

# Outcomes

## Getting to the Core of Programmatic Education and Accreditation

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Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors



## Acknowledgements

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors thanks the contributors to this report:

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- AACSB International
- ABET
- Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine
- Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing
- Accreditation Commission for Midwifery Education
- Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics
- Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education
- Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education
- Accreditation Council on Optometric Education
- Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant
- Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
- American Board for Accreditation in Psychoanalysis
- American Board of Funeral Service Education
- American Council for Construction Education
- American Library Association - Committee on Accreditation
- American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
- American Veterinary Medicine Association - Council on Education
- Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools
- Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education
- Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care
- Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education
- Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs
- Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education
- Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education
- Commission on Accreditation of the American Psychological Association
- Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
- Commission on Dental Accreditation
- Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs
- Council on Academic Accreditation in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology
- Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs
- Council on Education for Public Health
- Council on Naturopathic Medical Education
- Council on Social Work Education
- Council on Podiatric Medical Education
- Joint Review Committee on Educational Programs in Nuclear Medicine Technology
- Liaison Committee on Medical Education
- Midwifery Education Accreditation Council
- National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences
- National Architectural Accrediting Board
- National Association of Schools of Dance
- National Association of Schools of Theatre
- National Association of Schools of Art and Design
- National Association of Schools of Music
- Planning Accreditation Board
- Project Management Institute Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs

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**Specialized and professional accreditors** are uniquely positioned in the discussion about accountability and outcomes in higher education due to their focus on the public interest. At the core of programmatic education and quality assurance through accreditation is the expectation that students attain the competencies essential for effective practice in their chosen profession.

Forty-five programmatic accreditors participated in a survey conducted by the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) to identify the current state of practices in outcomes assessment. All respondents require program assessment of outcomes and the approaches vary based on the nature of the profession, licensure or certification requirements and related public or regulatory pressures. Some accreditors require very specific indicators or thresholds, others employ a more diversified or nuanced methodology, and many fall somewhere in the middle or take a blended approach. The outcomes reported were grouped into three categories: competency assessment, bright line indicators established by the accrediting agency, and indicators determined by the educational programs.

**Competency assessment** includes measurement of student learning outcomes or competency attainment. Accreditors may identify core and/or specific competencies that students must achieve, or alternately require individual programs to develop their own competencies and demonstrate student performance. Competencies include the knowledge, skills, and values/attitudes/professional disposition necessary for safe and effective practice of a profession. Requirements for competency assessment were reported by 76% of respondents.

Approximately 58% of responding agencies have **bright line outcomes requirements**. Bright line indicators involve thresholds that typically relate to graduation or retention rates, placement rates for employment or internships, or licensure exam pass rates for professions with such requirements for entry-to-practice. Agencies that require bright line requirements tend to use them in more than one category.

**Program-determined indicators** were used to assess outcomes by 76% of respondents. These indicators are typically based on the program mission and context within a framework established by the accreditor. Some agencies allow for broad discretion as it relates to program indicators, while other agencies prescribe specific areas that must be addressed, similar to bright line indicators such as graduation, placement, and licensure rates. Also included are broader inquiries like student or alumni satisfaction measures, and alumni performance or employer feedback.

Stakeholders can be assured that specialized and professional accreditors are holding programs accountable for outcomes that result in competent practitioners in the profession or field of study.

## Introduction

Over the past decade the public and policymakers have called for increased accountability in higher education that has resulted in additional emphasis on the assessment of student achievement and program effectiveness outcomes. Specialized<sup>1</sup> and professional accreditors are uniquely positioned in the outcomes discussion as they focus on educational standards that protect the public interest by producing competent practitioners in the students' chosen professions or fields of study. This report provides an analysis of the state of current outcomes assessment practices of programmatic accreditors.

ASPA made a broad request to its membership for: samples of policies and standards that relate to accreditor requirements for student learning assessment and program outcome assessment; examples of indicators used to assess compliance with standards and policies; and an indication of benchmarks used in either of those areas. Forty-five agencies provided data along multiple dimensions during the fall of 2015.

## Findings

Of the programmatic accrediting agencies that responded to the survey, 100% provided evidence of requirements related to outcomes assessment, and most agencies have multiple types of requirements. All agencies focus on outcomes as an important component of the quality assurance process.

