

## **WHY SEEK ACCREDITATION?**

The goal of accreditation is to ensure that institutions of higher education meet acceptable levels of quality. Accreditation in the United States involves non-governmental entities as well as federal and state government agencies. Accreditation's quality assurance function is one of the three main elements of oversight governing the Higher Education Act's (HEA's) federal student aid programs.

In order for students to receive federal student aid from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) for postsecondary study, the institution must be accredited by a "nationally recognized" accreditor (or, for certain vocational institutions, approved by a recognized state approval agency), be authorized by the state in which the institution is located, and receive approval from the Department through a program participation agreement.

Additionally, Senate Bill 1247, Chaptered in 2014, resulted in a change to the California Private Postsecondary Act of 2009 requiring institutions in California offering degree programs, or seeking to offer degree programs, to become accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

## **ROLE OF ACCREDITING AGENCIES (ACCREDITORS)**

Accreditors, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met. Institutions and/or programs that request an accreditor's evaluation and that meet an accreditor's criteria are then "accredited."

## **SOME IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS OF ACCREDITATION**

- Assess the quality of academic programs at institutions of higher education
- Create a culture of continuous improvement of academic quality at colleges and universities and stimulate a general raising of standards among educational institutions
- Involve faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning
- Establish criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation

## **TYPES OF ACCREDITATION**

There are two basic types of educational accreditation, one referred to as "institutional" and the other referred to as "specialized" or "programmatic."

Institutional accreditation applies to an entire institution, indicating that each of an institution's parts is contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives. The regional and national accreditors perform institutional accreditation.

Specialized or programmatic accreditation normally applies to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university or as small as a curriculum within a discipline. Most of the specialized or programmatic accreditors review units within an institution of higher education that is accredited by one of the regional or national accreditors. However, certain accreditors also accredit professional schools and other specialized or vocational institutions of higher education that are freestanding in their operations. Thus, a "specialized" or "programmatic" accretor may also function in the capacity of an "institutional" accretor. Some of these "institutions" are found within non-educational settings, such as hospitals.

## **CHOOSING AN ACCREDITOR**

Institutions seeking to become accredited should thoroughly research U.S. Department of Education-approved accrediting agencies to determine a good fit between the accretor and the institution's mission, objectives, and educational programs. Some accretors focus only on certain *types* of programs, such as occupational or trades, while other accretors may limit the scope of their accreditation to degrees at the associate level. Some accretors focus on religious education and others focus on educational programs delivered online. Institutions should review accretors' eligibility requirements to ensure the institution's programs will fall within the scope of the chosen accretor.

## **UNACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS SEEKING BUREAU APPROVAL AND PROPOSING TO OFFER DEGREE PROGRAMS**

The process for unaccredited institutions seeking approval to offer degree programs begins with the submission of the appropriate application. New institutions or institutions currently verified as exempt but seeking approval must submit an Application for Approval to Operate for an Institution Non- Accredited. Institutions currently approved to operate must submit an Application for Change in Educational Objectives.

## **THE ACCREDITATION PLAN**

In addition to the required application, the institution must submit for approval an Accreditation Plan, for the institution to become fully accredited within five years of issuance of its provisional approval to operate.

The plan must include, at a minimum:

- Identification of an accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Dept. of Ed.

- An outline of the process by which the institution will achieve accreditation candidacy or pre-accreditation within two years, and full accreditation within five years, of its provisional approval.

Provided the institution's application and accreditation plan are approved by the Bureau, the institution will be issued a Provisional Approval to offer no more than two degree programs, while it seeks accreditation.

## **REQUIRED NOTIFICATION TO STUDENTS**

Institutions with a provisional approval to offer degree programs must notify its students in writing, prior to executing an enrollment agreement, that the institution's approval to operate is contingent upon it being subsequently accredited.

## **VISITING COMMITTEE REQUIREMENT**

Within the first two years of issuance of the provisional approval, a visiting committee, empaneled by the bureau, will review the institution's application for approval and its accreditation plan, and make a recommendation to the bureau regarding the institution's progress toward achieving accreditation.

## **REQUEST FOR EXTENSION OF THE TWO- OR FIVE-YEAR DEADLINE**

A provisionally approved institution that has not achieved pre-accreditation within two years or full accreditation within five years, may submit a request for extension of time, not to exceed two years, to achieve accreditation candidacy, or accreditation. The institution's request for extension must show that the institution is making strong progress, and must include the following evidence:

1. An amended accreditation plan adequately identifying why pre-accreditation or candidacy outlined in the original accreditation plan was not achieved
2. Active steps the institution is taking to achieve accreditation
3. Documentation from an accrediting agency demonstrating the institution's likely ability to achieve pre-accreditation or accreditation.

The bureau's Quality of Education Unit will convene a review committee to review the institution's request for extension. The institution will be notified in writing of the committee's decision.

## **SUSPENSION OF DEGREE PROGRAMS**

If a provisionally approved institution does not achieve accreditation candidacy or pre-accreditation within two years, or accreditation within five years, and an extension was not requested or was requested but not approved, the institution's degree programs will be automatically suspended and the institution will be required to submit to the bureau a degree program teach-out plan. The institution will receive a Notice of Suspension of Degree Programs, and will be provided the opportunity to appeal the suspension by means of an informal hearing.

## **LIFTING OF AN INSTITUTION'S SUSPENSION OF ITS DEGREE PROGRAMS**

An institution with provisional approval to offer degree programs, that has had its degree programs suspended for failure to achieve accreditation candidacy or pre-accreditation, but that subsequently achieves accreditation candidacy or pre-accreditation, may have the suspension its degree programs lifted and be permitted to pursue full accreditation.

An institution with provisional approval to offer degree programs, that has had its degree programs suspended for failure to achieve full accreditation, but that subsequently achieves full accreditation, may have the suspension its degree programs lifted and be granted full approval of its degree programs.

## **COMMUNICATION WITH THE BUREAU**

Communication with the bureau during the provisional approval period is critical. The institution should notify the assigned Education Specialist whenever an accreditation milestone is achieved or whenever the institution decides to change accreditors. The bureau is required to monitor the institution's progress toward accreditation and will periodically request updates. Additionally, the bureau will communicate with the institution's selected accreditor, concerning the institution's progress.