available. Students can compare everything from curricula and costs to the published articles of professors in various disciplines in different institutions. Accrediting organizations cannot act with integrity if they join others in promoting as full truths current notions that there are a few simple quantitative indicators that will tell every student automatically which institution is best for him or her or that students will automatically make better application decisions if accreditation records are openly available. It is inappropriate to imply that the responsibility for a student's education rests solely with the institution when the work that the student is willing to do has so much to do with the result.
- F. The accreditation community is productive in part because it supports a positive climate for the development and improvement of higher education. Any policy initiatives at the federal or national level compromising the principle of confidentiality would undermine the positive climate that has been created around education.
- G. Federal or national policies affecting accreditation must preserve an appropriate balance of power between institutions and accreditors. Mandating full disclosure by law and regulation raises exponentially the kinds of public relations leverage accreditors have over institutions. Legislating such an imbalance destroys nationally the spirit and function of give-and-take necessary in the most effective analysis-based review procedures. It reduces the autonomy of institutions and treats them as targets of, rather than participants in, accreditation. It raises temptations to coerce on grounds not related to educational results. These prospects are fraught with danger for the future of both quality and freedom in higher education.

8. SERVICE

PRINCIPLE: ASPA supports policies based on broadly constructed concepts of service.

- A. The service that accreditors render to all constituencies, including the general public and students, cannot be abstracted or decoupled from the other principles outlined above. The separate and related operations of all these principles are the basis of service.
- B. Accreditors cannot participate in creating illusions about service. For example, no member of the public can know or follow all the details of the work done for his or her benefit every day.
- C. Accreditors must serve multiple constituencies with different needs in ways that do not harm the ability of accreditation to serve all constituencies. Fundamentally, there is no single “public.”

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