

A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation

Peer Review*

Peer Review is a major ingredient in the incredible advance of the United States in all fields of endeavor over the past two centuries. Using peers who are experts in a field of inquiry to serve as reviewers is a tradition in academic culture. Scientific journals use peer reviewers to determine the importance and substance of articles for publication; grant agencies use peer reviewers to decide what research to fund; faculty members are promoted using peer review; and institutions review their programs using expert peers in that discipline. Applications of peer review are successful because of the expertise, commitment, and integrity of professionals interested in serving students and the public through the work of their field.

Page | 1

Peer review is not unique to the academic world. Peer review is also found in the concept of ethics committees and other self-governing mechanisms in the private and governmental sectors. For example, no one wants to fly in an airplane that has not been checked by expert mechanics and pilots, and no one would willingly undergo surgery from a physician whose skills had not been certified by a board of expert practitioners. When the future and livelihood of our children and family members are at stake, shouldn't we make sure that the quality of their education has also been checked by experts?

Peer review ensures that whether it's the airline industry or medical practice, that experience and expertise are used to make judgments about safety and quality. In education, peer review by experts occurs in many ways; one of the most effective is through the process called "accreditation." Peer review teams in accreditation are made up of experts in higher education and in specific subject areas, practitioners, and others who must follow well-defined and published standards, policies and procedures of the accrediting organization.

How does peer review in accreditation work to ensure fairness and objectivity?

The peer review process in accreditation contains interlocking systems of checks and balances and with clear separation of responsibilities and powers. These include policies and procedures that promote objectivity in applying standards to institutions and programs. The procedures work against conflicts of interest among individuals involved in the accreditation process and those at the institutions and programs under review. Additionally, members of the public with no affiliation to the institution or program, or professional expertise in the discipline or profession participate in groups that approve standards and policies and that make accreditation decisions.

- Formal written policies and procedures are developed and used to assure objectivity and to avoid any conflicts of interest or bias among peer reviewers, decision makers, staff, and academic institutions and programs.
- The standards-setting process also contains checks and balances systems.

Accreditation standards are developed in collaboration with many groups that not only include educators, practitioners of specific disciplines and members of the public, but may also include students, employers, state regulators, and others.

- Quid pro quos are specifically prohibited in published rules guiding the work of accrediting organizations. Peers, staff and public members of boards and accrediting commissions are covered by these rules. The policies are enforced mutually and compliance is monitored by the institutions, and by commissions and boards. The nature of the review process in terms of checks and balances virtually eliminates any opportunity for collusion. Staff has a special opportunity to ensure that rules are kept.
- Accreditation peer reviewers are thoroughly educated and trained in the accrediting organization's standards and procedures. Briefings and advanced training are expected, especially for those visiting institutions.
- Peer reviewers are generally volunteers who are normally not paid anything for their work, and if they are, the payment is small, far below usual academic consulting fees. Reviewers spend significant personal time to read and evaluate extensive documentation, visit institutions, and cooperate with other peer visitors to produce a report. They volunteer to fulfill professional responsibility to higher education in general or to the development of expertise in their specific field.
- Most specialized accreditation peer reviewers undergo extensive training in the processes and procedures of accreditation in their specific discipline.

Peer review is essential to producing evaluations that are trusted by experts in the same field. The more advanced the level of work in any field, the more this is true. There are many different disciplines and professions. Without its basis in peer review, accreditation would have no credibility in the academy or the professions. In this regard, expert knowledge, skill, and judgment matters.

*This briefing paper is posted on the ASPA website.