

## **THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

"The essential purpose of the accreditation process is to provide a professional judgment as to the quality of the educational institution or program(s) offered, and to encourage continual improvement thereof."<sup>1</sup> Accreditation is the process by which the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training (ACCET) grants public recognition to an educational institution which has voluntarily submitted to an evaluative comparison with established qualifications and standards and has demonstrated that it is in compliance with the Standards for Accreditation, both upon initial application and periodically thereafter. ACCET's function is focused upon educational quality, the continuous assessment and improvement of educational practices, and assistance to institutions in the improvement of these practices within their programs. Through its support of an independent Accrediting Commission, the ACCET membership promulgates and sustains the Standards for Accreditation, along with policies and procedures that measure and inspire educational quality.

The four major components of this ongoing process are as follows: (1) the development and implementation of institutional and program goals and objectives that focus upon a continuing education mission; (2) a comprehensive, analytic self-evaluation review and report by the institution; (3) an on-site professional peer review to evaluate both the adequacy and accuracy of the self-evaluation and the institution's compliance with ACCET standards; and (4) an independent review and decision by the Accrediting Commission as an assessment of the institution's commitment to and compliance with ACCET standards, policies and procedures.

### **Principles of Ethics for ACCET Accredited Institutions**

In support of its Standards for Accreditation, ACCET members must uphold the following principles of professional ethics:

- To provide programs of study that are educationally sound, up-to-date, of high quality and demonstrably effective.
- To maintain fair, ethical, and clearly stated advertising, admission, and enrollment practices by accurately and fairly representing the institution and its services to all people.
- To provide effective student services that recognize individual differences and ensure successful student retention, graduation, and employability where applicable.
- To demonstrate the ultimate benefit of private educational training programs through satisfied participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Register August 20, 1974 p. 30042

- To ensure proper and ethical administration of all financial aspects of the institution.
- To embrace voluntary self-regulation, which is inherent to the accreditation process.
- To demonstrate a commitment to the people served by the institution through local community involvement and participation.
- To demonstrate the effectiveness of private educational training, thereby providing essential skills to support a productive workforce.
- To promote continuing education and training programs of the highest quality and integrity.

Integrity is a central, indispensable, and defining characteristic of a quality institution demonstrated by the operation of the institution and its programs in accordance with the Principles of Professional Ethics for ACCET Institutions. In the accreditation process, an institution must provide the Commission with accurate, complete, and pertinent information, including reports of other accrediting, licensing, and auditing agencies. An institution's failure to report honestly by providing false or misleading information, including misrepresentation by omission, will constitute a breach of integrity and seriously jeopardize the institution's accreditation status, with the risk of an adverse action by the Commission.

### **Definition and Scope**

A continuing education program is defined as "postsecondary instruction designed to meet the educational needs and interests of adults, including the expansion of available learning opportunities for adults who are not adequately served by current educational offerings in their communities".<sup>2</sup> ACCET accredits institutions that provide continuing education and training programs, including those institutions that are authorized to award occupational associate degrees. Further definition of the institutional characteristics as they relate to continuing education and training programs applicable to ACCET accreditation standards can be found in ACCET Document 24 - Profile of Institutional Clientele and Programs.

"Continuing education and training provides for (1) self-determined improvement and enrichment of individuals' lives; (2) concurrent education for adults who are involved in earning a living or homemaking; (3) employment-related pre-service and/or in-service education; and (4) pursuit of learning in an intentional and systematic fashion."<sup>3</sup> Learning is the activity by which adults acquire new knowledge and skills; education is the process that facilitates such learning. While education is generally used as the broad descriptive term for these learning experiences, dependent upon the context, education is viewed as an emphasis on the theoretical and conceptual elements of learning

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<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Act - PL 94-748

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Harry, et al, NAPCAE Exchange, "Defining Adult Continuing Education", Winter/Summer 1981, Pg. 9-10

whereas training focuses on practical applications of knowledge and skills with specific hands-on experiences.

Learning experiences associated with continuing education can thus be concentrated or protracted, but are focused on adult learners, building their previous education and experience into their present and future needs. The applications of this definition for continuing education fall into one of four broad categories: to develop new job skills; provide credentials necessary to advance in one's career; qualify for licensure, relicensure and certification; or personal development through avocational pursuits. "Regardless of form or dimension, the primary purpose of continuing education is to provide new knowledge, understandings, and skills for adults".<sup>4</sup> It is within this context that ACCET accredits institutions that offer continuing education programs for professional, vocational, and leadership training; personal and occupational development in volunteer service or paid employment; improvement of the ability to manage personal, financial, material, and human resources; and preparation for licensing, certification, or admissions examinations.

