

ASPA Considerations for the Higher Education Act – 2018

About ASPA

A nonprofit organization, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors 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's 60+ accreditor members set national educational standards for more than 25,000 programs for over 100 different specialized disciplines and professions such as nursing, architecture, physical therapy and engineering. They ensure students receive a quality higher education, consistent with standards for entry or advanced practice in a field or discipline. Through an emphasis on self-evaluation and peer (subject matter expert) review, accreditation plays an important role in continuous quality improvement in higher education.

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.



Subject matter experts develop accreditation standards and conduct program reviews. Expertise matters.

Specialized and professional accreditors (referred to as “programmatic” herein) ensure that educational programs provide the public with qualified and competent practitioners. In many professions, completion of a program accredited by the programmatic accreditor is a requirement for eligibility for certification, licensure or advancement in the profession in the United States.

Profession-specific expertise defines quality practice and informs quality education. Subject matter experts set national educational

Laws and regulations should recognize that subject matter expertise is crucial to the success of programmatic accreditation.

accreditation standards and determine the competencies necessary for entry or advancement in a profession. These experts include practitioners, employers and industry, educators, professional associations, and other communities of interest. Programmatic accreditors evaluate assessment methods utilized by faculty and other institutional stakeholders to judge whether the student has reached a level of performance that qualifies as competent to enter the profession. This system has ensured that professional practice in the United States in health care, technology and other fields is among the best in the world. The reliance on professional expertise is essential to effective quality assurance that serves the public interest.

Programmatic accreditors monitor and assist programs to ensure their long-term and consistent compliance with accreditation standards.

Programmatic accreditors expend time and resources ensuring that higher education programs that have been found to meet or exceed standards for educational quality specific to the profession, remain in compliance with these standards. Programmatic

accreditors work with low quality programs to improve so that they can meet and maintain compliance with standards. If they are unwilling or unable to

Laws and regulations should recognize that the quality of a programmatic accreditor is determined by its focus on ensuring that higher education programs comply with profession-based standards.

implement program improvements, the programs are never accepted in the system or an adverse action is taken that affects their accreditation status.

Withdrawal of accreditation is not a measure of the quality of the programmatic accreditor. The number of adverse actions taken by an accreditor is not an indication of success. All programmatic accreditors withdraw accreditation and take other adverse actions when necessary. Ensuring that low quality programs never receive accreditation in the first place enhances the effectiveness of the accreditation process.

The programmatic accreditation process focuses on student learning. Appropriate student learning outcomes are best determined by the profession and the accreditor.

Programmatic accreditors set standards for appropriate program goals and student learning outcomes and require accredited programs to continually assess and make improvements in educational quality based on student learning-centered data. Accreditors set profession-specific outcomes by, for example: gathering employer feedback on what it takes to succeed upon entry to a profession; job task analyses of credentialing organizations; requiring programs to establish community advisory boards to advise on current practice and trends; and monitoring of research and publications in the profession.

Laws and regulations should recognize that student achievement is best determined by institutions, programs and accreditors in partnership with communities of interest.

Student achievement metrics such as loan default rates, salaries, graduation and placement rates may be important indicators, but are outside the control of accreditors and have little to do with educational quality. No accreditor can control salaries, the economy, or changes that occur in industries. For instance: the petroleum industry was booming a few years ago and now growth is stagnant; jobs in urban centers often have higher salaries than those in rural areas; and colleges and universities may decide to offer a program in a profession with a scarcity of jobs. Most states can control or influence the development of new programs related to availability of jobs. The accreditor can only determine that educational quality is in place.

Programmatic accreditors ensure fairness, objectivity and relevance in program review.

The profession-based nature of programmatic accreditation ensures that students completing accredited programs are competent entry-level practitioners. Employers, educators, practitioners, professional associations, regulators, students, the public, etc. participate in the development and review of standards and contribute to the review of educational programs as well as the accreditation decision making process. These stakeholders provide relevance and information about current trends and best practices in the profession. The value of relationships between programmatic accreditors and stakeholders cannot be overemphasized.

Laws and regulations should recognize the value of appropriate stakeholder participation in the programmatic accreditation process.

Programmatic accreditors are not membership organizations, trade associations, or guilds. Programmatic accreditors that rely on sponsorship from stakeholder and parent associations have written agreements with the parent organization or sponsor, policies, or bylaws that specify the accreditor's autonomy in all accreditation activities and decisions. Strict conflict of interest practices address undue stakeholder influence – so that no entity or party with a vested interest in any educational program has influence in the review of the program and accreditation decision.

Programmatic accreditors support informed choice by making information available to students and the public.

Programmatic accreditors make accurate information available to stakeholders about the accreditation status of programs on their websites. This information includes details of accreditation processes, accreditation status, accreditation terms, schedules for reviews, adverse actions and reasons for adverse actions.

Laws and regulations should promote public information about accreditation decisions that is current and accurate.

One size fits all approaches to create databases that require accreditors to fit their accreditation actions into fixed categories do not accurately describe accreditation decision actions that have been developed by the individual professions. Best practice is to refer to programmatic accreditors' websites for accurate and the most current information.