The second notable finding is the diversity of approaches used by specialized and professional accreditors for the assessment of outcomes. The nature of the discipline or field of study and its labor market, the existence of licensure or certification requirements, and specific public or regulatory pressures all appear to influence a programmatic accreditor's choice of indicators. Some programmatic accreditors require very specific outcomes indicators or thresholds for all programs or schools, while others employ a more diversified or nuanced methodology. Many fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum or take a blended approach.

**All responding accreditors have requirements for outcomes assessment.**

## Analytical Method

Each accreditor's requirements related to outcomes were categorized into three groups:

- **Competency Assessment** — Responses that specifically mentioned the measurement of student learning outcomes or competency attainment. Accreditors may identify core and/or specific competencies that students must achieve, or alternately require individual programs to develop their own competencies and demonstrate student performance. Competency assessment indicators are required by accreditors in both regulated and unregulated professions. The development of a set of competencies in a profession clearly informs the public about what a professional in that discipline would be expected to know how to do, safely and effectively.

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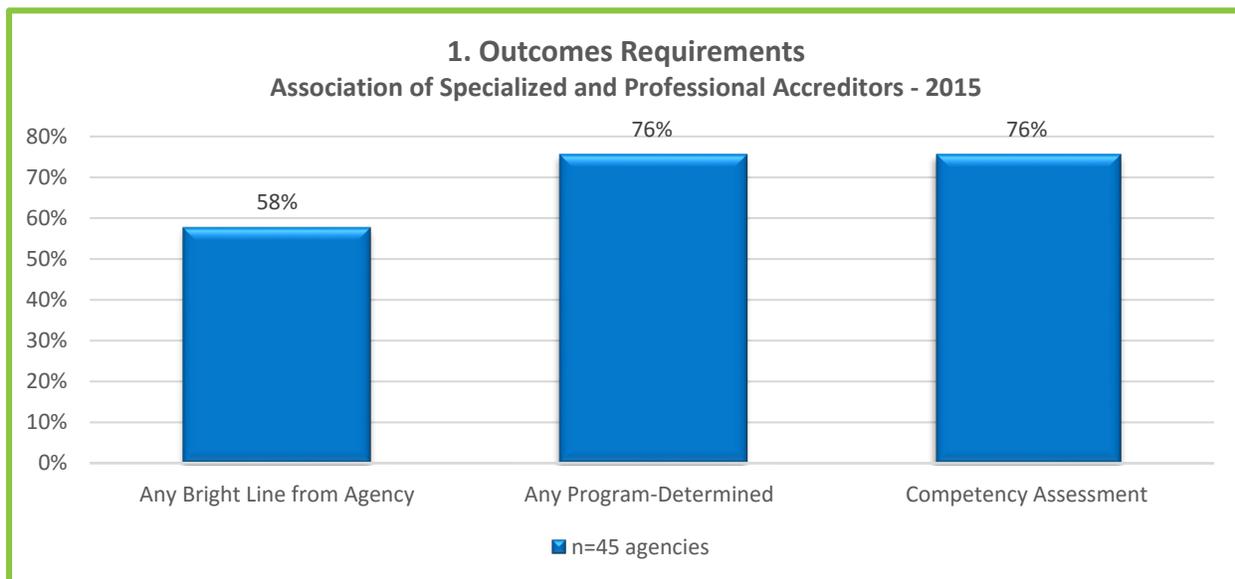
<sup>1</sup> The terms "specialized", "professional" and "programmatic" are used synonymously in this report.

- **Bright line indicators established by the accrediting agency** — Responses that indicated a specific quantitative threshold regarding an outcome, established by the accrediting agency. These thresholds typically relate to graduation or retention rates, placement rates for employment or internships, or licensure exam pass rates for professions with such requirements for entry-to-practice. For example, several health and other regulated professions require passing a national or state examination as a pre-requisite for licensure.
- **Program-determined indicators** — Responses that described how the programs or schools are responsible for identifying their own outcomes (typically based on the program mission and context) within a framework established by the accrediting agency. Some agencies allow for broad discretion as it relates to program goals. Other agencies prescribe specific areas that must be attended to, similar to bright line indicators such as graduation, placement, and licensure rates. Also included are broader inquiries such as student or alumni satisfaction measures, and alumni performance or employer feedback.<sup>2</sup> This approach is often used by accreditors of programs for professions that do not have nationally established requirements for entry-to-practice and diversity exists across states in both practice and regulatory requirements.