ACCET provides institutional accreditation for organizations whose primary function is for educational purposes and for organizations offering continuing education as a clearly identified institutional objective within the operational entity such as in-service corporate training or Intensive English Programs owned and operated by a college or university. ACCET accreditation can include educational institutions which offer programs at locations other than the main headquarters under specified conditions and controls (Refer to Document 26 – Review and Approval of Additional Locations). ACCET accredits continuing education and training organizations throughout the United States and abroad. Institutions that may be eligible for accreditation include:

- Trade and professional associations
- Private career schools
- Corporate training departments
- Intensive English Programs (IEPs)
- Social service, volunteer and personal development organizations

Like other educational accrediting agencies, ACCET does not grant academic credit or any other unit of educational measurement. Academic credit can be granted only by educational institutions licensed or chartered to do so by federal or state governments. Additionally, the transferability of academic credit between institutions is at the sole discretion of those institutions directly involved.

### **Eligibility**

To be eligible for accreditation by ACCET, an institution must meet the following requirements:

1. It has an identified body of individuals actively involved in a prescribed learning format and setting. Programs offered must provide a clearly interactive component of educational

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, Harry, et al, NAPCAE Exchange, "Defining Adult Continuing Education", Winter/Summer 1981, Pg. 9-10

methodology appropriate to the subject matter and expected training outcomes.

2. It meets applicable state licensing requirements.
3. It has a predominant portion of the participants involved in a continuing education experience convergent with those outlined in Document 24 - Profile of Institutional Clientele and Programs.
4. It can demonstrate continuous, on-going and successful operation of the institution in the delivery of education and/or training programs for at least two consecutive years immediately prior to application. At minimum, one graduating class must have completed their training.

The term "continuous operation" means that the principal educational and training activities of an institution, for which accreditation or reaccreditation is sought, has proceeded as scheduled without interruption.

Exceptions may be recognized after the fact when the interruption is caused by forces of nature, civil disorder, or abrupt and unforeseeable change in law or regulation affecting the institution.

An institution may apply for an exception before the fact upon application to the Commission and a showing of good cause for the exception. Applications must be submitted in a timely manner, considering the circumstances, in order to permit proper consideration of the application.

At minimum, one graduating class from the longest program must have completed the education or training offered.

5. It has not had a prior accreditation withdrawn from a U. S. Department of Education recognized accrediting agency, nor has it voluntarily withdrawn under a show cause action, within one year prior to application to ACCET.
6. It has been under the same ownership and/or control for at least two years immediately prior to application. This requirement may be waived by the Commission upon provision of acceptable documentation showing the applicant institution is owned or controlled by an organization and/or individual(s) with a reputable history of ethical, competent, and effective management and prior experience operating an educational entity.
7. It is an educational establishment that offers post secondary certificates, diplomas, or degrees up to the Associate's level. If the institution offers more advanced degrees, specifically at the Bachelor's degree level and above, that entity will not be eligible for accreditation. This restriction does not apply to a stand-alone department or division, such as continuing education or intensive English programs, within a higher education institution accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education.

8. It prescribes a time requirement for the education and training offered in clock hours and, if applicable, credit hours or continuing education units.
9. It agrees upon application and accreditation to abide by the ACCET Bylaws, Principles of Ethics, Standards for Accreditation, policies and procedures and to support the goals and integrity of the accreditation process.

### **Organization of ACCET**

The membership of ACCET consists solely of those organizations which have been accredited by the Accrediting Commission of ACCET. The membership elects the institutional non-public members and may advise on the appointment of public members to the Accrediting Commission; approves the eligibility requirements and Standards for Accreditation, serves as peer review evaluators for on-site team examinations; and is solicited for commentary on the bylaws and major policy and procedural issues.

The Accrediting Commission consists of no fewer than eleven (11) nor more than fifteen (15) members. The Accrediting Commission manages the administrative and fiscal affairs of ACCET and serves as the judicial body with final authority to interpret and apply the Standards for Accreditation in determining whether or not an applicant meets the published criteria for accreditation. The Commission decides, based upon the eligibility criteria, whether it is competent to apply the ACCET Standards to specific educational programs. The Commission is responsible for submitting proposed changes in the eligibility requirements and the Standards for Accreditation, to the membership for review and approval. The Commission may adopt such policies and procedures as it deems necessary with regard to the accreditation process. At least five members of the Accrediting Commission must be from the public, unaffiliated with the ACCET membership. Additional public and consumer representatives may be appointed to advise the Commission. Commission meetings are held three times per year, in addition to an annual conference and such special meetings as approved by the Commission in accordance with the ACCET Bylaws.

