



## Standards, Outcomes and Quality

Accreditation standards establish minimum levels of educational quality on which evaluations and accreditation decisions are based. Outcomes or results can provide evidence that standards have been met.

### Accreditation Standards

Accreditation standards set expectations about essential elements for educational quality. They are created through a consensus process that calls for input from educators, students, practitioners, regulators and the general public. Institutional accreditation standards are written in terms of institutions as a whole; specialized accreditation standards apply to specific programs in disciplines and professions. In both cases, accreditation standards:

*Accreditation promotes quality in higher education through comprehensive evaluation of institutional and programmatic outcomes and quality.*

- Address educational and operational issues associated with developing educational results and maintaining consistent academic protocols, such as:
  - Area of study
  - Faculty
  - Student support services
  - Financial resources
  - Facilities
  - Curricula
  - Student learning outcomes
  - Definitions of academic degrees and credentials
- Reflect the consensus of experts in the field or profession, and higher education
- Establish the basis for accreditation decisions

An additional note about standards, following standards does not mean that all programs or institutions must be standardized. Standards allow for flexibility and diversity, as long as standards are met. In this way, aspirational quality, creativity and diversity are encouraged to flourish in programs and institutions.

### Outcomes

Outcomes are results. They provide evidence that standards have been successfully met. Outcomes of interest to educators and accreditors include:

- Educational achievement/student learning — development of student knowledge and skills in academics overall or specific to a profession or occupation
- Indicators of performance — graduation rates, licensure pass rates, etc.
- Procedural compliance — the support structure for a quality program, e.g., schedules, course sequences, rules, deadlines, etc.

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## Quality

Just as accreditation standards are determined by input from a variety of interested parties, the minimum requirements for the quality of an educational program in an area of study or profession are also determined by communities of interest, which include practitioners, students, graduates, education experts and employers. These requirements are integrated into accreditation standards used for evaluating programs. While the definitions for quality may vary from profession to profession, the process used by accreditors requires that all communities of interest have a role in creating the definitions. Whatever the area of study, public protection or entry level competence is the baseline, and the development of capable new professionals is a fundamental goal.

## How are Accreditation, Outcomes and Quality related?

The educational quality of institutions and programs is judged in terms of their ability to demonstrate that their results can support the educational development of students.

Accreditation means that institutional or program quality has been judged to be at an acceptable or higher level by professionals who are experts in a specific field of content and have experience in higher education. These experts judge how well:

- Accreditation standards are met (and can continue to be met) by the institution or program
- Elements such as curriculum, evaluation methods, faculty, resources and admission requirements are suited to the overall mission and level of program offerings and objectives
- Students can be expected to fulfill the knowledge and skills requirements for completion of their programs
- Tests, juries and other review mechanisms are in place to support and evaluate learning and ensure that graduation or completion requirements are met

## A Note About ASPA

This Quick Reference was developed by the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA)—an advocate for quality in higher education through specialized and professional accreditation.



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