**Assessment of outcomes varies in relation to the nature and specific needs of the profession.**

## Outcomes Requirements

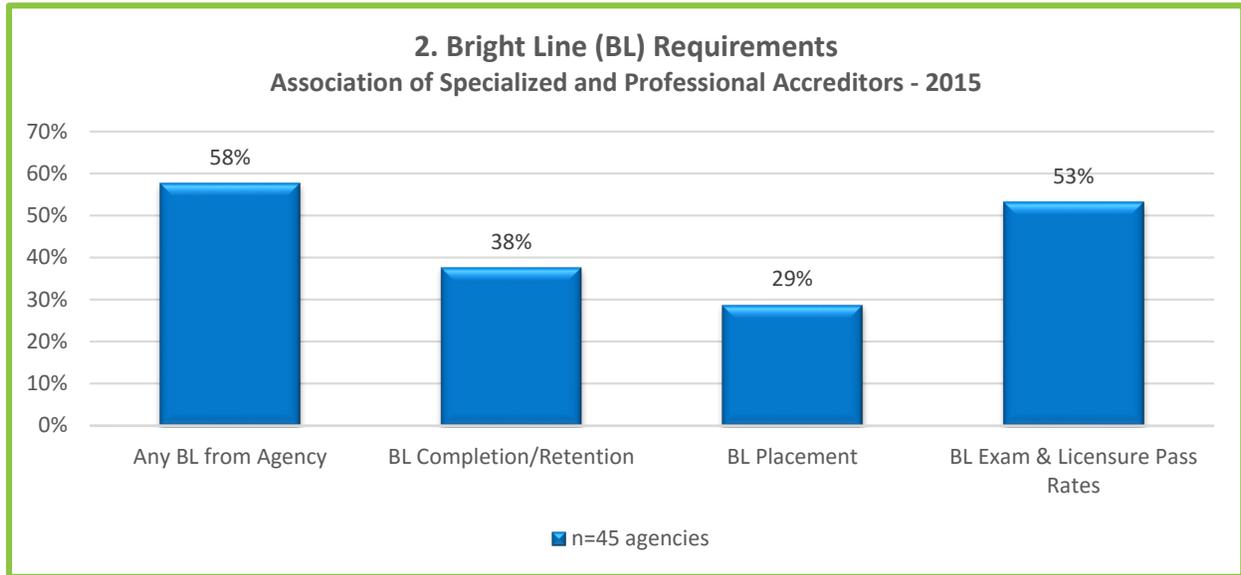
While all respondents have requirements related to outcomes assessment, how accreditors implement their unique approach to quality assessment varies. On the whole, agencies use a blended approach of bright line outcomes requirements, program-determined outcomes, and competency assessment.



<sup>2</sup> Faculty scholarship was an important outcome for some accreditors, while others used it as a measure of faculty qualification. Given the divergent perspectives and a low number of responses in this category, this indicator was not included in the analysis.