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### **Inquiry**

Institutions inquiring about accreditation are directed to the ACCET website ([www.accet.org](http://www.accet.org)) to review ACCET documents which describe and depict the accreditation standards, policies, and procedures. Interested candidates are then invited to log onto the password-protected Accreditation Management System (AMS) on the ACCET website to complete and submit the required Inquiry Questionnaire, along with the fee, to request a preliminary review regarding whether the interested institutions meet the basic requirements to be eligible to apply for ACCET accreditation.

### **Application**

Formal application to ACCET for initial review and consideration to determine eligibility requires the electronic submission of ACCET Document 4 - Application for Accreditation and application

fee through the web-based AMS system accessed on the ACCET website. The application must include supporting documentation for the main campus and all branches, auxiliary classrooms, and classroom extensions, along with an application processing fee as outlined in ACCET Document 10 – Fee Schedule. Acceptance of the application is not an indication or assessment of the institution's compliance with the Standards for Accreditation, but simply an initial indicator of congruence with the eligibility requirements. The supporting documentation will be reviewed and analyzed in order to make a final determination for acceptance of the application.

### **Accreditation Workshop**

Prior to the submission of the institution's Analytic Self-Evaluation Report (ASER), initial applicants are required to attend an Accreditation Workshop. The workshops are designed to provide an in-depth study of the ACCET accreditation process in order to assist the institution in the preparation of the ASER, preparing for the on-site evaluation, and understanding the actions of the Commission.

### **Analytic Self-Evaluation Report (ASER)**

Following acceptance of an application, ACCET will provide the institution a projected schedule for submission of the Analytic Self-Evaluation Report (ASER) for the main campus and, if applicable, the Branch Analytic Self-Evaluation Report(s) (BASERs). The institution will be directed to the appropriate version of the ASER and any templates applicable to the institution. These documents are explained at length in the Accreditation Workshop, may be referenced/downloaded at the ACCET website, and must be completed and submitted electronically through AMS.

### **Readiness Visit**

Following acceptance of an application for initial accreditation, an institution will be scheduled for a Readiness Visit unless the institution submits written notification of its decision not to have the Readiness visit for receipt by ACCET within 30 days of the date of the acceptance letter. At least one cycle prior to the full on-site team evaluation, the one-day Readiness Visit will be conducted by an experienced ACCET representative to assist an institution in preparing for the subsequent on-site team evaluation. Completion of a draft ASER is a prerequisite to the visit. To schedule the Readiness Visit, an institution must submit ACCET Document 8 – Request for On-Site Evaluation Team Visit and the Readiness fee, within 60 days of the date of the acceptance of the institution's application for initial accreditation.

The Readiness Visit will provide a preliminary review of the draft ASER and assist the institution in evaluating its responsiveness to the requirements for compliance with each standard, but will not provide a definitive assessment of the institution's full compliance with the Standards for Accreditation. During the visit, the ACCET representative will review and discuss the institution's responses in its ASER as they relate to the ACCET standards; point out areas where responses to the ASER questions were not clear, lacked sufficient detail, or did not fully address the question; and identify areas where the institution is not demonstrating compliance with ACCET standards.

The representative will not edit the institution's ASER nor will s/he assist in writing in any portion of it. Upon completion of the Readiness Visit, the institution will be advised as to whether to proceed as scheduled with the full on-site team visit or to delay the team visit to allow additional time for the institution to more fully address the issues in the ASER relative to compliance with the standards.

### **Submission of ASER/BASER, Request for On-Site Visit, and Fees**

Based on the projected Commission review cycle schedule, the ASER for the main campus and, if applicable, the BASER for the branch campus(es) must be sent electronically through AMS, along with the completed Document 8 – Request for On-Site Examination Team Visit. The on-site examination fee must be sent by check in the amount outlined in ACCET Document 10 – Fee Schedule.

### **ACCET Review of eASER/BASER and Scheduling of On-site Team Visit**

After the ASER is received, the assigned Commission Representative will contact the institution to set a date for the on-site visit(s) and will forward specific information regarding the visit and team members when final arrangements have been made.

### **On-Site Examination Visit**

The on-site examination team will conduct a review using the institution's self-analysis (ASER/BASERs) to serve as the framework for the team to evaluate operational activities/results in the context of ACCET's standards, policies and procedures. The policies and procedures that guide the selection and activities of the on-site examination teams are outlined in ACCET Documents 7 – Guidelines for On-site Evaluation Teams and 7.1 – Affirmation of Professionalism and Ethics. The team will present a brief exit briefing at the end of the on-site visit.

Except for financial statements, which are reviewed separately by ACCET, items must be made available to the on-site examination team by the institution, in accordance with the Preparation Checklist for ACCET On-Site Examination Visit that is provided prior to the visit.

