

The world of higher education and accreditation uses terminology that is not always employed consistently among the various constituents. This reference provides some typical definitions of three key terms – standards, outcomes, and quality – and identifies relationships among those terms.



Standards

Accreditation standards set expectations on which evaluations and accreditation decisions are based. Standards allow for flexibility and diversity among programs. Complying with standards means that quality is evident but does not mean that all programs meet standards in the same way.

Quality

Quality assurance (QA) – occurs when the accreditor determines that a program meets the minimal acceptable level of educational quality assessed against standards.
Quality improvement (QI) – occurs when programs continually self-evaluate and look for ways to improve the educational service they deliver.
QA and QI are not the same.

Outcomes

Accreditors may establish **benchmarks** or **thresholds** that programs must meet – such as an 85% graduation rate. If programs do not meet thresholds, they may be required to explain why, or if the indicator is a **bright line** the program may be determined to be out of compliance.