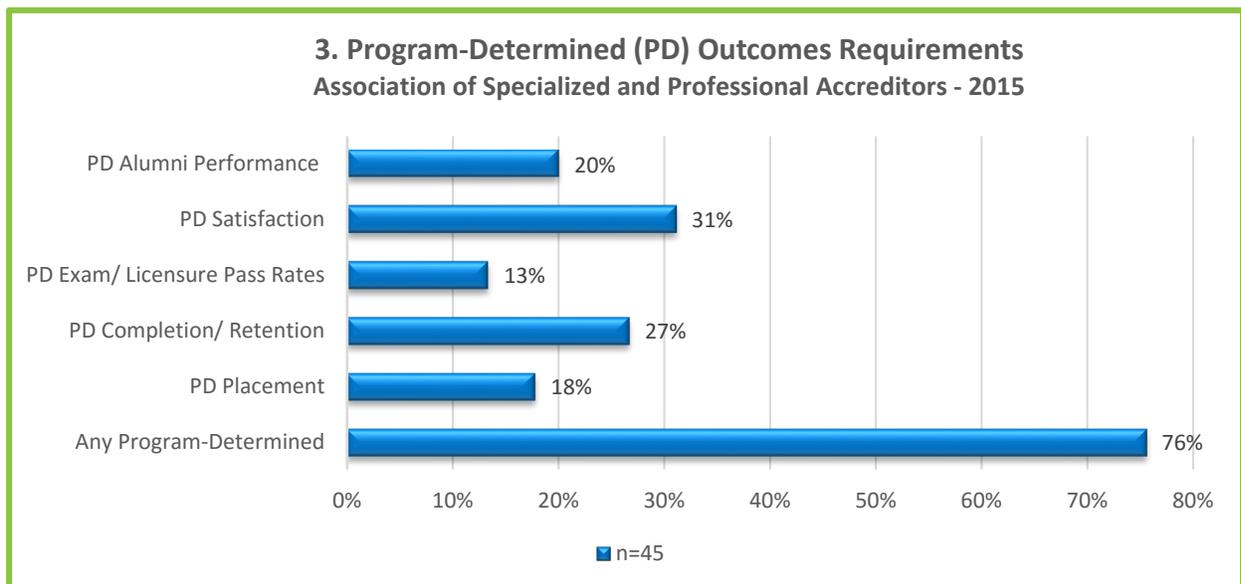
### Bright Line Outcomes Requirements

Approximately 58% of responding agencies have bright line outcomes requirements. Given the percentages for use of specific bright line requirements among overall respondents (38% for completion, 29% for placement, and 53% for exam/licensure), it is apparent that agencies with bright line requirements tend to use them in more than one category.



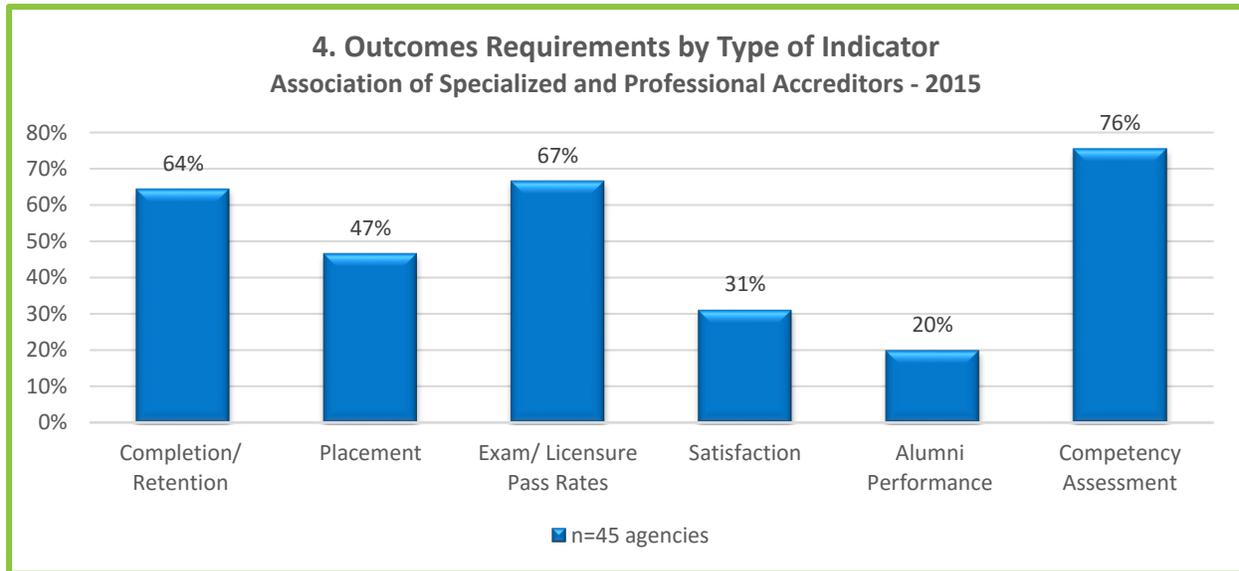
### Program-Determined Outcomes Requirements

Agencies that use program-determined outcomes (76% of respondents) exhibited a greater diversity in approaches. Some agencies articulated a broad approach, without specifying required subcomponents (such as placement, alumni satisfaction, etc.). Others specified areas where programs must assess outcomes, sometimes within a broad approach and sometimes not.



### Outcomes Requirements by Type of Indicator

Regardless of whether the requirements are based on bright lines or are program-determined, agencies surveyed are most focused on competency assessment (76%), exam/licensure pass rates (67%), and completion/retention (64%).