### **On-Site Examination Team Report and Institutional Response**

Within 45 calendar days from the date of the on-site examination team visit, a written report will be sent electronically through AMS to the applicant institution, providing an opportunity to respond and to submit additional documentation, clarification of, and/or new information pertinent to factors existent at the time of the visit. The institution will be given 14 calendar days to submit through AMS its response to the On-Site Examination Team Report(s) for consideration by the ACCET Accrediting Commission. The ASER/BASER(s), team report(s), and other supplementary reports are treated as confidential materials and are not shared with other ACCET members, the press, or the public. These materials may however be subject to review by appropriate state and federal agencies or courts of law, in accordance with statutes and regulations.

### **Accrediting Commission Deliberation and Action**

The Application for Accreditation, the ASER/BASERs, the On-Site Examination Team Report(s), the institution's response(s) to the team report(s), the financial statements, and any other information that may have a bearing on accreditation will be made available to the Accrediting Commission for deliberation and action. ACCET Document 11 - Policies and Practices of the Accrediting Commission outlines the actions that may be taken.

### **Notification of Commission Action to the Institution**

The institution will be notified in writing within 30 calendar days of the action taken by ACCET regarding the institution's application for accreditation.

### **Time Schedule**

While there is no fixed, definitive timeframe for completing the accreditation review process, twelve (12) months is a reasonable estimate for an institution committed to a serious investment of the necessary effort and resources. An accepted initial application expires twelve months from the date of receipt at ACCET, if an initial applicant does not submit an ASER, Request for an On-Site Examination Visit, and visit fee within this twelve-month period. An extension of one cycle (four months) may be granted an initial applicant, based on the submission of a written request with compelling reasons for the extension which, if approved, will be subject to the terms and conditions specified relative to fees, scheduling, and updated documentation. Institutions granted extensions must submit the following within the extended time frame: (1) ASER, (2) Request for an On-Site Examination Team Visit, and (3) visit fees. Applicants scheduled for an on-site evaluation during a specified review cycle (April, August, or December) are required to timely submit the appropriate documentation and fees. ACCET's workload and logistical factors may necessitate the rescheduling of the visit(s) for a subsequent review cycle.

### **General Policies**

1. Accreditation is a voluntary, self-regulatory process, conducted on the basis of published standards, policies and procedures, and judged by an independent Commission of knowledgeable peers. The burden of proof for meeting the accreditation standards rests on the institution, which must show that the administrative oversight, curricula, and educational methodologies used produce significant and beneficial outcomes. The institution's educational mission, goals and objectives must be demonstrated through successful outcomes realized by students, and employers, if applicable, as they relate to competency factors.
2. Each institution is evaluated and considered for accreditation on the basis of its established objectives for meeting the education and training requirements of its clients and employers. Each program is evaluated within its own context and not in comparison with other programs.

3. Applications will be accepted by ACCET in new fields of study upon a determination that sufficient expertise is available to effectively evaluate the program(s).
4. The Accrediting Commission serves to validate and improve educational quality; it does not function as a standardizing board.
5. Applicant institutions are reviewed and judged as a whole. Minor remediable weaknesses may be offset by major significant strengths; however, a major weakness in any area may prevent accreditation despite strengths in other areas.
6. Accreditation can be granted for a minimum of one year but cannot exceed five years. Following the initial grant of accreditation, institutions will be required to apply for reaccreditation by completing the full process, including an application, ASER/BASER(s), and on-site reexamination(s) prior to the expiration date cited in their letter of accreditation from ACCET. Reaccreditation applicants should refer to ACCET Document 45 – Steps to Follow for Reaccreditation. ACCET reserves the right to require an on-site examination at any time it determines that circumstances warrant such action.
7. An organization which administers and controls all aspects of its programs from a centralized headquarters is accredited as a single entity. Program delivery sites which are decentralized with some parts under uniform administrative control and other parts under local control are required to be accredited as separate entities.
8. The ACCET Standards for Accreditation are under constant monitoring and review by the Accrediting Commission and periodically, at intervals no greater than every five years, are submitted to the membership and to other interested parties for review and comment.
9. A publicly available directory of ACCET accredited institutions is available on ACCET's website at [www.accet.org](http://www.accet.org). The directory includes the name, address, telephone and facsimile numbers, and a listing of the programs/courses offered in addition to the designation of the year in which each institution is scheduled for reevaluation or expiration of its accredited status. Branches, auxiliary classrooms and classroom extensions are listed directly following each corporate/main campus-designated listing.
10. ACCET accredits short courses, programs offered at the certificate, diploma, and associate degree levels, as well as courses and programs offered via interactive distance learning. Institution's offering associate degree programs should refer to ACCET Document 3.OAD – Occupational Associate Degrees Template. Institutions offering courses or programs in an Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) mode should refer to ACCET Document 3.IDL - Interactive Distance Learning Template.