

# 101: ACCREDITATION



## WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Higher education accreditation of postsecondary education is a process used to assess academic and instructional quality of an institution of higher education (IHE) and programs at those institutions. While accreditation is a peer-driven, voluntary process, it plays a key role in ensuring quality of higher education for the purposes of federal policy.

Under the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), institutions of higher education that participate in federal student aid programs must, among other provisions, meet three sets of requirements. These requirements, carried out by what is commonly referred to as the "Triad," include:

- 1 Approval, including an examination of an institution's financial capabilities, by the U.S. Department of Education (ED)**
- 2 Authorization to operate as an institution of higher education by the institution's state**
- 3 Institutional accreditation by an accreditor recognized for these purposes by ED**



## THERE ARE THREE MAJOR TYPES OF ACCREDITATION:

### Regional

accredits entire colleges and universities, most of which are degree-granting and not for-profit. Each regional accreditor is responsible for IHEs in a designated region of the U.S.



### National

accredits entire colleges and universities anywhere in the country, most of which have a single focus—such as career and technical education.



### Specialized/Programmatic

accredits programs, departments, or schools within a college or university; this type of accreditation is not used to determine eligibility for federal financial aid.



## FEDERAL RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITORS

Accrediting agencies that issue that stamp of approval to institutions must receive recognition from ED. The Higher Education Act has specific requirements for the composition of accrediting agencies and the standards they measure as part of the accreditation process.

### UNDER HEA, RECOGNIZED ACCREDITORS MUST:

- ✓ **have a membership of institutions;**
- ✓ **develop and use standards for assessing institutional quality against the objectives of the institution and its programs;**
- ✓ **apply standards that assess student achievement;**
- ✓ **evaluate curricula, faculty, facilities and fiscal capacity; and**
- ✓ **provide due process for institutions as part of the review.**

ED receives recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Integrity and Quality (NACIQI), an advisory panel charged with determining which accreditors should receive federal recognition, thereby fulfilling an important oversight role and making consequential decisions about which colleges and universities can continue to participate in federal financial aid programs.<sup>1</sup>

### ACCREDITOR FEDERAL RECOGNITION PROCESS

ED requests federal recognition applications



Accreditors submit applications



ED announces NACIQI meeting & invites comment



ED prepares staff recommendations



Accreditor may appeal decision to secretary of education



ED senior official makes recognition decision



NACIQI holds meeting & makes its own recommendation



<sup>1</sup> For more information, please reference Higher Learning Advocates NACIQI 101: <http://higherlearningadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/101-NACIQI.pdf>

## WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR COLLEGES TO BECOME ACCREDITED

Under the Higher Education Act, institutions must be accredited by a national or regional accreditor recognized by ED to ensure their students are eligible to use federal student aid—including student loans, Pell grants, and Federal Work Study funds. While the specific path to achieving accreditation varies by accreditor, the institutional accreditation process typically starts with an institution conducting a self-assessment.

As part of this assessment, institutions examine their operations and performance to meet the accreditor's standards. An institution then develops a written report based on this self-assessment. The self-assessment is then submitted to the accreditation body, which in turn tasks a volunteer team of individuals from peer institutions to review the institution and its self-assessment. This team then makes a recommendation to the accrediting body, which then makes a final determination of the institution's accreditation status.

Accreditors periodically review institutions through this process in cycles ranging from a few years to 10 years. Interim reviews may be required when there are unresolved issues from a comprehensive review, and accreditors may also conduct out-of-cycle reviews due to substantive change reports or annual reporting.



## ACCREDITATION LOOKING FORWARD

The eligibility requirements and scope of existing accreditors and the creation of new accreditors have been part of a larger debate of how the Higher Education Act should assure institutional, programmatic and academic quality. Two primary debates have dominated the conversation over accreditation reform in recent history: creating a quality assurance system for new and innovative providers and programs; and requiring accreditors to place a greater focus on student outcomes.

Congress has begun the process of considering changes, or "reauthorizing" the Higher Education Act. As part of this process, policymakers have an opportunity to examine and revise the requirements of accreditors, as well as what they require of institutions to obtain accreditation, will be examined. As part of this upcoming reauthorization debate, Congress should place a priority on reforms that address both sides of the accreditation reform debate in order to place a stronger focus on student outcomes and to create a way to assure quality and create federal student aid eligibility at new and innovative providers and programs.

For more information about Higher Learning Advocates' work on accreditation policy, please contact **Emily Bouck**, Policy & Advocacy Director, at [ebouck@higherlearningadvocates.org](mailto:ebouck@higherlearningadvocates.org), and visit [www.higherlearningadvocates.org](http://www.higherlearningadvocates.org) to learn more about our work.