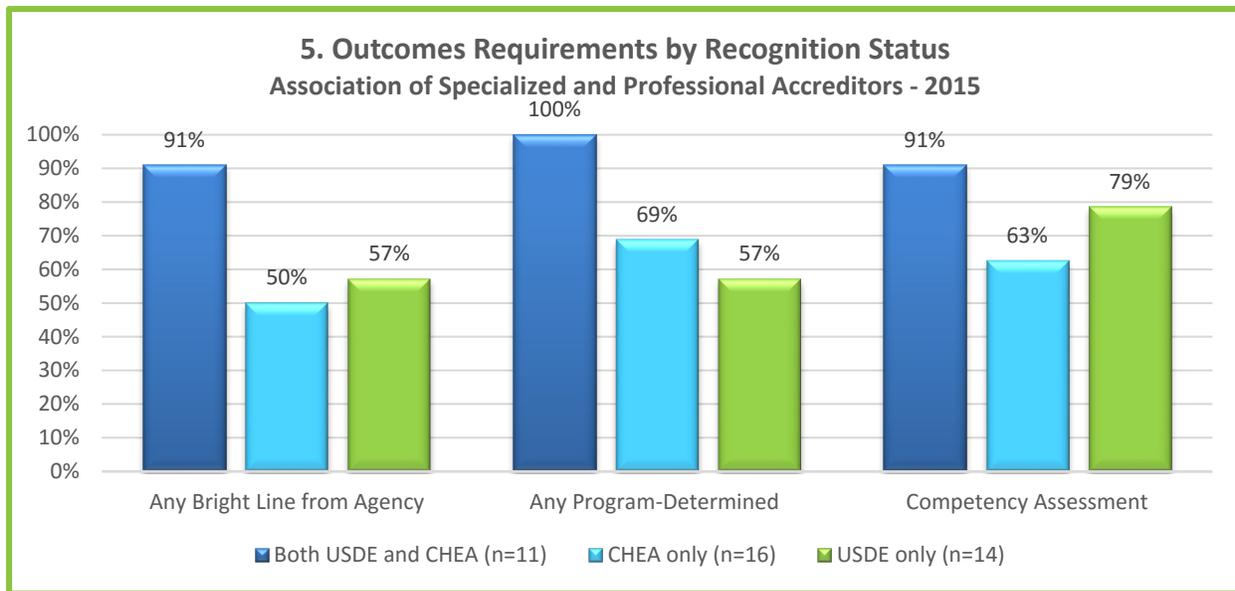
### Recognition Status and Outcomes Requirements

Most agencies responding to the survey are reviewed against established standards set by an external entity in order to be “recognized”. Of the respondents, 60% are recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and 56% are recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education (USDE).<sup>3</sup> This corresponds roughly to the overall breakdown of recognition categories among all ASPA members which are 57% CHEA-recognized and 50% USDE-recognized. Approximately 24% of the respondents are recognized by both CHEA and USDE.

Overall, agencies that are recognized by both USDE and CHEA have the most participation across each outcomes category. Undergoing recognition by multiple regulatory enterprises appears to have some bearing on the quantity of measures and the diversity of approaches within a single accrediting agency. It is unclear if the requirements of the recognition bodies motivated the spread of choices, or if accreditors have responded to exogenous factors within their professions and labor markets, or some combination thereof.

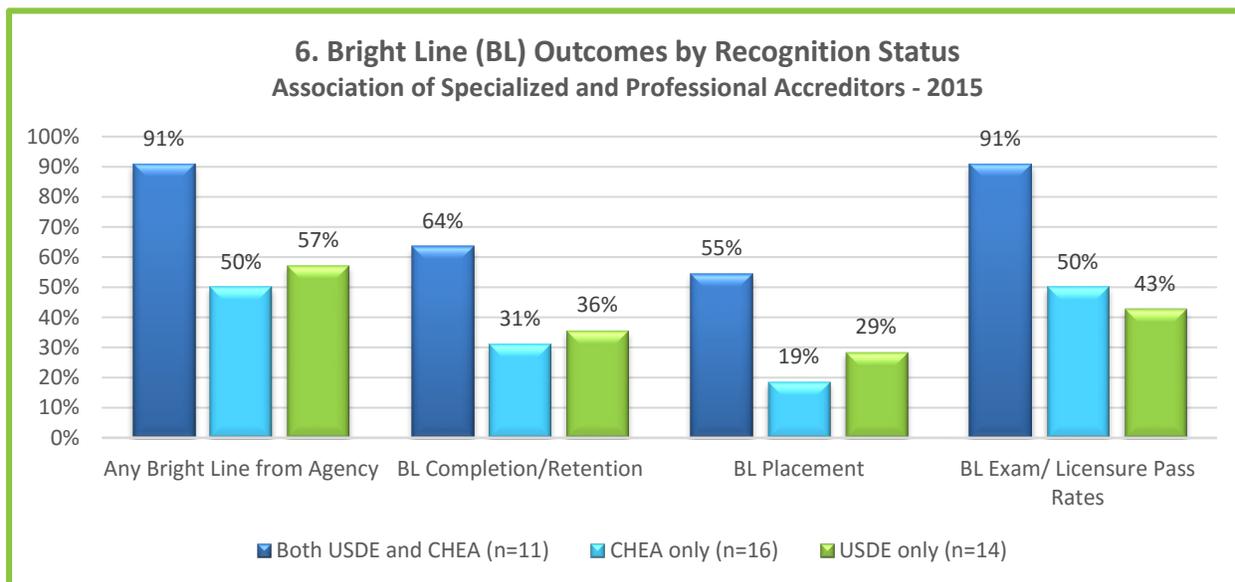
Overall, USDE-recognized accreditors especially had a strong emphasis on student competency assessment. Both the USDE and CHEA have requirements for accreditors to address “student achievement” – student competency attainment is one of several student achievement indicators.

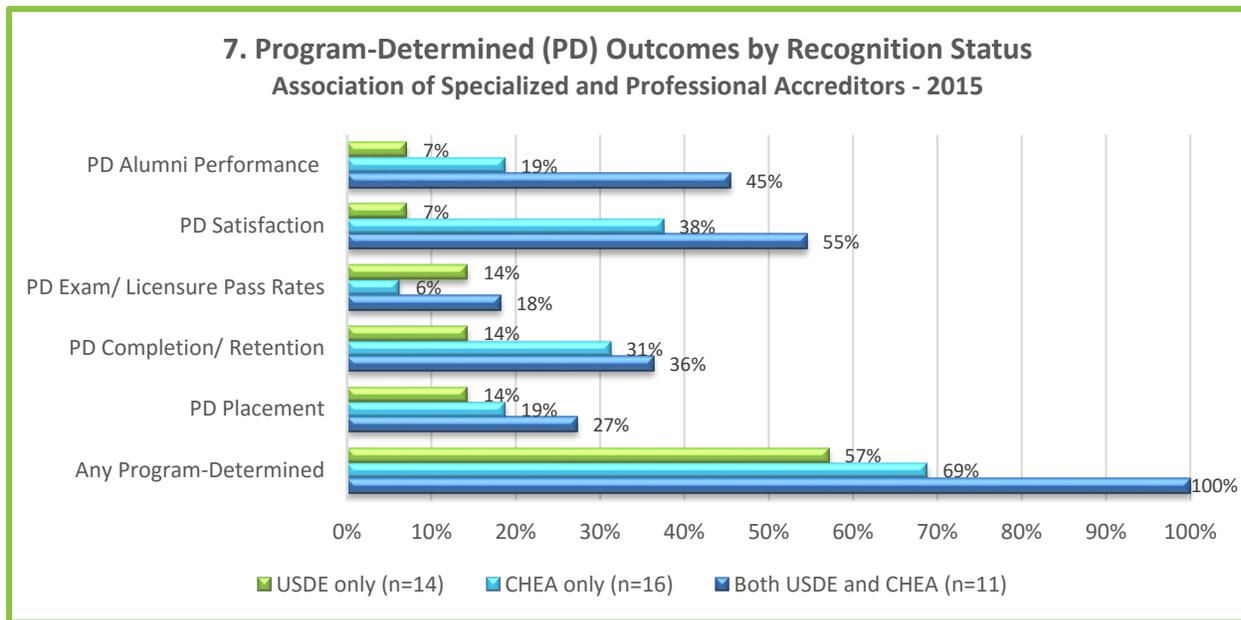
<sup>3</sup> Respondents not recognized by either USDE or CHEA were excluded from this portion of the analysis due to small sample size (4 respondents). Recognition status was verified on the USDE and CHEA websites.



Bright line outcomes indicators are more prevalent among accreditors recognized by both USDE and CHEA, across all categories analyzed. While rates were similar, USDE-recognized agencies tended more towards requiring bright line indicators on the whole, while CHEA-recognized agencies looked at program-determined outcomes at slightly higher rates. In some of the program-determined subcategories, CHEA-recognized accreditors have more requirements than USDE, especially in areas that tend to be bright lines among USDE-recognized accreditors (program completion, job placement/employment), but also in satisfaction.

While there is clear variation among program requirements here, the analysis does not supply an answer for the cause of these differences. It may be that the USDE regulations foster greater use of outcomes requirements than the CHEA criteria. However, it may also be the case that agencies that are eligible for USDE recognition (having a federal link) also tend to accredit educational programs for professions with characteristics that lend themselves to greater adoption of quantitative indicators.





***Licensure and Certification Exams as Measures of Quality***

Many professions with programmatic accreditation use certification or licensure as a requirement for entry-to-practice or as a supplemental measure of graduate quality. Although approximately 84% of the respondents have certification or licensure requirements in their professions, only 64% require programs to use these indicators in their assessments. Clearly, some accreditors find value in connecting certifications with assessment of academic programs, while a few do not. Interestingly, all respondents in fields without external exams or licensing have a focus on student competency assessment in their accreditation standards. It appears that the majority of accreditors look at student competency, but the approaches vary, depending on the existence of external competency measures (professional exams and licensing requirements), and the accretitor’s perception of the utility of those measures.

***Practices in Competency Assessment***

Accreditors or programs identify core competencies<sup>4</sup> that students must demonstrate to successfully complete educational programs. The development and identification of competencies for any given profession are determined and guided by the accretitor, practitioners, employers and industry, educators, professional associations, and other stakeholders. Once competencies are defined by the profession, accreditors focus on assessment methods that enable faculty and other stakeholders to judge that the student has reached a level of performance that qualifies as competent to enter the profession. Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities/attitudes necessary for safe and effective practice. These include critical thinking skills and the ability to grow, to adapt, and to create knowledge that is essential for the evolution of professional practice in response to a changing environment. Peer review is an essential element in judging such outcomes.

<sup>4</sup> The terms “competency” and “competencies” used throughout this report refer to the knowledge, skills and abilities that students achieve to qualify to enter a profession. These are distinguished from “competency-based education” (CBE), an alternative to the credit hour-based system. In CBE, student proficiency is measured through assessments or credit for prior learning, rather than time spent in the classroom.

Nearly all respondents require their programs to have some form of assessment for student attainment of competencies. A plurality of agencies requires programs to adopt a set of competencies based on the program mission and to provide a detailed plan for the assessment of those competencies. There are two main variables in agency approach. The first is the level of specificity with which agencies require their programs to perform competency assessment. Some agencies have very specific requirements for how and when programs assess competency attainment. Other accreditors simply require that programs have a plan for and demonstrate implementation of competency assessment. The second variable is the degree of control agencies maintain over the competency model. Some agencies allow programs to tailor competencies within generally accepted norms within the profession, while others mandate programs to assess their students on a very specific set of competencies. A third group of accreditors fall in the middle and require programs to adopt a competency model that incorporates a set of competencies or competency domains set by the agency.

**Ensuring  
competent  
practitioners is  
the focus of  
programmatic  
accreditation.**

Most agency policies did not specify whether programs must assess competencies at the student, course, and/or program level. It is generally accepted practice that programs must have a system in place to assess effectiveness of teaching through student achievement or demonstration of competencies, and the results of the assessment are used for program improvement.

### **Limitations of the Analysis**

The data for this analysis was provided in a variety of formats in response to a relatively broad question. Agencies were categorized by what was provided, under the assumption that the information received was most relevant to the inquiry. If an agency did not specifically mention a requirement, it was coded as not having that requirement. There is a possibility of undercounting.

Many of the observations are useful at a sample size of 45 respondents out of 60 programmatic accreditors surveyed. Smaller breakdowns such as the analysis of USDE and CHEA recognized agencies are presented with less confidence.

### **Conclusion**

Specialized and professional accreditors are committed to the core principle of assuring that graduates know and are able to perform the essential functions to safely and effectively practice in their chosen profession. Quality assurance through peer review and the accreditation process requires programs, agencies and stakeholders to be committed to regular and ongoing analysis of the needs of the profession, what is expected of new practitioners, and the effectiveness of educational programs in meeting these expectations in light of their mission and goals. Stakeholders can be assured that specialized and professional accreditors are holding programs accountable for outcomes that result in competent practitioners in the profession or field of study.

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